

MIDNIGHT ROADS



the
World of Darkness



MIDNIGHT ROADS



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L



Killing the highway gave it life. People don't always realize it, but death has its own ecology. A fallen tree is home to pill bugs, beetle grubs, consuming mosses, lichens like scabs. A human corpse is a bonanza of bacteria, eating from within and from without, eventually meeting somewhere on the bones, which they will soon clean to an astonishing whiteness. That's not to mention all the maggots or the turkey buzzards that might come to pick at the meat, too.

Thing to remember about this kind of life is that it's the lowest of the low. Bottom-feeders. The garbage-men of nature. The equivalent of that fish that clings to the shark's belly, eating whatever fish parts float near its mouth.

Death of a highway, it's the same thing. From the outside you might expect it's just a sad collapse, a strip of forgotten civilization that isn't much more than cracked asphalt and pine trees. Wait till night falls. Wait and see what comes crawling out of the road shadows to feed on the remains. Hoping that some food falls near its hungry mouth.

I

I had an accident. I don't mean the "shit-your-pants-in-history-class" kind of accident. I mean the "had-too-many-drinks-crashed-into-drainage-block" kind. No seatbelt. When I hit the concrete, I just slid down below the seat. All the heavy business up in the front of the car came up into my lap, and I guess the way it moved . . . it crushed my one leg pretty badly. Spun my foot around like a twist-tie.

For a bit over a year, my life was all pins and braces. Metal framework around the leg. Had to swab the parts where the pins went into my skin, because they got crusty with this moist rime the color of cheese.

Couldn't really work.
Couldn't really do much of anything.
Got a little fat.
Got a lot depressed.

I pretended everything was on the up-and-up. What few visitors I had wouldn't see my sad and shameful side. Couldn't let that happen. It was all smiles and rude jokes. Some at my expense. I let them know it wasn't any big thing. Sure, I said, I wasn't really that drunk. The leg'll be fine, I'll be kicking my heels together soon enough.

Lies, of course. Oh, not to myself.

I wasn't convinced of my own bullshit. I knew the score: if I walked again, it'd be with a herky-jerky limp. Forever. And if I ever drove again (they took my license, gladly outing me as a

fool's
example of What
Not To Do), then I'd never
drive drunk and I'd never drive fast
because I was too afraid of what might happen.
I was drunk then, and didn't remember the accident. But
after? I have dreams. Dreams I can't make myself wake up from,
nightmares of shrieking metal and the sound of my leg breaking (lots of little
pops and snaps, like a boot falling on a bag of bird bones).
Whole time, my family wanted to see me. Mom and Pops, they lived a few hours
south of me in a town called Buckler, a rinky-dink pisspot of a town, a
crippled burg that was breathing its last gasps of life. They wanted
to see me, of course. Neither of them could drive, though: Mom had
macular degeneration, middle of her vision was all blurry (though
God had sought to spare the vision in her periphery, which was
about as useless a gift as He can give). Pops was hard of hearing,
which is another way of saying he was a deaf as a dead dog. Neither
of them was allowed to have a license anymore.

I COULDN'T GET TO THEM, AND THEY COULDN'T GET TO ME.

Then there was that whole "shame" business.

Even with her eyes gone all funny, I knew my mother would look at me in a
way that cut to the quick. She has this guilt thing. A deep and terrible
voodoo. Pops . . . well, he'd just look at me and call me a worthless
shit, then maybe throw me a Coors Light. That's just how he was. Still
would've stung.

So. For a long time I didn't see them, and they didn't see me. We talked
on the phone once in a blue moon. Never for long.

And here I thought maybe the shame would go away. Time, so the story
goes, heals all wounds.

BUT THAT'S A BASKET OF CRAP.

Time rots the wound. Time is the enemy.

While I was feeling all sad for myself, the already beleaguered
highway went and sang its last hurrah - not only did the fine
politicians of our government go ahead and decommission the highway,
but the bridge that lead into town started to collapse. Boards dropped
into the muddy, slow-going river below. The whole thing developed a
kind of tilt, like an old person about to fall out of their chair.
You could drive over the bridge, as I'd do soon enough, but you did
so with the fear of God, wondering if you might shimmy and shake into
the dark waters below.

A year after the highway died,

Pops died, too.

Same day they gave me my
license back.

SHIT.





Buckler. Population: Damn Near Nobody.

Towns aren't supposed to die, at least not the way I figure it. America is a country of prosperity. Streets of gold. Limitless opportunity. So they sell it. With a population swelling like a tumor and people driving cars with seats that warm your asses, how the hell is it that a town can up and die? How is it that a highway — that once did a fine job indeed of getting people across the country, from coast to coast, from Canadian hockey to Mexican tacos — ends up as useless? Thrown to the rats and vultures and potholes-like-sores? Highway dies, the town dies. That simple. Most of the rats know to jump a sinking ship. Some don't and drown as it drops.

Funny thing is, Buckler used to be bright and shiny. Buzzing neon from two bars. Shiny diner, always full. No community pool (hey, we weren't rich), but there was a swimming hole not far from the playground.

Going back, though . . .
let's just say that Buckler
had officially lost its shine.

IV

Besides the minister, two people came to Pops' funeral: me and Mom. I wouldn't even suggest that the minister was really there, not in the strictest of terms. You could catch the whiskey on his breath every time he extolled some virtue that he just made up, and sometimes he just stopped talking to watch a bird or jump at a shadow.

Rest of the town around us had gone to the birds. That's not a figure of speech, either: I mean everywhere you looked, birds. Pigeons warbled on drooping power lines. Crows hopped from tree to tree, frolicked in the empty street without fear of ever being disturbed. Black turkey vultures circled and circled. Never saw one land. Just saw them orbiting the invisible space, same way they might do to a car-struck deer on the highway that hasn't given up the ghost just yet.

The funeral was in the late afternoon, and by the time the minister ran the crank and started dropping Pops into the ground, Mom seemed to get edgy. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes and looked around at the lengthening shadows — the same shadows that the minister seemed to shy away from.

"Evening's coming," she said. "We ought to go."

"You don't want to sit here for awhile?" I asked. "Pay our respects a little longer?" My shame wanted me to hold fast, to stay here all damn night if I had to. Apologizing for not coming to see him. Apologizing for not knowing that he got sick with the flu but didn't go to the hospital (which was East Jesus from here, easily an hour's ride in perfect conditions, and here my folks couldn't even drive).

But Mom hissed at me,
pulled at my elbow,
pleading with me to
go home.

I couldn't bear
disappointing somebody else.

We went home.

V

I'd always heard that in nature, you've got your predator, you've got your prey. Everything eats something else — it hunts for it, kills it, eats it. And, in turn, that thing is probably hunted by something bigger and faster and meaner. Except, that isn't quite true.

It misses the third party: the scavenger. Like hyenas eating the lion's leavings or ganging up on a limping gazelle. Or crows and vultures, counting on fast-moving cars to serve them their meals with smashing tires and bone-breaking bumpers.

Road's full of scavengers, as it turns out.

NOT HUNTERS. SCAVENGERS. They wait for a blown tire. A wayward traveler who can't find his motel. A drunken fool who falls asleep in his car on the shoulder. Their meal is always the sick gazelle.

SOMETIMES, SCAVENGERS GET A FEAST.

BUCKLER WAS THAT FEAST.

VI

Under the light of her crooked lamp, I could see that Mom didn't look so good. Sitting there in the ratty recliner, I knew she was old, but she wasn't *that* old. In the pale light of the poorly lit house, her skin almost looked translucent. The way it hung off her in places, sags of skin unanchored to muscle or bone.

"You sick?" I asked her. "Be straight with me, Mom."

She waved it off, held out a plate of macaroons. I took one, but noticed that she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were searching over my shoulder. The window. She was looking out the front window.

"It's night, Mom. What do you think you're gonna see out that window?"

"Nothing." She said it too fast. Too sharp and short. Brittle hands tightened.

"You sure? Someone been bothering you?" Not that I knew who such a someone could even be, given that the town appeared to have very few people left in it. I hadn't seen a moving car all day, and what few people I'd seen weren't outside for long — hurrying into their homes, heads down, same haunted shoulder-droop of the minister.

"Eat a cookie," she said.

I ATE A COOKIE.

STALE.

SHIT.



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E



"Mom," I said, mouth full of too-dry crumbs, "I just want to tell you that, shit, I'm real sorry about —"

The house lit up like the FBI was outside pointing its floodlights into the place. And the ground rumbled with the sound of a grumbling engine. My ears constricted with the shrill keening of tires squealing. And then, laughing. Cackling, even.

Someone was outside, bright-ass headlights pointing inside the house.

"This what you've been worried about?" I asked.

Mom said nothing, just sank deep into the chair. The woman was shaking.

"FUCK THIS," I said, and limped my way down the hall to my old room. As it had always been, my bedroom was a monument to my childhood: baseball trophies, posters of bikini-clad models faded from where the sun came in during the day, models of Hess trucks on a dust-caked bookshelf. Over to the bed I went, reached under, and felt around until I found what I needed.

**LOUISVILLE SLUGGER.
GOOD THING MY PARENTS KEPT MY ROOM
LIKE A MEMORIAL TOMB.
I MARCHED UP PAST MOM AND OUT THE DOOR.
INTO THE LIGHTS.**

I had to shield my eyes, those headlights were so bright. I could make out a shape just past them — a car, some hot rod like a Mustang or a Camaro from 30 or 40 years back. I held up that bat like I was about to break bad on that beautiful car, screamed at them, told them to leave my poor mother alone. They didn't move, and I could hear that cackling from inside the car, though in a way it sounded a million miles off, too. Something was wrong here. Something I didn't understand, not yet.

So I took a step forward, raised the bat with every intention of bashing open one of those headlights —

But the car jacked it into reverse with a shriek of rubber on road.

And then it gunned it back down the street. The chorus of hoots and cackles fading with red brake lights that looked more than a little like a pair of mean eyes.

"I got rid of them," I said to Mom when I got back inside. I leaned the bat up against the table. "Sent those vandals packing."

"Vandals," she repeated. "Yeah, vandals."

"What'd they do to you? Smash up the mailbox? Break up the fence around the garden?"

Mom, though, she didn't answer.

Just cowered in on herself and wept a little bit.

More shame for me: I can't bear my mother crying. And not in the way where I seek to comfort her.

It's that way with me and any woman. She cries, I have to go. Feel like a caged animal as soon as those tears start to fall.

SO,
I DID JUST THAT.

GOT IN MY CAR
IN SEARCH OF A DRINK.
AS I SAID, MORE SHAME FOR ME.

VII

Five shot glasses, overturned in front of me. Each catching the amber-hued lights of the bar. Each sitting in a ring of the cheapest whiskey imaginable, some acid brew that was probably just as much Drano as it was old oak barrels.

"I earned these," I said to the bartender, who wasn't listening anyhow. "Haven't had a drink in years. But my Pops died. And my Mom's crying.

I earned these."

The bar wasn't in Buckler, because the tavern there — Milly's — was just a boarded-up shack whose neon beer signs had been shattered. This place was maybe 10 miles out of town, which necessitated another rough-and-tumble drive over that wobbly bridge. I swore as I drove over it I could hear the splashes of bridge bits plopping into the mud-colored depths below.

In the bar was me, the bartender and another man. He sat down at the far end of the bar. Looked familiar. Mostly bald with a comb-over that wouldn't fool my blind mother. Kind of bug-eyed, like someone had squeezed his neck and made them pop out of his skull. He fidgeted with some peanut shells. Sipped at a light beer.

FUCK HIM, I THOUGHT.

I gazed into the one-eye of a freshly poured shot. Pondered how it would feel going down my throat. Raking up my esophagus.

"You're Al's boy," the man said. He was sitting next to me, suddenly. I hadn't seen him move from his spot at the end of the bar, and he scared me enough where I almost spilled my shot. I told him as such.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to spook you."

"Well, you did. Now, if you don't mind, I'm having a conversation here with my dinner date." I held up the shot to show off my true love. "She was the Prom Queen, and we're going to get married." Then I gulped it back. Felt the burn.

"It looks like she left you," Bug-Eyes said.

"Guess so. Have to find someone else to love me." I snapped my fingers at the bartender to splash some firewater in another shot glass for me.



"Listen. Your Dad, he didn't die of the flu. Well. Maybe he did. But you best ask your mother how he caught that flu. Maybe see what diseases she's got, too."

"Hell, I know you," I said, pointing a finger right in his face (my depth perception was starting to get off-kilter). "You were that neighbor down the street. Kenny, right?"

"Kenneth."

"Kenny, sure, I remember you. Neighborhood kids always thought you were a bit goofy." Before he could say anything else, I clarified: "I don't mean kid-toucher goofy. I mean, you know, strange. Like a hermit."

"Yes. Well. Listen, I want to help you."

"Help me how?"

"I CAN HELP YOU SAVE YOUR MOTHER'S LIFE."

"Uh-huh." Rolled my eyes.

"Perhaps even save the whole town. Give some life back to it. It's about the highway, don't you see? Pinch off the artery and the heart dies. I can show you how to read the Road Gospel. Together, maybe we can —"

"All right, did I not tell explain myself well enough? I'm drinking. Alone. I didn't ask for any conversation from some weird, old —" I stood up. "You know what, forget it. I need to get back anyhow. Forget this shit."

He called after me, but I just yelled back that he was creepy, and damn well may have been a kid-toucher after all.

THEN I THINK I GAVE HIM

THE FINGER AND LEFT.

III

THERE, BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD, GO I.

DRUNK. DRIVING. DUMB.

I wasn't so drunk I don't remember the drive, but drunk enough to think that I could speed over that bridge without a care in the world. Bits of rotten wood disappeared into the darkness beneath the onslaught of my tires. I also thought a turn was a straightaway, but somehow I took the curve even though my brain didn't see fit to carry that information to my hands. Almost felt like the road carried me where it wanted to go. Heck. Maybe that's what happened.

Back at the house, I sobered up real fast.

Mom was sitting in her chair still, jaw slack. Not dead, but weak.

Wanted me to wet her lips with a washcloth, so I did.

I noticed some things. A few spots of blood on the collar of her robe. A couple more on the back cushion of the chair. I asked her what happened.

"Vandals," she whispered.

"It was them vandals."

HIGHWAY

8

Somewhere,
far off in the
distance, I heard the pop of
gravel under tires, and mad cackling over
a roaring engine. I felt my heart cinch up. I took Mom
into bed, and crashed out on the couch. Sleep didn't come.

IX

Next day, I went to Kenny's house, see if he still lived there. He did. Not long after I knocked, he opened up the door a crack to see who it was. Etched into the frame, up and down the wood, were all kinds of weird symbols. Burned into the wood, by the looks of it.

"I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT COME BACK," HE SAID.

Kenny's house was a museum left for the spiders and dust mites. Bunch of Route 66 paraphernalia hanging on the walls, some of it pretty rusted. Had a bunch of car parts — chrome hubcaps, some side and rear mirrors and weird hood ornaments from cars I'd never seen before. Maps, too, hanging everywhere, marked up in red pen. Strangest of all were the mason jars of different types of stone and gravel sitting on a few bookshelves.

**I REACHED OUT AND GRABBED A FISTFUL OF HIS SHIRT.
PULLED HIM CLOSE.**

"START TALKING.

TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON AROUND HERE."

He told me. I wish he hadn't.

But you already know the story. Highway dies. Town follows suit. All the creatures of decay settle in for a meal.

ALL THE SCAVENGERS, HUNGRY FOR BLOOD.

Except, Kenny — excuse me, Kenneth — told me that I was wrong about one thing.

"The highway isn't DEAD," he explained. "Make no mistake, it's dying. Drying up like a snake baking in the sun. But there lurks a little life left in the road. And you can help me stir that life anew."

Took a deep breath. Then I told him I'd help him. Of course, then I figured he was just talking in metaphors. Turns out that wasn't the case.

X

We walked over the rickety bridge at noon. Sun beat down on us. Even though it was just us, the bridge still shuddered and swayed. A hammock of broken bones.





Didn't talk much. Words don't suit me, and Kenneth seemed lost in thought. He had a heavy backpack with him, and I could see his small round body shouldering the weight. I almost helped him. Don't know why I didn't, other than maybe I still felt he was a bit weird and repugnant.

He took me to a spot, an old closed-down exit off of the already decommissioned highway. The macadam was cracked in some parts, downright destroyed in others. Pricker-bushes and thistles pushed up through the road. Nature was reclaiming its land.

"This is the spot," he said.

"Great. Now what?"

"Kneel," he said, unzipping his bag. "You need to kneel. Cup your ear to the road. Listen to the sound."

"I'm not Tonto."

"Please."

I spit, sighed, then tried it out. Whatever New Age crapola he wanted me to do, fine, I'd play the game. But only so long. One way or another I was going to get some answers.

I didn't have to wait long.

Ear to the road, I wasn't hearing much of anything except maybe a dull hum and some cicadas. I had to ptoo a couple of ants from trying to climb the mountain that was my nose. Growing frustrated, I tilted my head just a little to see what Kenneth was doing, and suddenly he was there, blocking out the sun. Small man towering over me.

HE HIT ME IN THE TEMPLE

WITH SOMETHING HEAVY.

I rolled over, growling, starting to come to my feet.

But there he was again, and I saw that he had a goddamn broken gear shift in his hand, topped with an eight-ball. He told me he was sorry and moved too fast for such a dumpy sonofabitch: the shifter nailed me again in my temple. I saw black spots. Stars. Bright lights.

I limped backward, fell on my ass like a fool.

Blinking through the spots and lights, my jowl sticky with blood from my temple, I could see Kenneth come up to me with an old Coke bottle. He splashed something in his hand and flicked it on me like it was cologne, except it wasn't cologne: the acrid stink of gasoline filled my nose.

"SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM," HE MUTTERED.

I tried to stand, but he easily pushed me back down. Had another, different bottle in his hand: a plastic Mountain Dew bottle, filled with something dark and goeey. Poured it over my head. I mumbled something, tried to wipe it away, found my hands slick with . . . motor oil, I think it was.

HE WHISPERED:

"THE BLOOD OF
THE ROAD."

THEN: "AND
NOW THE
BODY."

I
heard the
sound of metal on glass,
saw him spinning the lid off one of
those mason jars from his house. Couldn't stop
him from pushing a palm full of gravel into the wound on my
head, really pressing it hard into the blood and oil. I started to
protest, but he kicked me hard in the face. All went dark.

XI

Wasn't long before I woke up and could read the Road Gospel. It was written
on all parts of the road. Verses etched into each piece of gravel. Painted
onto the macadam, written with cracks and fissures. Ants formed the
language, too. I'd gone mad, I thought. But it all made so much sense.

I could hear the road, too, like Kenneth wanted. A dull pulse beat, a deep and
distant heart that sounded more than a little like a piston pumping.

Kenneth stood behind me as the sun was going down, setting the horizon ablaze.
"You see it now," he said. "The highway is a part of you."

He was right. On my skin I could feel every bug that crawled atop it,
every worm that squirmed beneath it. I could even feel the bridge, its
bones broken much like my leg had been, splintered and thought to be
ruined. But not ruined. Mendable. I strained, and thought maybe the
boards moved. Not enough to do anything. Not yet.

I STOOD UP, AND THAT'S WHEN I FELT THE OTHER THING.

Tires vibrating deep inside me.

Someone was coming. Someone with a '67 . . . no, '68 Mustang. Had an engine
that roars. Passengers that cackle. The scavengers were coming back.

But I was the road now.

I did not want them here.

In the distance, I saw their headlights. Just pinholes of light
right now, but winking, growing, coming closer.

**I clenched my fists, and I felt the
asphalt beneath me tighten — cracks easing
shut, biting off roots and weeds that had
grown up through it. Through me.**

Kenneth made a sound, a kind of mad giggle.

**I told him to step back. "I think I
got this," I whispered.**

"Amen," he said, as the headlights came closer.

**I gritted my teeth
and grinned.**



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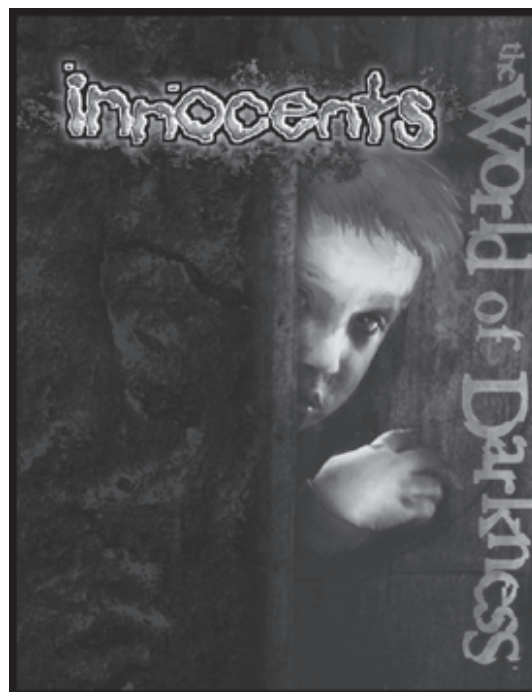
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MIDNIGHT ROADS



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"It's really foggy. Shouldn't you slow down a little?"

"I'm fine. I'm not going that fast." As if to prove his point, Jake gave the pickup a little gas, and the engine growled in approval. He noticed her hands tighten a bit on the jeezus bar she'd been clutching since she'd gotten into the truck and smirked a little to himself. Maybe she'd shut up now.

"Do you want to turn on the wipers? It's kinda misty."

"No . . . I can see just fine." Stupid woman. It wasn't that bad out. Okay, so the fog cut off the headlight beams less than a car length ahead of him. He knew these roads like the back of his hand. He wasn't about to turn on the wipers, especially now that she'd nagged him about it.

"There's a curve up ahead. It says forty-five."

"I'm only going fifty. It's fine." He nudged the truck up to 55, powering through the curve. With the extra gas, the pickup clung to the pavement like a champ. Slow down -Yeah, right.

"What's that red light mean?"

"Jesus, woman, will you just shut up for a bit? I've got everything under contr . . ."

He frowned as the engine started knocking, the wheel shuddering slightly under his hands. The speedometer needle began to creep back over to the left.

50 . . . 45 . . .

"Jake? What's wrong? It's not supposed to do that, is it?"

"It's nothing." He scowled at the "ENGINE" light that was now gleaming a malevolent red from the otherwise green-yellow dashboard array. He gave the truck a bit more gas, pumping the accelerator experimentally. The engine coughed and sputtered, and the truck continued to slow.

40 . . . 35 . . .

Jake squinted forward into the fog and coasted the truck onto a wide spot in the shoulder.

"Jake? What's wrong? What happened?"

He unbuckled his seatbelt and threw open the door. "Don't know. Probably just a loose belt or something." He climbed out, then reached back into the cab to pop the hood. "You stay put."

Walking through the thick mist to the front of the truck was like stepping through cold, wet spider webs. Jake wiped his face with the back of his flannel and shuddered, wishing he'd grabbed his jacket. But he wasn't going to go back now - the cold was less annoying than his wife's nagging questions would be.

He leaned over the still-hissing engine, warmth from the motor driving away part of the chill of the night. Now, what the hell was wrong with the . . .

He didn't have time to think more than that before the thing that was hiding in the depths of the engine leapt for his face. To Jake, it was like the shadows had jumped for him, wrapping his head and shoulders in thick, hot, oily darkness. He jerked back, but the blackness came with him, pressing into his eyes, clotting his nostrils and, when he opened his mouth to yell for help, stopping his screams un-heard in his throat. He reeled backwards, falling on his back on the rocky shoulder of the road. For a moment, he felt the dewy grass and the hard cold stone against his back and legs, and then Jake felt nothing at all.

* * * * *

"What was it? Did you fix it?" Emma asked as he clambered back awkwardly into the cab of the truck.

The thing that was once Jake just nodded. "It's fine."

Introduction

Highways and Byways of the World of Darkness

Much of the focus of the new World of Darkness is “your chronicle’s setting.” That is, the focus is very local. Hierarchies and organizations (even those that span the entire world) tend to center on a small geographical area, usually a town or city, rather than existing as a rigid structure on a regional, national or global basis. Even within specific worldwide social, political or spiritual groups, the residents of one town and thus the local manifestations of the group are not the same as those of another. They vary greatly from one city to the next.

For Storytellers, this allows a great deal of customization, with sourcebooks offering suggestions of how things might be, without dictating how things must be in any given area.

But did you ever stop to think about why?

Why does so much of humanity dwell within city limits? Why do vampires and mages focus so strongly on citywide social and political structures, while bonds that extend out of the city are much more tenuous? Why do even werewolves, feral creatures who are spiritual kin to wilderness predators, still tend to claim territories in and around human cities? Why do changelings organize their freeholds in and around existing towns?

Cities represent safety. And beyond the cities, beyond the boundaries laid out and claimed by civilized souls, lie miles and miles of dangerous road.

You often meet
your fate on the road
you take to avoid it.

– French Proverb

The Illusion of Safety

The United States’ National Highway System alone is composed of more than 160,000 miles of highway within the country’s borders, with hundreds of thousands of other state and local roadways filling in between. The Trans-Canada Highway stretches almost 5,000 miles, the length of the country, and China’s National Highway 010 (at more than 3,500 miles) is only one of dozens of modern routes that crisscross that nation. All together, there are literally millions of miles of roadways connecting city to city and shore to shore throughout the globe. Surely, with such extensive networking connecting locations across the world, there can’t be too much danger involved?

That, in fact, is an illusion that we as travelers are careful to build around ourselves.

For humans (and human-like supernatural creatures) safety lies in defense and numbers. Inherently unarmored and lacking natural weaponry, we are under-advantaged creatures in a world full of things with teeth and claws. Early on, however, we learned to use caves (and later, to build our own buildings) as a method of protection. Spears and sticks could, after all, be broken or dropped, but safely behind stone walls, few predators could do us harm.

Similarly, while one human on his own might be weak, as a group (and using the ability to communicate to take best advantage of those numbers) humans can be deadly against even a physically superior foe. The ability to call for help, to communicate details about the location and identity of a predator and to make long-range plans with others, before and after an encounter, counter many of man’s natural disadvantages.

Traveling between cities leaves a person vulnerable by stripping him of these two basic safeties. The metal and glass surrounding us are but poor substitutes for the walls and roofs of our civilized sanctuaries, and more than 70% of car trips involve a single driver and no more than one passenger. As much as we would like to think

The Denizens of the World of Darkness

World of Darkness: Midnight Roads is a sourcebook designed for use with any of the game lines bearing the World of Darkness name. To illustrate examples or to make a specific point, we occasionally refer to one of those games within this book, but the reader doesn't need to be intimately familiar with all of the different game lines to use **Midnight Roads**. Below is a handy primer on the five different types of supernatural creatures that we'll mention in this book:

Vampires refer to themselves as *Kindred*. All vampires belong to one of five different *clans*, which determine what supernatural powers the Kindred wield and some of their weaknesses. Many vampires also belong to *covenants*, organizations that fill the roles of religions, political parties and secret societies. Small groups of vampires band together into *coteries*.

Werewolves are born to human parents, but undergo a First Change some time during their lives, at which point they discover their savage heritage. Werewolves refer to themselves as *Uratha* in their own language, or sometimes as *Forsaken* (those who ally themselves with Luna, the spirit of the moon) or *Pure* (brutal, vicious werewolves who make war on their lunar cousins). Forsaken werewolves take social roles called *auspices*, based on which phase of the moon they first Changed under, and many join *tribes* that provide training and support. The basic unit of werewolf existence, though, is the *pack*.

Mages are human beings who Awaken to mystical Supernal Realms and work their arcane powers through a connection to these places. Every mage walks a *Path*, depending on which Watchtower she Awakened to, and some join one of five *orders*, ancient fellowships that stretch back to a forgotten city of antiquity. A group of mages is called a *cabal*, while a local organization, usually composed of multiple cabals, is called a *Consilium*.

Prometheans, sometimes called the *Created*, are living beings made of unliving flesh. Just as the Golem of Hebrew legend or Dr. Frankenstein's monster, these creatures are powerful, despised by humanity and extremely rare. This is well, because Prometheans bring out the worst in people. Close proximity to Prometheans makes others suspicious, angry, jealous and spiteful — and all of this ill will is focused squarely on the Promethean. Each Promethean walks a Pilgrimage, hoping to find the secret of Mortality, and sometimes these beings are lucky enough to find others of their kind and band together into a *throng*.

Changelings, finally, are people stolen by the Others, the True Fae, the beings from Arcadia. These hapless souls, sometimes called the *Lost*, have made their back to the lands of their birth. Some live in fear that their tormentors will return. Others swear that if the "Fair Folk" come for them, they will be ready. Changelings arrange themselves in feudal *Courts*, named after the seasons of the year and based roughly on mystical and political outlook.

otherwise, travel away from our "territory" leaves us less prepared to deal with whatever we may encounter. And, because we are away from familiar territory, what we may encounter is unknown, adding another layer of danger to the situation.

We compensate for this danger in many ways. Vehicles have, in modern times, become mini-dwellings, with many conveniences to help us forget we've really left the safety of our shelters and companions behind. The most-traveled roadways are outlined in lights, and liberally dotted with mini-towns that contain all conveniences a traveler might need, including temporary shelter. We've done everything we can to give travelers the impression that travel is as safe as being at home.


And in most case it works.

But this impression, at its heart, is an illusion that needs only the slightest mishap to be revealed. A flat tire just out of cell phone range. A deer bounding across the road too quickly

to avoid as we're driving through a mountain pass. A misread gas gauge that leaves us stranded between towns. One wrong turn, and we're in unfamiliar territory, and face-to-face with the fact that, illusions aside, travel is risky business.

Of course, most travelers do make it from place to place without any problems. Many travelers arrive safely at their destinations for every one who does not. The World of Darkness can be a subtle place, and in its own way, this is another layer of danger, another subtle deception that leads us to believe that travel is safe. Every safe journey made only heightens our false sense of security, increasing our surprise — and vulnerability — when the reality of the dangers travel can hold is truly revealed.

Getting in a car and driving beyond city limits probably isn't anywhere nearly as inherently deadly an endeavor as most supernatural societies make traveling out to be. A long-ingrained sense of near-feudal superstition regarding whatever



might be over the next hill, however, makes most vampires, werewolves and what-have-you dread whatever is outside of the territory that they consider to be safe and familiar. Likewise, the powers-that-be in each Kindred domain, Awakened Consilium and the like, have a vested interest in making the world beyond their borders out to be a horrific place that no one wanders into and survives. Without engendering such a mindset, after all, how do they keep the citizenry penned in and reliant upon its superiors?

In the end, weird things happen to characters who leave the cities for the same reason that weird things happen to the characters who stay there: exciting stories don't happen when things go safely and as expected. Characters on the road can get downtime, during which boring and tranquil miles roll by under their wheels, but *something* exceptional is eventually going to transpire, because players don't show up to hear about how peaceful their characters' journey was. Players want the strange, the horrific and the wondrous. You can play up the fact that the characters' wanderings are somehow exceptional, however, through the occasional encounters and conversations with others that make the road their home.

What Lies Between

The true dangers of the road are not the ones that first spring to mind. Flat tires, mechanical problems, running out of gas, and even car accidents are not the real dangers of travel in the World of Darkness. At most, they are only the triggers, the things that slow drivers down long enough to realize how truly vulnerable they are.

Midnight Roads is about the real hazards of the road. Phantom hitchhikers, evil creatures hunting rest stops for lone travelers, back roads that lead only to disaster and diners where damnation is the daily special. We'll discuss the things lying in wait just beyond the safety of the headlights' beams, and those things that don't bother waiting for a breakdown or flat tire before tearing into the fragile metal cage we fool ourselves into believing makes us safe. We'll talk about car accidents and cross-country chases and what by-land travel means in a horror story. About the people, places and things that threaten us when we are traveling between one relatively safe place and the next, and what part they play in the World of Darkness as a whole. Within these pages, readers will find what lies just beneath the illusion of safety we create about travel, and the reasons why that illusion is necessary.

Theme: Isolation by Surprise

You never think you're alone in a car. You've got music, climate control, your super-sized drink in the drink holder. This is civilization, even if you're hundreds of miles from the next town. Then you look up and see the man running alongside your door — and keeping pace. Or you get a flat, and four guys walk up to you from nowhere. Or something

steps out into the road in front of you — and you drive through it. And you realize that all your amenities are just one glitch away from leaving you all alone in the dark with nothing but a quarter inch of safety glass between you and . . . whatever is out there.

Mood: Deer in the Headlights

There's a reason that deer get the look they do, just before the car strikes them dead. It's a split second of sheer inevitability. The lights are barreling down at them, and they know that no matter what they do, in a heartbeat the situation is going to get very, very bad.

People encounter the same inevitability. The gas gauge reads fumes, but the only place you've seen in 50 miles is that tiny little one-pump station with the owner who looks like something out of *Deliverance*. The tire is flat, and you know you need to get out of the car and fix it, but the fog's swirling around so thick you can't see the far side of the road from the shoulder. You're so tired you can't keep your eyes open any further, but do you really want to stop at the "Rest A While Inn" where the owner/maintenance man is looking at you like you're dinner? Or would it be better to just pull off into that rest area you saw a while back, the one with the "stray dog" sniffing around that garbage Dumpster that was leaking something dark and sticky?

How to Use This Book

Midnight Roads is designed to introduce readers to the World of Darkness that exists between civilized cities and towns, on the highways and byways and all the little places scattered along them, and to aid Storytellers in creating games that happen in those places.

Chapter One: Journeys and Destinations provides some insight into the arterial structure that connects the World of Darkness. This chapter showcases not only the streets and roads of the world but also who travels them, how they do it and what awaits those who journey between the bastions of relative civilization.

Chapter Two: Construction Ahead deals with the mechanics of vehicles and travel in the World of Darkness, including new Merits and methods for drivers and other road-related persona.

Chapter Three: Road Hazards gives readers a drive-by glance at some of the macabre and mysterious things and people readers will find on the open road, including sample characters and destinations that are fully fleshed out and ready to be included in any **World of Darkness** game.

Chapter Four: Dangerous Intersections contains tips on Storytelling travel plots and sessions built around the open road, as well as five sample stories that are ready for Storytellers to use as a part of their **World of Darkness** chronicles.

Sources and Inspirations

Books

Christine — The king of the Car-Killer stories. Obsession, murder and a dynamic story of death and love.

The Long Walk — While this Stephen King (writing as Richard Bachman) novella involves walking, rather than cars, this work exemplifies the themes of **Midnight Roads**. Outside the boundaries of civilization (which the entire Long Walk can be seen to be), things are different. The rules change, and people change as well.

“Trucks” — Separated by circumstance (and an army of killer vehicles), an unlikely band of humans tries to find a way to deal with now-sentient and malevolent machines in an isolated truck stop. This short story can be found in Stephen King’s anthology *Night Shift*. There’s a movie version, too (*Maximum Overdrive*, 1986), but you’re probably better off sticking to the book.

Jackals and Raven — Charles Grant gives readers packs of subhuman “jackals” that prey on straggling humans caught between places of safety and civilization and a possibly supernatural murder in the middle of a snowed-in hotel.

The Nightrunners — Joe Lansdale takes readers on a tour of the dark side of human nature that comes out when we’re away from the assumptions of safety. Sex, violence and a black ’66 Chevy — who could ask for more?

Various books by Jan Harold Brunvand — Titles include *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends* and *Mexican Pet*. A good number of urban legends center on cars and travel, and Brunvand’s books are good resources. Another one, which has the advantage of being free, is the Urban Legends Reference Page at www.snopes.com.

Graphic Novel

The Crow — James O’Barr masterfully portrays this book’s theme of isolation by surprise. In the scene where the gang kills Eric and Shelly, the moment of realization between “damn, car trouble” and “damn, we’re screwed” is the kind of epiphany that exemplifies **Midnight Roads**.

Television Shows

Drive — Why, oh why must the good die young? This cancelled Fox series featured a diverse group of

drivers being brought together to follow obscure clues in a cross-country auto race.

X-Files — Although not all of the X-Files episodes featured out of the way places or travel, several did, and when they did, they did it well. Episodes such as “The Jersey Devil,” “Darkness Falls” and “Quagmire” highlight some of the bizarre occurrences that can be found off the beaten path.

Movies

Grindhouse (2007) — *Death Proof*, Tarantino’s half of the *Grindhouse* double feature, contains what is arguably one of the best car chases in movie history (though the first half of the film is rather talky).

The Hitcher — Both the 1986 and 2007 versions pit travelers against a supernatural serial killer who terrorizes them and sets them up to take the blame for his crimes, in an excellent example of how things can go horribly wrong for travelers.

Hot Fuzz (2007) — Though this film is more comic in tone than our setting, the contrast between Angel’s former routine in London and his new assignment in Sandford is a great example of the difference between the rest of the World of Darkness and the parts found outside of the city. Just as in Sandford, events on the Road can often be much darker, and more bizarre, than they seem at first glance.

The Transporter (2002) — A great action movie with many of the “road” tropes: car chases, exploding vehicles, reckless driving and, of course, plenty of crashes. It’s also a great look at some of the “getting things from here to there” situations that might encourage characters in the World of Darkness to step outside of their (relatively) safe cities and venture out into the dark open roads.

Tales From the Crypt: Demon Knight (1995) — A small town in the middle of nowhere (the town is actually called “Wormwood”) serves as the final battleground between a charming demon and a haggard, but noble, drifter. Gory and fun, with some highly quotable lines and a great performance from a young Thomas Hayden Church.

Crash (1996) — Not the more recent Oscar winner (though that’s good, too), but this film starring James Spader, Holly Hunter and Elias Koteas about sex and car crashes. The footage of the crashes is interesting, as is the notion that people get off on recreating such crashes.

Near Dark (1987) — A band of vicious vampires rides around in a modified RV, terrorizing the Southwest. For inspiration on how vampires function on the road, this one is a must-see.





The spare tire dropped to the pavement, and instead of bouncing, sank flatly against the road.

"Great. Just great." Tammy pushed the spare over. It wouldn't even roll, just hit the ground with a dull thud. She checked her cell phone for what must have been the hundredth time since the car had started to shimmy, forcing her to pull over.

No bars. No service. No way this day was going to get any worse.

She headed back to the front of the car, but the driver's side wheel hadn't miraculously repaired itself. It was, if anything, flatter than the spare.

She'd filled up in Midway, and the wheel had been fine then. But that was a good 20 minutes back the way she'd come, and Fairfield was at least a half an hour further on. In flip-flops, that was going to be a hell of a walk, either way. But she'd been here for—she checked her phone again—almost an hour, and the cars that had driven past hadn't so much as slowed when she'd tried to flag them down. It was looking like walking was her best option.

She'd only got maybe 200 yards before the tow truck pulled up. The driver leered at her as he leaned across the cab and rolled down his passenger window. "That your rig back there?"

"Yeah. Got a flat, and the spare is flat, too. Can I use your phone?"

"Can't get service out here. Even the radio don't work out here. Bad stretch to get stranded on."

Tammy frowned. Just my luck.

"Can you tell someone I'm stuck here?"

"I can do better than that." The driver jumped down from his truck and walked around to open the passenger side door for her. His clothing was crusted with road dirt and oil stains, and his skin was worse.

"I'll give you a lift back to the shop. You can use the phone there." His breath was like a sewer, and as he smiled at her, Tammy could see why. Half his teeth were missing, and the ones that remained were rotting. His grin was a neglected picket fence of yellow and brown.

Tammy looked down at her flip-flops. She could already feel the blisters starting to raise between her toes where the road-grit had begun to wear away at the skin. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

As the driver pulled the truck back onto the road, Tammy continued. "No one was even slowing down."

"Yeah, what with the scare they've been having around here, folks are a bit spooked."

"Scare?" The tiny hairs at the back of Tammy's neck prickled.

"Yeah, seems some girls went missing a while back. Police found them the other day. It was a big ol' mess." The driver smiled, and Tammy's blood went cold. She scooted a bit further toward her side of the truck.

"Oh, don't worry yourself about it," the driver said with a grin as he reached over to lay one possessive hand on Tammy's knee. "I've found a much better place to hide things now."

Chapter One: Journeys and Destinations

Every day, millions of people drive, walk and bike down millions of roads. It seems mundane. Easy to think of it as little more than getting from Point A to Point B.

But it's easy to get lost between Point A and Point B. Roads are everywhere, forming a tangled network crisscrossing the nation. In this way, roads and highways are like arteries. Pumping blood from coast to coast, across the heartland, through the badlands and mountains and deep dark forests.

But roads are about history, too. Pick up a handful of gravel from a road pocked with potholes or from the shoulder of a long stretch of sun-bleached bypass, and in your hand you'll have a fist full of the past. Of car crashes and lost travelers. Of blood and glass and shrieking metal. Of kidnap victims trapped in trunks, of drivers who travel the open road the way that a wolf hunts old deer trails.

The world of the Road is dangerous. It doesn't seem like it, maybe, in a world full of easy-to-read road signs or GPS technology. It's just a ruse, though. False comfort in the sanctity and safety of the open road. Because what happens when some mean gang of road jackals switches signs? Or when a driver's GPS — in a voice that sounds just a little different than it did before — tells that driver to turn right when he most certainly should've turned left? The culture of the road has a system to it, and that system can be easily exploited by monsters, and easily misunderstood by prey.

To know the road
ahead, ask those
coming back.

— Chinese Proverb

Nitty-Gritty

This section will help detail out some of the details of the Road. These details won't be utterly comprehensive because what we're giving you here is for your stories. You want the full history of the American highway system? The Internet and the library eagerly await your investigation. But if you want to get a fist full of the aforementioned gravel, sifting through the stone for story bits (or maybe just a tooth or a worn ribbon of tire rubber), then please, read on.

The Road

If you want use the Road in your game, it doesn't hurt to know some details. Verisimilitude goes a long way, and some of the details herein should grant you that necessary measure of reality.

Devil in the Details

Know the difference between a road and a street? A road is a catch-all term — any way connecting two points meant for travel by vehicle is a road, whereas a *street* is considered a suburban or urban road, specifically framed on both sides by buildings.

What about highway, expressway, route, interstate, bypass, freeway or turnpike? A *highway*, like a "road," is a general term, usually indicating a high-speed, long-distance road. Many highways are local, forming the National Highway System. Those that are not local are generally Interstates (see below).

Freeways generally have no cross-traffic access and no driveway access, and manifest sometimes as underpasses and overpasses. For story purposes, it's hard to just hop off a freeway. Sometimes, the distances between exits can be vast — one mile, 10 miles, even 50 miles. Miss an exit, and a character could get trapped on the freeway. If it's divided by a barrier, making a U-turn might become impossible (which is generally illegal, anyway, but when some fire-eyed madman in a bobtail truck cab is barreling down on a character, a minor traffic violation is the least of his concerns).

Expressways have more access than freeways, meaning expressways have a limited number of driveways and intersecting cross-streets (or railways). It's less difficult to get trapped here, but that also means that predators can get on and off more easily, too.

The *interstate* (or, the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways) is composed of highways, freeways and expressways that, as the name suggests, cross over several states. This interlinked system of superhighways connects major urban areas all across the country. These highways often possess the highest speed limits (which can make for tense, dangerous driving in high-traffic conditions, rules for which are found on p. 53 of Chapter Two). As the full name suggests, the interstate system is in part meant to be used for the military: the system allows for the swift transportation of troops and military vehicles. One thing worth noting about the interstates is *contraflow*. When disaster strikes a city and evacuations are necessary, interstates turn all incoming lanes into outbound lanes to facilitate the massive exodus. Though, like rats fleeing a sinking ship, this can often be more chaotic than is designed, and interstates can still be deadlocked (even a single accident during an evacuation can profoundly complicate, even stall, the escape).

A *bypass* is a highway used to circumnavigate areas of congestion (heavily-traveled parts of the cities or suburbs). Ironically, bypasses often become as clogged as the areas the bypasses hope to circumvent. Some places are rumored to possess “hidden” bypasses, unmarked bits of unused highway that the police use to skirt congestion. Other, darker stories say that these hidden bypasses are used by monsters as traps (set up a sign, let a lone driver think he's getting around the congestion, take the sign down and now you have your prey driving alone down a long, forgotten curve of asphalt). Bypasses often connect to larger interstate roads.

In the United States, a *turnpike* is a toll road, usually a highway. Some turnpikes have toll-takers standing at booths handing out tickets and collecting tolls. Some turnpikes have automated systems where you just toss money into a bucket or place a bar-coded or RFID “E-Z Pass” in your window. The pass allows a driver to prepay tolls and simply drive through the tollbooth — the tollbooth reads the pass electronically as you drive through. Missing a toll, losing the toll ticket or failing to have the money can be costly: one has to pay the maximum toll present on the ticket, or is otherwise fined. Of course, the very concept of a “toll”

can be used in a good **World of Darkness** story: what if one must pay something other than money? What happens when the toll-booth operator tells a driver that he needs a picture of the driver's kid or the driver's wedding ring? Or maybe the operator wants a “favor” done, or even a bit of the driver's soul. Most drivers wouldn't pay that toll. Unless, of course, the driver *must* get down the highway (to save a loved one, perhaps, or to catch a fleeing thief).

Finally, a *route* or *route number* is just a numerical designation indicating the road — I-95, Route 1, Highway 476. The system can be confusing in the United States, because sometimes local highways and interstate highways share numbering.


Bloody Streets

The goal of a city's streets is to provide circulation for the city's residents, its goods, its infrastructural operators (fire, ambulance, police, postal, etc.). In a perfect city, the streets line up in a nice grid plan that's been in use since before Babylon. Some of the streets on a grid might be numerical, or consist of words (be they states, names, trees) that go in an alphabetical fashion. In the latter half of the 20th century, though, the grid layout gradually waned, leaving room for more chaotic and asymmetrical patterns designed in some cases to provide a more organic flow within a town or city. Did it work? Sometimes. The reality, though, is that this so-called street hierarchy system made it so that the trip between a person's apartment and the store where that person buys her milk is hampered by the very streets laid out for their presumed efficiency. Moreover, the system was found to encourage congestion, discourage pedestrian movement and increase fatalities from accidents.

What does this mean? It means that the gridwork, which may give way to “good blocks” and “bad blocks,” can be grimly efficient. Those cities without the grid system (really, any new city or city expansion after 1960) can be chaotic and confusing, a tangle of streets that run into one another with no easy way to discern the pattern of traffic or direction of movement. (Translation: Great for **World of Darkness** games. Getting lost in a maze of streets and alleyways is emblematic of urban horror, so feel free to treat some cities as the labyrinthine constructs that they truly are.)

Highway History

The history of the United States Highway System appears uncomplicated. The 20th century has been the century of the automobile (as opposed to the 19th century, which was the time of the railroads). As the mobility of the American citizen increased in leaps and bounds, the country needed a stable highway system. It was anything but stable at first, with the individual states given the freedom to reroute interstates however the states wanted, thus ensuring that the major traffic arteries passed through their urban centers. A good idea in theory, but one that led to chaos and confusion with all manner of misappropriated signs and poorly rerouted highways.



The federal government stepped in and gave some uniformity to the highway system, administrating the major interstates. Over time, though, what happened was that the smaller highways (rarely signaling a straight line between Point A and Point B, instead assuming rather circuitous routes) grew to be more trouble than the government felt they were worth. And so the government rerouted smaller highways, or decommissioned them entirely. From the 1950s to the 1970s, countless highways were shortened or eradicated, left in many cases to crumble. Route 66 is a prime example of this, but is by no means the only decommissioned highway.

It seems fine on the surface. Faster, straighter highways made traveling faster. But something was lost in translation. The hurried march to progress often used the backs of American citizens as step stools. How?

Consider that the highway system (before the advent of the freeways and expressways) counted as the major arterial network of the transportation circulation system. Therefore, commerce built up along these highways: restaurants, hotels, motels, quarries, shipping yards, warehouses, tourist attractions and so forth. Where there was money to be made, people had to live, too. Commerce gave way to residence. People made their homes near the places that they worked. Whole communities sprang up out of nothing, all thanks to the highway system.

The superhighways destroyed that. With the smaller highways left to rot, so, too, were the homes and businesses given over to the fading circulation of traffic. No cars, no people. No people, no money. And when the money stops rolling in, people either need to pack up and move, or remain in stagnation. Vast parts of the country have been thus ignored by the supremacy of the superhighway, leaving entire towns to turn to dust, the highways linking these places shifting and cracking with nobody to fix them. Lonely neon buzzing down a dead highway. A rest stop filled with people who aren't zombies, but at a distance probably look that way because they are, metaphorically, the living dead. Junkyards gone to rust. Restaurants with desert plants pushing up out of the walls. Bridges across dark streams too rickety to drive across because the government won't

commit the money to fix them anymore. In these places, the United States lives on wheezing life support.

Darkness Spreads

What does this mean for the World of Darkness? It means that the shadows had a chance to spread. Before, the highways were lined with the lights of the road — street-lights, neon, headlights. Now, forgotten, the highways are all dark. They still exist. Many are still accessible (at least in parts) to traffic. But the lights are all out. The towns are dead or dying. Business is meager.

The power of prosperity — really, the whole American dream — is dead in these places. And where the dream dies, darkness can take root. Literal ghosts rise up, making forgotten towns their bleak kingdoms. Vampires lurk in the abandoned buildings up and down the rotting highways, picking off lost vacationers the way wild dogs cull the sick and young from a herd. The trees have started to close in on the highways, widening the territory of the hungry beasts who hunt those woods. Sorcerers can perform mad magic away from prying eyes. One finds no end of horror amidst these bygone byways.

It's all too easy for a driver to take a wrong turn down a lost highway or to zip off the wrong exit. He'll find himself in a place that hasn't kept up with its street signs, and they might be wrong. That rusted, bullet-pocked sign that says the turnpike is "this way" was right maybe 20 years ago. Now, it just leads the character deeper into darkness. It's even possible that the monsters who cling to this disregarded road have switched signs — who's there to check? Who's there to fix them? A switched sign just herds the driver toward their territory, toward sudden isolation that is as inescapable as quicksand.

Car Culture

Herein we talk a little about cars and the impact they've had upon the World of Darkness. One could theorize that the

Strata

Street comes from the Latin, *strata*.

Strata, of course, implies layers. And, really, while that's not the intent of the word or its origin, the streets and roads of the world are formed of strata. They're often cast over old roads and boulevards, whether dirt, gravel or previously paved.

History leaves its marks, remember. It has a physical effect on the world, and a spiritual one. What might lie beneath a road? Bones? Teeth? A strange old artifact that fell out of a junkyard truck some 50 years ago? A piece of jewelry from a murdered girl?

More importantly, what might stir from these things that lie beneath the sand, stone and asphalt? Ghostly hitchhikers? Infernal automobiles that crawl up through wet-tar blacktop once a year at midnight? Doorways to other streets that aren't of this world? When tires kick up stone and expose an old pothole, what might crawl up out of that crater?

Highway Sirens

No, we don't mean the things on top of cop cars, believe it or not. You know the Sirens out of Greek myth? Singing or playing music so enchanting that sailors steered their vessels toward the sound... thus crashing into the rocky crags where the waiting Sirens could devour the shipwrecked fools?

The highways and byways of the world have Sirens, too. Sometimes, you might be driving down a lonely strip of interstate and hear a song drifting down the macadam. Usually, it's a song that has something to do with roads or highways, be it Chuck Berry singing "Get Your Kicks (Route 66)," Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" or even Portishead's "Roads." You might not think much of the song normally, but out there in the middle of nowhere, it'll start to sound pretty good. So good, in fact, you just have to hear who's playing it. Maybe there's a gas station or a diner. Maybe it's down that little access road bisecting the highway, and sure enough, it sounds like the music is coming from that direction....

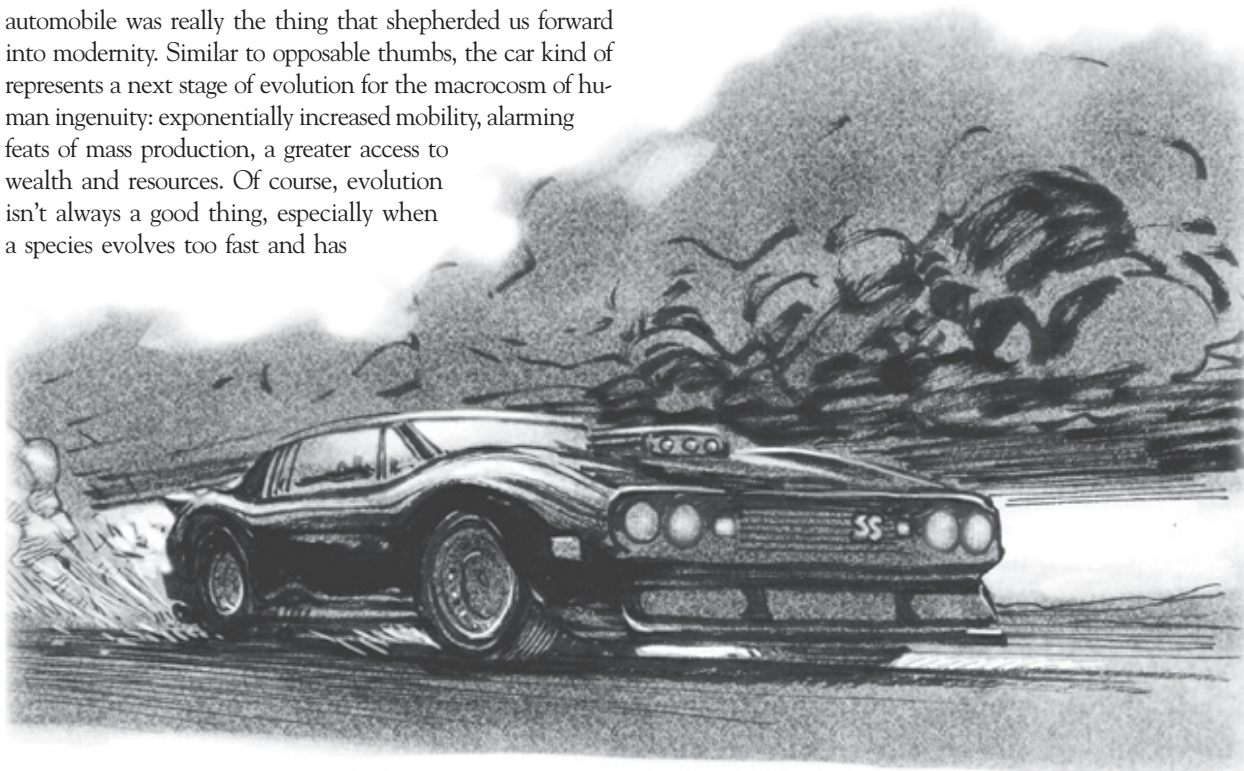
Of course, what's down that direction isn't much more than a dark gravel road with a spike strip buried amidst the stone. A mile down, the tires pop. And not long after, the Sirens come out of the shadows, ready to feed.

automobile was really the thing that shepherded us forward into modernity. Similar to opposable thumbs, the car kind of represents a next stage of evolution for the macrocosm of human ingenuity: exponentially increased mobility, alarming feats of mass production, a greater access to wealth and resources. Of course, evolution isn't always a good thing, especially when a species evolves too fast and has

little perspective on the sudden lurch forward. The automobile might just be the nail in our coffin, too, if we're not careful. The automobile industry is in part what helps us gobble up resources all around the world, leeching the world dry of its oil reserves (and in the process, stirring the hornet's nest of war in oil-rich regions). And what happens when a manufacturing facility closes? Or when it becomes so automated that it doesn't need all those human workers? Thousands of people, cast onto the streets, let loose into the system with a sudden loss of income. The layoffs from the automobile industry are staggering... and some might say a terrible blow to the economy.

Oh, and then there's all the blood. Automobiles result in a staggering number of deaths across the country every year: more than 40,000 deaths per year in the United States alone, making the automobile the number one cause of accidental demise. Cars have helped humankind spatter a great deal of blood and guts across the highways — the shriek of metal, the crash of glass, the sound of a man screaming inside his burning car because he can't unhook his seatbelt. A car has the ability to go well over 100 miles per hour, and that makes it a rocketing death sled. Lose control of the car on an icy road. Clip a guardrail. Try to answer a cell phone while driving. The tiniest fluctuation in one's driving ability or concentration can, on a really bad day, lead to a pile up of metal, rubber and corpses in the middle of a major interstate, closing the whole thing down while someone sorts out the bodies and shrapnel.

Sure, cars are great. They allow us surprising freedom. But, like all things, without moderation they can be bad news. And, since this is the World of Darkness, we're going to focus on all that bad news.



Corporate Monsters

The automobile industry once gave a major shot in the arm to the American economy. Mass production let a city like Detroit become the Motor City, a crowning achievement of American workmanship and initiative. Of course, take a look at Detroit today, and see the squalor born from life leeches out of the neighborhoods. Take a gander at the rows of derelict buildings, many of them old manufacturing facilities. The automobile industry became the foundation of the rather prodigious manufacturing sector for a time, and then that foundation was pulled out from under the country. The industry isn't yet in the ground, but it's in a rough-and-tumble state, especially in certain parts of the country. Those who count on this industry to live may find the American dream (home ownership, a good car, a nice neighborhood) slipping through their fingers.

How does this affect the world? How does it give strength to monsters? In the same way that decommissioning a major highway cuts off the "blood supply" to the communities that have relied upon the road, corporate greed can leave an entire town or neighborhood floundering. It doesn't take long for crime to seep in at the edges. Desperate people begin desperate measures to feed their families (or keep up their own misguided standards of living). And when that happens, when the rot creeps in, so do the monsters. Vampires feed on the weak. Werewolves enter under the cover of a new moon to cull those "herd" humans who are giving certain spirits too much power. Mad mages see a community on the brink — a great place to set up an isolated laboratory or library, or to kidnap those forgotten humans for a battery of unsightly experiments.

Sometimes, a car company invites weakness under the auspices of making sound business decisions. Ever hear of the "General Motors Streetcar Conspiracy" that happened mid-century? GM helped other companies buy up dozens of streetcar systems across the country and replace them with buses and cars, thus allowing GM to maximize profits, even though in doing so GM put in place an inefficient system that was less convenient for the citizens *and* more costly to them. Now, feel free to evoke any number of conspiracies about the auto industry. Maybe cars are built with a "timebomb" effect, whereas they're forced to degrade after three or five years, ensuring people buy new ones with some regularity. Could be that the car companies have been suppressing technologies that would damage their own profits, perhaps by switching to some resource other than oil. Maybe they've even *killed* people who dared to invent engines that run on water or vegetable oil.

It's possible that true monsters are a cog in the automobile industry machine, too. A decades-dead vampire has had years to realize ways to milk profits from the populace. He drinks blood literally, so why not drink it figuratively, as well? By pulling the strings and putting in place a number of callous blood-slave shareholders, a vampire can gain mightily at the cost of the American public. Sure, he's just one Detroit bloodsucker, but by putting himself in a posi-

tion of power at a major car company, he can affect people all around the world.

Or, what about a cult of auto executives who find that the only sure way to increase sales of their product is to sacrifice someone to the assembly line once a month? Maybe the machines that make the cars — all those robotic arms and metal presses — gain life and sentience after so much viscera dries into their joints, gears and circuits.

Maybe all our cars contain little bits of alien technology. Say a cadre of men in the 1950s made some kind of deal with extraterrestrial (or "ultraterrestrial," i.e., not from outer space but from *outside* both space and time) beings that came to us from between worlds. In trade for such technology, this cadre of dark-suited men in glasses made us all complicit in some strange deal, some "favor" that will be called upon at a later date. Sure, we all love our cars, but the cost to have them is perhaps far greater than we know, because when these entities come knocking, who knows what the denizens of the World of Darkness will have to give in payment?

Illegal Street Racing

Unsanctioned street races take place on public roads. These races often begin in the shadows and end in the shadows, though some cars and bikes are cast in the soft wash of undercarriage neon. Some are impromptu — a couple street gangs get together to see whose ride can make it to the end of the Bay Bridge first. Others are well-coordinated, backed by wealthy men, laid out in a series of races just like NASCAR or any other sporting event. Winners take the chance to race again. Losers go home, often without their cars. Orchestrated races tend to see cars fitted with GPS (cop "hot spots" are marked and shared among racers), radar detectors, nitrous boosters (to outrun the cops) and emergency radio band scanners (so they can listen in on police chatter). Many racers don't use their own cars, having instead jacked them from other racers or innocent people. (Though, in some situations, this is frowned upon. One should care about one's ride; otherwise, where's the real risk?)

What kinds of prizes are up for grabs? Anything. Other cars. A million bucks. Slaves. Blood. Supernatural good luck charms, like an eight-ball gear shift that's been passed around from winning racer to winning racer for the last 50 years.

The Drag

"The Drag" is a drag race, plain and simple. Three lights — red to yellow, yellow to green — and *bang*, the cars or bikes are off. Straight shot road, whoever hits the end of it first is the winner. Of course, drag racers don't have safe straight-aways marked with barriers. They use public highways or city streets. Bystanders get in the way. So do other cars. Sometimes, a racer kicking up at speeds of 150 miles per hour or more maybe just . . . nudges the other car, and the two tumble together in a rolling fireball of shrieking metal. Sometimes, people die. But the races go on.

Local Point-to-Point

The race organizers pick two points, a start and a finish, usually at different ends of the city or in two different neighborhoods. Whoever gets to the finish point first is obviously the winner, but the key here isn't just speed, it's smart-driving. Knowing shortcuts is key, even if those shortcuts involve driving through an abandoned warehouse or through someone's yard. Property damage is common. Sometimes, pedestrians end up on the crossing walk as a car bears down and strikes them. Hey, shit happens. Big prizes are on the line with these kinds of races. Lots of pride, too.

Cannonball Point-to-Point

The Cannonball Run was a comedy film from the early 1980s, yes, but it was based on a very real race phenomenon: a coast-to-coast race from New York to California. Drivers could drive whatever car they wanted. Again, whoever crossed the finish line first was the winner. The great wide expanse of the United States was a playground and a danger zone — state troopers, inclement weather, deer gamboling across the open highway, shortcuts, detours, heavy traffic, urban areas and so on. GPS is key, though some races outlaw GPS because it removes the element of intelligence and cleverness (others point out, though, that GPS isn't really configured for racers, and thus is only of moderate advantage). Sometimes, the race isn't coastal, but still crosses hundreds, even thousands of miles.

The Longest Road

The Pan-American Highway is nearly 30,000 miles long. It starts in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, and goes down through Canada and the United States, then keeps going through Mexico, Central America and South America. The "route" ends at the southern point of Ushuaia, Argentina. In some places, namely Canada and the United States, the highway isn't an actual highway but a "route" consisting of various highways. Though, through Mexico and all points south, the "route" is a named highway.

It's a rough-and-tumble ride. Some parts are particularly tough going, with highways that become dirt or gravel roads (or have just fallen into total disrepair). Also, because the highway passes through almost every conceivable biome, drivers will see snow, forest, desert, jungle, the whole nine yards. An entire story could be set on this drive — is it part of a *Cannonball* point-to-point race? Do characters have to transport something, maybe a favorite or accursed car, down this long journey? Maybe someone in the trunk, kicking and screaming? Someone who would burn up if the sun touched her skin?

The Bizarre

Car culture isn't just about racing or modding automobiles. Cars are a part of the American way of life, and sometimes, the American way of life gets pretty bizarre. Below are some truly "out there" examples of car culture at work.

Alternative

In this day and age of global warming, pollution and an increased dependence upon oil, foreign and domestic, the race is on to develop alternate fuels for cars. Biodiesel's non-toxic properties (it generally comes from used vegetable oils, with many home-brew proprietors driving around to greasy spoons and fast food restaurants to collect the aggregate oils from grease traps) makes this alternative desirable, given that it can just be poured into a diesel engine. Some have figured out a way to make biodiesel from algae, too, great ponds slick with green, which is skimmed and then processed. That's not really that bizarre, though, is it? (Of course, we won't talk about what happens to the poor souls who sometimes slip and fall into the vast algae pools, drowning beneath the green scum. One might even suggest it's a great place to hide bodies given how rarely the pools are cleaned, since cleaning them can disrupt the algae process.)

What's bizarre are the rumors of *other* alternative fuels. One legend has it that someone has created a biodiesel process that uses blood for fuel. Animal blood, of course, taken from butcher shops and coupled with animal fats. But is it such a stretch to assume that someone could use human blood? Farming out human slaves or kidnapping society's bottom-feeders? The greatest proof against such an idea is that isn't buying gasoline altogether easier? It is. Though, consider that some scientists or sorcerers find pragmatism lost beneath hubris, and that some vampires need blood anyway. . . .

Another legend has it that a Promethean was able to incorporate flesh into his car's engine — pulsing aortic valves pushing black oil, pistons of cartilage churning up and down, fibrous fleshy mesh filtering fuel. Some even say that the Promethean *was* the car, but such a grisly thing can't be true, can it?

Crash Fetishists

Some people, similar to those characters in *Crash* (both the book and the 1996 film), get off on car accidents. Why this is remains unclear. Has technology become so pervasive that even at its most industrial (tearing metal, shattering glass, oil spraying across a filthy highway) it has become sexualized? Or is it because cars are already so sexualized in commercials and in exterior and interior design? Whatever the reason, some people find a perverse sexual thrill in car accidents.

The fetish has levels to its extremity. Some simply get hot reading about accidents or visiting the scenes of accidents. Others get off on coupling with the victims of accidents — particularly those who have been disfigured or dismembered in some way by a wreck. The upper echelon (or perhaps lowest nadir) involves those who actually either want to be *in* the crash itself or purposefully cause crashes to happen for their own excitement. Some even speak of whole cults of hollow-eyed car crash orchestrators, setting up elaborate accidents on distant roads, then descending upon the new wreckage to get their thrills in whatever depraved way they can manage.

This might be an interesting fetish for vampires, by the way. First, vampires possess urges just as living humans do, but these urges are often dark reflections or subverted twists on the “normal” urges. Second, car crashes inevitably involve blood. Is it such a stretch to imagine a Kindred who preys upon accidents, and finds the blood there so sweet that it gives him an unprecedented sexual thrill?

Cursed Cars

Legend is rife with cursed cars. Really, any car that’s been in a grisly accident but is then put back out on the road is a likely target for the “curse” story. Even moreso if the car was owned by a celebrity or other well-known figure.

Archduke Ferdinand’s limousine, for instance, as well as Kennedy’s limousine, are both said to be carriers of a potent curse that harms all who touch or drive the cars. Some say their ghosts haunt the cars. Another story, though, claims that the cars were cursed long before, perhaps even cursed in production. Did someone fall into the machinery? Is something possessing these cars, a long-dwelling spirit that sees the automobile as the body to the entity’s ephemeral hungers? Or is the belief in a curse enough to make one manifest?

Urban Auto Legends

Urban legends, those modern fairy tales passed around from “a friend of a friend,” have their share of grim tales about cars. It’s easy to assume that such myths aren’t true . . . but the stories had to come from somewhere.

What about the story that carjackers or mental patients lie in wait beneath a person’s car in a dark parking lot? When the person approaches, the hidden deviant slashes out with a knife, cutting the Achilles’s tendon. (Could a vampire feed this way? Of course. Not all Kindred are the suave Eurotrash types. Some are gutter-fed fiends.)

What about the game of “spunkball?” Where gangs of teens, roving the streets like hyenas, toss lit gas-soaked rags (sometimes wrapped in foil) into parked cars or cars idling at stop lights?

Or the gang members who drive around in dark cars, and if someone flashes his lights at them, hunt him down and kill him? It sounds strange. Maybe too strange. But it could also be a bizarre gang initiation. Or maybe these aren’t gangs at all, but strange spirits or spirit-possessed “hosts” programmed to perform certain actions given the right (or wrong) stimuli.



Maybe you've heard about the drunk driver who found the crumbled body of a child or adult either embedded in the front grill of his car or hanging from the undercarriage of the vehicle. He must've been so drunk, he didn't notice. True? Maybe not. But could someone make a character *think* that this is what happened by setting up this elaborate scene? Perhaps.

Bottom line is, auto myths are prevalent. People losing arms or heads. Ghostly hitchhikers (covered later in this book). Roving marauders. Cars are a part of the American dream, and thus, they're also a part of the American nightmare.

The Long Between

Leave the cities, leave the towns and a character enters a vast space, like a hole in the fabric of civilization. Distant straight-aways, serpentine switchbacks, long highways continuing on to a blurry vanishing point . . . sometimes, it seems that traveling long distances can get one lost in a vast backward backyard. Take the scenic route, and who knows what a character will see? Break down somewhere along the scenic route, and well, who knows when that character will ever *return*?

This section is about the kinds of locations characters might find along the way, between towns, between cities. Each location is described in a way that hopefully allows the location to be dropped into your story with as much or as little warning as the Storyteller requires (but is described in more general terms than the specific locales described in Chapter Three). Each location also comes with a set of plot points that may help you give some life to such lost locales.

Campgrounds

Rural America is littered with campgrounds. Some are placed in notably scenic areas — mountains, lakes, great forests. Some . . . aren't. Maybe they once were, but now? They sit in the middle of bleak forests or at the edges of murky swamps.

Some campgrounds are government-owned (and usually part of the park system), while others see ownership by independent entities (such as the KOA, the Kampgrounds of America). Many charge a few bucks to cover costs or to turn a meager profit.

Most campsites offer a handful of amenities. More robust sites include such amenities as firepits, flush toilets, RV parking, a potable water source, hot showers and elevated platforms for tents. Barebones campgrounds usually offer little more than an area carved out for tents, some out-houses, maybe some picnic benches. The more amenities, the higher the cost to camp at that location.

A campground, especially when linked to the National Park System, often connects to a series of hiking or driving trails. Worth noting is that some sites are "backcountry camping" only, meaning that to actually *camp*, you usually need to hike or ride horseback deep into the park system to get to the campgrounds. Such a trip usually takes a half-a-day or more to reach such an area.

It's illegal to camp anywhere but a campground in this country. If characters set up a tent in the woods off Route 22, well, fine. They'd better hope the cops don't see.

Plot Hooks

- Some campgrounds are woefully decrepit. The "cost" to enter relies on an element of trust where drivers put a bit of money in a box and take a ticket to display in the windshield. It might look as if someone hasn't checked the box in about six years (maybe the bottom has rotted out and money put in just drops into a dirty puddle below). Characters who endeavor to camp at such a place find themselves completely alone . . . at first. At night, the vagrants and cast-offs who populate the dark campsite come crawling out of the woods. Maybe they want food. Maybe they siphon gas. Maybe it's been awhile since they've enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh. Maybe, *just maybe*, they've been living out here so long, existing totally unchecked, that the forest has become a part of them, and they're all possessed by various wild fey spirits.


- The characters park their car or RV at a nice enough campground about 10 miles off the highway. It's got quite a few amenities, and the place has maybe a dozen other groups of people who have the same idea. Everything seems fine. Except, at midnight, the moon through the trees above seems to *pulse*, though only for a moment. In the morning, everybody tries to go his separate way, heading back to the highway . . . but the highway isn't there. The access road just dead-ends off a bridge. A bridge that wasn't there last night. Cell phones don't work. Radios just bring in static.

- Two words: zombie attack. At night, at a campground, a wave of slow-moving undead pushes through the trees and thickets, suddenly overwhelming the cars and tents. The zombies push all the campers deeper and deeper into the wilderness, and the more they get harried toward the middle of nowhere, the harder it is to escape. And the shambling undead, there's just too many of them. Can the people survive in the woods and manage the zombie horde? Can the people work together? And where did all these bodies come from, anyway? Remember that great zombie stories are about the weaknesses of the survivors — the threat from within is what allows the undead to destroy the survivors.

Diners and Restaurants

Highway eating is rarely of the utmost quality. In between cities, you find truly greasy spoons, diners casting flickering neon into the dark night, grungy fast food places that stay open till 2 AM despite an apparent lack of customers, cramped truck stops filled with midnight miscreants twitchy from too much coffee (or not enough meth). Many of the restaurants found in that empty gulf between populated areas tend to be old, wearing the decaying prosperity of an Art Deco yesteryear. Most diners serve generic American food, most of it deep-fried, though some embody





“immigrant foods” (Greek diners where gyros are popular, perhaps, a filthy taco stand, even a place that sells Polish food like blintzes or pierogies).

What’s interesting about these way-out-of-the-way restaurants is how empty they are or how they’re busy with a cadre of truly strange strangers. Those restaurants that are isolated are eerie. Nobody’s eating there, and yet they’re serving food. The few workers seem hollow-eyed, depressed, lost. On the other hand, busy diners or truck stops are sometimes scraping the barrel for their clientele, throwing together an alarmingly diverse mix of characters who end up at such a place at 3:30 in the morning: nocturnal truckers, college students taking the long haul back to home during a vacation break, a drunken couple on their first date or a gaggle of pissed-off high-school kids who seem to call no place home.

Diners, truck stops and other highway restaurants are great places to begin new stories or to introduce new elements to an old story. What if the characters’ scaredy-cat contact wants to meet them out at the Route 42 Diner (“The Big Blue”) away from the bright lights of the city? Or what if the characters just stop there some night after a fulfilling some task or another, and end up running face first into some desperate victim who will pay handsomely for them to either investigate what happened to her or get revenge on those who dared to harm her? In some stories, such a place can serve as the nexus, constantly revisited for new clues and storylines.

Plot Hooks

- The characters end up at a distant highway diner late at night during a bad snowstorm. Everybody’s getting snowed in. And then what happens when people start dying? A sniper, maybe, picking off people who dare to exit the diner. Or big black birds that wait out there in the white blanket of the parking lot, picking at the fleshy extremities of those who didn’t make it in the door.

- The food itself can be a plotline. What is it that the characters are putting in their mouths? What if someone bites into a class ring from a few years back? Or eats the food and suddenly feels dizzy and intoxicated, hallucinating all the while? What if the food is just so good — too good, inhumanly good, so delicious that the characters become addicted to it? Alternately: what kinds of diseases lurk in these road victuals?

- The place is packed. And at first, that’s not really all that strange. Sure, it’s midnight. And there weren’t many cars out on the road. And when seen from one’s peripheral vision, the patrons don’t really look like *humans* so much as they look like greasy shapes with red eyes and strange mouths or beaks. Well, okay, maybe it is that strange.

Ghost Towns

The United States is home to innumerable ghost towns (Texas alone has thousands, and that’s just what’s on the

books), once-hospitable villages and burgs that have fallen to disuse and disrepair over the years. These towns have died, and all that’s left standing are derelict ruins of past prosperity.

What kills a ghost town? Lots of factors could contribute. We’ve already talked about how some highways were declared defunct, thus pulling the traffic away from the towns, which is like diverting a crucial artery away from the heart. Sometimes, local resources go belly-up: the mine closes down, the river dries, the oil stops flowing. Other times, there are negative health factors that harm the town and its people. For example, Centralia, Pennsylvania, is a town that literally burns from underneath, as a coal vein simmers beneath the earth. Parts of the West and Midwest were used as nuclear test sites by the American government. And while they didn’t (to our knowledge) nuke living communities, the radioactive fallout was easily cast to the wind (some conspiracy theorists have claimed that this is responsible for the alarming rise in cancers over the last 50 years). And don’t forget bad weather. Sometimes a storm comes in, floods everything out. Or an earthquake splits the earth and the streets of a town, and swallows its vital buildings.

Some towns are loosely inhabited: A few citizens, usually older, cling to their hometown like a sinking ship. You might find 10, even 100 people still living in a community. (Sometimes, these people aren’t right in the head. They might be overly suspicious of outsiders. They might have strange rituals to which the eerily insular community hews. They might even be feral.) Other towns are totally desolate, home to little more than spiders, lizards and ghosts.

Plot Hooks

- Sometimes, the government “appropriates” a whole swath of land for its own use, and that could include a tiny out-of-the-way burg. The characters come upon such a place, very recently selected by the government. The government offers the people a meager stipend (by purchasing their land and homes) to kick them off, but they don’t want to go. The characters see this ghost-town in the making. What sinister thing does the government want with this seemingly unimportant bit of land? Will the characters field offers from either side, helping the government rout the stubborn townfolk or offering the townfolk aid in getting rid of the “gubmint interlopers?” Or, maybe the government is *right* in trying to clear this land, because it knows what’s going to happen here when that eclipse happens next month.

- Pollution, radiation or virulent disease can kill a town and linger there amid the ruins . . . but it’s a silent predator. So, too, are the townfolk who still live there, infused with the chemical and radioactive energies. These mockeries stalk the darkness and hunt like a pack of coordinated beasts. What happens when the characters’ car breaks down only a few miles from such a town? Not only do they have to contend with the feline once-humans, but the characters may begin suffering . . . changes of their own.

• The characters pass through a town given over to the animals and to ghosts. The place is overgrown. Coyotes peer out from behind broken windows. Deer bed down in the middle of a cracked street. And then there are the ghosts. Every night, they play out the same drama, a scene of war or murder, a vast theatrical event starring the spectral dead. It can spill over to the characters if they're not careful. Ghosts have potent energies carried with them from beyond, energies that could, for instance, fry a car's electrical systems.

Junkyards

Junkyards, many as old as the highways themselves, dot the spaces between towns and cities. Cars break down, and the junkyards take them. Some junkyards are almost exclusively for vehicles, and in such places characters might find spare parts for their own damaged vehicles (if the junkyard proprietors and guard dogs will let the characters have such pieces). Other junkyards are little more than graveyards of scrap metal, strange machines, weird gears and other artifacts from forgotten towns.

Plot Hooks

• A junkyard in the middle of nowhere might seem desolate and inactive, but it actually functions as an illegal chop-shop. The characters coming upon such a place to maybe look for spare parts don't expect to stumble onto a gang of car thieves.

• While the characters are at a hotel, rest stop or restaurant, someone steals their car and takes it to a junkyard. They track the vehicle, and find it's been wrecked. The junkyard is a maze, though, hedged in by towering, teetering walls of cars. The characters get lost. They find that the deeper they go, the wilder it gets — strange vines, thorny and twisted, grow up between the walls. In the distance, the characters hear a loud horn bellow followed by the baying of approaching hounds. Are they being hunted?

• A salvage yard is home to a cult called the "Rebuilders." They make servants out of spare parts . . . and only some of these spare parts come from cars. The other parts? From human corpses. These mad demiurges are obsessed with making life of blood and metal, and they may see the characters as helpers, enemies or "fresh materials."

Makeshift Communities

Sometimes, a town or community will rise up fast, out of nothing. Someone discovers a new source of natural gas, and you'll see no hesitation — a village will spring up out of nothing, consisting mostly of workers and their families. Other times, a ramshackle "town" will form from outcasts, dissidents or other social miscreants, a shantytown for the deformed, a leper colony, a ghost town suddenly populated by escaped mental inmates, a campground overrun by spectral or just plain spooky children.

Plot Hooks

• The characters uncover a town of immigrants and refugees hiding from law enforcement. Immigrant law has become so strident in the area that if they were found, they'd be deported. A few things worth noting: the town is on top of an active silver mine. Good money in that, and the people of this clapboard town know it. But there's something down there in that mine, too. Something hungry. Something that bellows. The "townsfolk" have made peace with it. Found that if they give the something fresh meat, it's all good. Where do the characters fit into this equation? Friend? Foe? Or food?

• The carnival came to town. Well, almost. The caravan got lost up there in the twisty mountain roads, the snow preventing them from finding help. They ate the zebras first. Of course, the lions escaped. The carnies had to eat each other, too. That was 10 years ago. The carnival members have lived here for all that time, living out of their caravan vehicles like houses. Hunting for their food. Trying not to get picked off by the pride of lions that now stalks the mountain pass. The characters find themselves lost down the same set of icy switchbacks, and as they smash into a guardrail and their car becomes useless, they hear the distant warble of calliope music. Somewhere, a lion growls.


• They call themselves "The People." An irony, given that they are something altogether more (or less) than humans: a cadre of spirit-possessed individuals living off the beaten path in a ramshackle community of lean-tos, overturned Dumpsters and tents. The People cannot breed, not naturally. And so their leader — a man who has the soul of an owl (who once had a wife with the soul of a timid mouse, but sadly, he had to eat her) has decided that they must find their own way to breed and grow. So, they kidnap. They abduct people off the road, bring them to the town and offer them to the spirits so that they may become infused with "new souls" (i.e., otherworldly entities).

Places to Stay

Hotels, motels, resorts, bed-and-breakfasts . . . somewhere along the way, people have to sleep, and so dotting the countryside in the mostly empty places are various lodges and inns. Certainly the road offers a number of chain hotels and motels for minimum price and moderate comfort, but the further one gets from urban or suburban centers, the more one must rely on less corporate locations. While some of these are surely clean and pleasant, a far greater number are rundown, disconnected from the rest of the world or just plain weird.

Think of a bed-and-breakfast lorded over by an older couple who seem far too nice for normal people (and what's with all the cats, dozens of them given to roam freely about the rooms and kitchens?), or a filthy old motor lodge left mostly in the hands of roaches, rats and spiders. Alternately, think of something like the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*, a labyrinthine monstrosity way up in the mountains; it's beautiful, but desolate and deadly.

Resorts are another interesting option. Sometimes, people just want to get away from all the hustle and bustle



of the cities and towns, and so they retire to some distant mountain or beach resort. Resorts tend to be self-contained, even gated, with all the major necessities and amenities found on its property — food, beds, pool, golf, shows, etc. Many resorts are nice, clean affairs. Others have been neglected or swindle people out of their money (especially in a timeshare condominium situation, where people are often convinced to pay exorbitant fees to “own” part of their vacation instead of rent). Perhaps an eerie mountain resort populated with a large number of strangers and off-kilter personalities.

All sorts of nefarious goings-on occur at places of lodging. A man visits his late-night mistress. A pair of teens enact revenge upon the man who killed their mother. Thieves pilfer money and identities from the few cars sitting in the parking lot. Motel clerks spy on those within the rooms, maybe even videotaping everything that goes on. Even better, don’t miss out on the possibility of haunted hotels — a suicide victim stalking an old Victorian inn, or a “lady-in-white” murder victim dragged from the nearby highway some 50 years ago (when it was a bustling freeway and not a defunct stretch of ruined road) and killed in the motel boiler room.

Plot Hooks

- On a long journey, perhaps a coast-to-coast cross-country trip, the characters have to stay at various lodgings along the way. And, at each hotel or motel, they see one guest who appears to be following them — except he’s already gotten a room by the time they arrive, so how could *he* be following *them*? Weirder still, he looks just a little different each time: a paunch here, missing at the next stop down the highway, or a mustache that couldn’t have been there the night before. Is he really the same guy? Are they inadvertently following him, not the other way around?

- The characters get the last vacant room for a night. Room 22. Seems fine at first. Mostly clean. Pillows have a little fluff left in them. Except, bizarre things start to happen not long after they arrive. The cable goes on the fritz, but in the static they can see faces. The characters also start finding odd objects around the room that clearly don’t belong to them: a fountain pen, a child’s toy, a cell phone model from about 10 years ago. When finally they’ve had enough, if they open the door to leave or to go complain at the front desk, they find the door opens into a hotel hallway . . . but this hallway belongs to a totally different hotel. Where *are* they?

- The characters get stranded. A classic scenario — a hurricane forces them off the road and to a distant neon-lit motel for the night. A bunch of strangers come together (perhaps the characters are even strangers to one another) in the middle of the night, marooned together at this little dingy motel. Something happens — a murder in a locked room. Ghostly hands pressing out of old wallpaper. Signs of a poltergeist manifest. Worse, it seems that someone — maybe human, maybe not — is out there in the darkness

of the storm, playing pranks on them that start to turn deadly. Are these awful events coordinated, somehow? Does the horror experienced in this old motel link the characters? What happens when one of them turns out to be a monster?

Rest Stops

The great American rest stop wears many faces. Some are clean, well-lit, a nexus of fast food restaurants and gas stations featuring pretty heavy foot traffic even in the wee hours of the morning. Others aren’t quite so elaborate. One rest stop might just be a foul pair of bathrooms with a broken candy machine and empty map stand. Another might have a little park and playground attached (the playground gone mostly to rust and ruin, of course, and the picnic area is home to little more than mangy squirrels and swarming insects). A third might have a convenience store and gas station attached, featuring brands the characters have never heard of, with a clerk who’d rather not be bothered.

Rest stops are theoretically useful. They have maps, usually, coupled with advertisements for local restaurants, lodging and attractions. One might have a state trooper on duty, or at least be patrolled by one. Some have ATMs. Even if some rest stops don’t have a restaurant or store, many offer vending machines and drinking fountains.

Of course, all these amenities offer plot seeds, too. What happens when the cop’s not there when he’s needed (or he’s openly antagonistic)? What if a character gets his arm stuck in the vending machine trying to retrieve a Snickers bar that refused to fall? Who’s waiting to rob whatever poor fool tries to use the rest stop ATM?

That’s the other thing: rest stops are notorious in some areas for the illicit activities that take place there. Robberies, murders, sex in the bathrooms. Drug deals in the parking lots. What kind of monsters might visit rest stops in the hopes of plucking unsuspecting prey from a dark bathroom?

Plot Hooks

- At a restaurant, characters suffer hallucinations featuring children — the characters see kids behind them in the bathroom, darting off into the woods just past the picnic area, running toward the busy highway. These children don’t look healthy. They seem gray, washed-out, faintly inhuman. Nobody else seems to see them, or their blood-red handprints on the walls. Or their bare-feet footprints coming out of the restrooms. Just what the hell happened here? Are they hallucinations? Ghosts? Something weirder and worse? Should the characters help these children, or run from them?

- The characters pull into a desolate rest stop only to find that the place is coated in spattered blood, bone, hair, skin. A murder happened here, or maybe many murders. The smell is terrible, and the blood is cooling but still fresh, from within the last eight hours. The flies have started

to feast, and just as the characters are trying to figure out what to do . . . the strobe lights of state trooper cars burst onto the scene. And they're in a hurry, and probably none too glad to see the characters. The characters surely didn't murder anybody, except . . . what happens when the police find evidence that they *did*? A severed finger in a pocket? A map taken from the map stand with the character's bloody fingerprints all over it, even though the character never remembers picking up such a map?

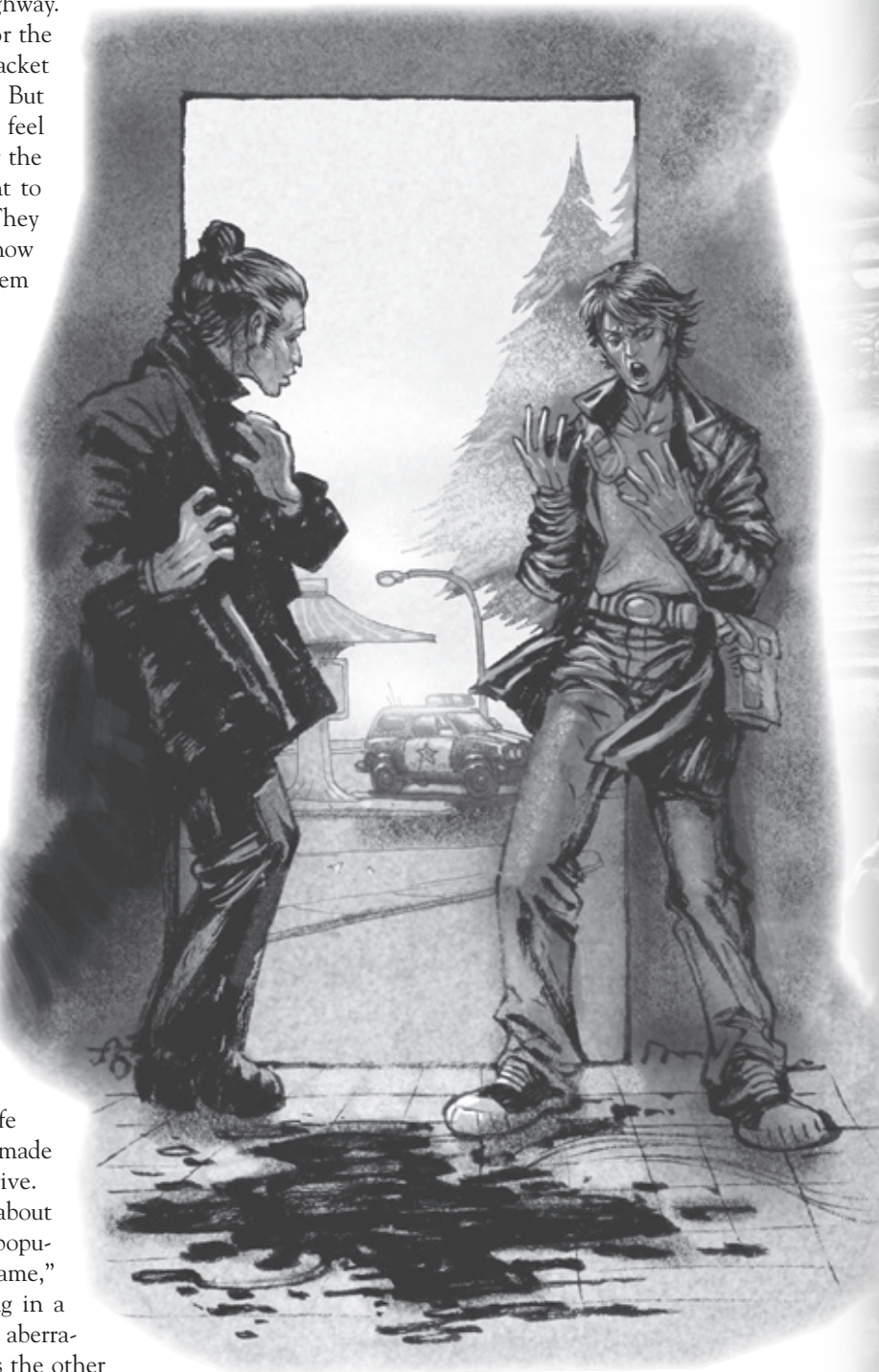
- The term "rest stop" is put to the test. The characters stop at a rest stop late at night along with a few other weary travelers pulling in from the highway. They get their maps. Make a break for the bathroom. Maybe grab a burger or a packet of crackers from a vending machine. But they can't leave. Maybe it's that they feel awfully comfortable and can't muster the energy to leave. Or maybe they want to leave, but something won't let them. They must rest. They must stop. But for how long? And why don't the employees seem fazed by this "trapped" phenomenon?

Roadside Attractions

The United States is home to some truly bizarre tourist attractions, many of which are found in those long stretches of nothing between cities and towns. Careening down a long highway, a character might see a hand-painted sign (with the letters dripping from too much spray-paint) announcing the turn-off for the World's Biggest Pumpkin . . . a dubious honor, though it probably *is* a big damn pumpkin. Some roadside attractions are a little more "official" — reptile houses, statues of American historical figures or weird kitschy motels (such as the Wigwam Village in Arizona). Anybody going on a trip that takes him more than an hour is likely to spot no end of strangeness, and it only gets more bizarre the more isolated he finds himself. Want to see a genuine two-headed goat? A real-life shantytown for dwarves? Stonehenge made of half-buried Cadillacs? Just take a drive.

What's perhaps most interesting about places like this is that they're rarely popular. Some gain a level of national "fame," sure, but most are desperate to bring in a few bucks to see whatever real or fake aberration they claim to possess. And that's the other

thing — for the most part, many of the "claims to fame" are faked. The family minivan pulls over to get a glimpse of the three-headed dog, and they find that the thing is not only dead but probably not legitimate in the first place. (It might be poor taxidermy of someone's pet with two other dog heads "sewn" on, or it might be just a wax representation. Best case scenario is that it was some kind of mutant three-headed puppy that didn't survive past a month, and now sits floating in a briny jar of something that resembles formaldehyde.)



Plot Hooks

- The characters' car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, but about a mile back they saw a sign for the exit to Reptile Land. If they go there, they'll find a strange little reptile zoo and house where patrons can feed (or even wrestle) alligators, hold a bunch of snakes or feed insects to various hungry lizards. They also play host to a number of venomous snakes, hissing behind dirty Plexiglas. There they find Reptile Land's proprietor, Claude Burney, dead and swollen from a snakebite. Someone has pinned a note to his forehead, and the note reads: "Can you pray with your eyes open?" They note that someone has, appropriately enough, Scotch-taped his eyes open.

- Usually, this stuff is fake. Everybody knows it. A supposed off-the-highway freak show is going to contain a whole passel of fake infant corpses in bubbling jars. Except, these fake babies, they *move* inside their jars. Their eyes rotate around in their weird heads. One has a face whose jaw stretches into a wolfish maw. Another has a mouth full of vampire fangs. A third has gills.

- It's a simple thing — a one-cell jailhouse about a mile from the highway. In the one cell is a handprint that never goes away. They've painted over it. They've chipped the rock away. But this handprint, which isn't of blood or any known material, just plain won't go away. The characters come. They see it. They marvel at it. They go home. Except, what happens when they wake the next day to find that they've each themselves been marked by a handprint tattoo somewhere on their bodies? A tattoo that will not fade, and will not yield to any attempts to remove it?

Vistas

Driving along in certain parts of the country, a character will eventually see those pull-offs advertising some kind of staggering vista. "Come see Independence Monument!" or just a gravel parking spot with a majestic view of some mountains, a river, a covered bridge, what-have-you. Vistas generally present nature in some kind of singular view, but some human-made objects have earned their lookout points. The Golden Gate Bridge, for instance, has several spots where tourists or other travelers can admire the architecture (said to be one of the most photographed pieces of architecture in the world). Many vistas include panorama viewing scopes (some may cost a quarter to use, others are free).

Plot Hooks

- It's a trap. The vista viewer is near a loose rail and some dangerous scree. The character who attempts to take in the view may find himself sliding down the side of a steep hill or even pitching forward into the crashing surf below. If the characters themselves are not victim to it, perhaps one of their allies is.

- A character who looks through a panorama viewing scope sees something he shouldn't — atop a rock, he sees

a shadowy figure run a woman through with a long blade or sees a monstrosity that cannot possibly be human. Of course, by the time anyone else looks through it, there's nothing there but the beautiful view.

- A panorama viewing scope existing far from any town is a unique device, indeed. Smear a quarter with a thumbprint of blood and then insert the bloodied coin into the device, and the legend goes that it allows the viewer to see into the Shadow for a time, seeing what the otherworldly spirits can see.

Methods of Travel

The method of choice for long-distance travel, of course, is generally flight, but that's not always a possibility, especially in the current era of high-scrutiny security. A character with something to hide (which, in the World of Darkness, is most of them) needs another way to reach his destination. This section discusses some of the options, and what can go wrong.

Trucks

When folks talk about highways being America's arteries, they're not talking about you and Aunt Mabel going to see that big pumpkin. They're talking about shipping, and when they're talking about shipping, they're talking about trucks. The long-haul trucker is an American icon . . . though what exactly he's an icon of is hard to say. In the '70s, there was a brief flurry of trucker-as-rebel films, and the general stereotype of truckers as rough, scruffy men who live by their own rules persists.

The trucking industry *does* play by its own rules, but that doesn't necessarily sit well with truckers. Back before 1980, long-haul trucking was regulated heavily by the federal government. Wages were kept pretty high — competitive with many other blue-collar jobs. Since deregulation, though, times have gotten tougher. The proportion of owner-operators has plummeted, salaries have dropped and more freight needs to move faster. The law still offers some protections; a trucker has to pull off the road and rest after 10 hours of driving, and he can't drive more than 50 hours a week. That sounds like a pretty good guarantee, but to the trucking companies, it's an obstacle to be stretched or ignored as much as possible, in favor of keeping those loads moving and getting them delivered on time. Truckers have to keep a log book, too, noting any time they get on and off the road, when they pick up and when they deliver and so on. Particularly difficult cops will scan these logbooks looking for evidence of speeding or hour violations.

Gear

The most important thing a trucker's got is his truck. Now, the truck's just the cab and the bed; the trailer belongs to the customer. A trucker sees many different loads, but he generally sticks with the one truck for years

at a time. In the old days, many drivers owned their own trucks, but insurance and licensing costs have made that less and less common. Still, if you see a truck with the little light bulbs all around the edges, or even flames ringing the cab, a truck that shows some *pride*, the driver's probably an owner-operator, or at least working for one.

The cab has his toilet (a small chemical model), his satellite dispatch system and a bunk or two. The sleeping compartment is generally curtained off from the driver and passenger's seats, and that'll be a thick curtain — no telling when the driver will be called upon to sleep. Most truckers carry a good alarm clock, too. It might need to be loud as Hell to wake a man up.

In the old days, loads were coordinated by CB and pager. Today, long-haul truckers rely on an electronic dispatch system. That's a computerized gizmo wired up to a satellite dish on top of the truck. The good ones have built-in GPS and sophisticated two-way communications with the dispatcher. The advantage is instant communication, but it also means drivers no longer necessarily form relationships with — or even know the identities of — the people the drivers are taking orders from. They don't know who they're dealing with on any given job. In the World of Darkness, that's an advantage for creatures who can alter the messages or exploit a character's loneliness and doubts.

Stops

Long-haul truckers see the whole country . . . but most of the places they stop look a lot alike. Anonymous gray warehouses, big, empty parking lots and an endless network of truck stops and service hubs. Living their lives from stop to stop, truckers also see the World of Darkness grow darker. A frequently traveled route becomes more and more desolate as the factories close and the towns collapse. A familiar overpass gives way to graffiti, then rust, then closes entirely.

Truck stops are to rest stops much as trucks themselves are to regular cars: bigger, business-focused and aimed at the kind of person who spends 90 hours a week on the road. Most truck stops are owned by one of a few big, national companies, and they all tend to look the same. They offer palatable food, thick coffee and the sorts of tools and gadgets a driver needs on the road. Wonder where to get that unnaturally shrill alarm clock? You can grab it here, along with over-the-counter caffeine pills. Truck stops are also regularly pamphleted by religious organizations and promoters of dubious investments. A stop's most useful facilities are the laundry and shower facilities. In fact, a truck stop shower is one of the cleanest places a character's likely to bathe on the road. The average truck stop also supports a local business or two: a mom-and-pop diner, maybe, or a vendor-owned CD stand. Almost all serve as places of business for drug dealers and prostitutes, but those activities take place beneath the surface, or at least out in the parking lot.

The Load

Truckers carry the anonymous metal boxes that keep the country running. A driver's entire job — his entire life,

when you look at the hours — centers on picking up loads, getting them where they need to be and picking up the next one as soon as he can manage. Traffic's a frustration, but downtime is the true enemy: being stuck in an anonymous parking lot, out at some shipping terminal in the middle of nowhere, that's a trucker's nightmare.

Most truck lines offer downtime pay after a day or so stranded, but they tend to find more work just in the nick of time. Drivers often get comfortable, if disgruntled, spending a night or two between boring, gray days in their trucks. That kind of complacency can be dangerous.

Prostitution

Sex, like drugs, is a commodity that was more available in truck stops back when there was more money to spend on it. Nonetheless, many women and a smaller number of men prostitute themselves at stops. Most truck stops make a token effort to keep prostitutes off the premises; anybody who isn't getting hassled is probably paying a cut to management. Drivers, whether they employ prostitutes or not, tend to hold them in low regard. "Lot Lizards" are resented for their brazen solicitations and their profession in general. Truck stop prostitution is dirty, unpleasant work, with the threat of being stranded joining fears of nonpayment, assault and HIV.

Although truckers are less keen to admit it, many regard prostitutes with a measure of fear, as well, afraid the "lizards" will turn to robbery or murder if they see the opportunity. The fear goes both ways; anyone who's been hooking long enough knows someone who disappeared or was found dead. After a while on the job, most learn to coordinate with each other, taking down the license numbers of each other's johns. In the World of Darkness, a lot more of everybody gets assaulted or kidnapped, but prostitutes still regard it as a particular hazard of their trade.

Much business is conducted over CB, where the sex workers use aliases and avoid explicitly describing their work. Police are often listening, but an ever-changing selection of jargon makes it difficult for them to track prostitution-related activities. Prostitutes arranging rendezvous with regular johns will often communicate by cell phone or text message, and may use those connections to find their rides back.

Unlike truckers, prostitutes usually aren't in for the long haul. Typically, a prostitute will adopt a route between two or three truck stops, catching a ride out and then one back in. Some truckers, tired of fending off knocks on windows in the middle of the night, have adopted stickers or signs to tell prostitutes their attention isn't wanted. One popular design is a gecko with a red 'X' drawn across it. A disturbing variation shows the lizard crushed by red tire tracks.

Plot Hooks

- What exactly is it that keeps the country running? Usually, it's the trash that consumers consume, the bits



used to build it or pieces of the packaging used to hock it to them. Sometimes, it's industrial parts and even chemicals (although dangerous chemicals are supposed to be shipped specially). What if it were something else, though? What if the truck lines are hauling sacrificial victims or the mummified remains of monstrous gods? What if *that's* what keeps the United States running? Suppose one of these special consignments falls into the characters' hands, a gigantic corpse wrapped in bandages and spices, along with its recently murdered human servants. The characters are supposed to take it to a government building near Seattle. Will they? Or will they sell the consignment to the strangely accented, too-tall man who approaches them en route?

- How long can the characters wait for their next big load? They've been waiting 33 hours in this lot, now, and there's still nothing on the dispatch. There are other truckers waiting here, too, and they're suspiciously quiet and exhausted. How long have they been here? Is there really anywhere else to go?

- A tractor trailer could be turned into a mobile command center, if a group of capable men were to spend a few weeks on it and maybe a few thousand on parts and equipment. The Stumph Trucking Company isn't a trucking company at all. It's a small band of men who are systematically

hunting down the creatures that slaughtered their friend at a truck stop one night. The creatures are werewolves, the truckers are sure of that, and so these men carry guns with silver bullets and weapons with silver-plated blades. They live in the truck, constantly searching, taking turns playing "bait" at the truck stops.

Hitchhiking

You don't have wheels. You can't hire wheels. Somehow, you've got to get halfway across the country, and you don't have long to do it. What do you do? Hitchhike. Hitchhiking became popular in the United States during the Great Depression. Poverty-stricken Americans would trade company and sometimes sex for rides between towns. In those days, hitching was legal across the country, and carried less risk than riding the rails. The open road was even more dangerous than it is today, though, without even the illusions of safety provided by modern technology. If a hitcher was never heard from again, his family might never even get suspicious.

Hitchhiking continued to grow in popularity, parallel with long-distance car travel, into the 1970s. Well-publicized serial murders, such as those perpetrated by Ed



Monster Trucks?

Long-haul trucking seems to hold many advantages for a supernatural creature, particularly as an independent owner-operator. Controlled environment, mobile lifestyle, part of the background of everyday human life . . . pretty good, no? Problem is, the hours and distances have no particular schedule or rhythm — hard to handle if you can't keep awake during the day or when you have to keep your eye on the phase of the moon. That's not even considering the territorial obsessions of vampires, werewolves and the spirits that haunt them. Prometheans, on the other hand, don't get much choice about a life on the road, and one that allows them to draw a paycheck while keeping human contact fleeting is pretty appealing.

Vampires, however, have a long history of traveling by big rig and rail, not as drivers but as cargo. Just as shadow businesses ship illegal drugs and weapons by truck, some also ship the Damned. Vampires create and run these businesses, but the day-to-day work is done by mortal servants who operate the receiving terminals. The Kindred usually cultivate a few dispatchers at the major truck lines, as well, just to make sure nobody looks too hard at the load. The paranoid isolation and splintered culture of vampiric kingdoms make operating in more than one area — much less moving between regions — dangerous business, but a vampire who can guarantee safe passage from, say, Baltimore to Seattle can charge almost any price he wants.

Humans, however, can be as treacherous as vampires. In the court of Chattanooga, rumors persist that elders who fled the city after a coup never made it to Toronto, but were instead delivered to a cult of risen dead who crave the blood of Kindred.

Kemper, the so-called coed butcher, fanned the fears of a generation of American young people, and contributed to the collapse of the hitchhiking culture.

Yet, even tonight, some characters are reckless or desperate enough to look for a lift on the midnight highways. Outcasts, wanderers and predators, these characters think they can protect themselves from the shadows between cities, or run fast enough to escape them. They're inevitably wrong.

Hitchhiking can be an exciting means of travel for a road chronicle but doesn't scale well for more than two characters. Large groups hitchhiking together tend to make drivers wary. On the other hand, the stories of a group of

friends hitchhiking separately, then regrouping to swap tales and nurse wounds, could make an excellent, if unconventional, chronicle.

Gear

Hitchhikers need more than a thumb and an innocent look. A sign helps, especially if the hitcher's looking for a ride someplace unusual or someplace cars wouldn't usually stop. (A sign that can be hidden is even better, in case the cops take an interest.) Hitchhikers should be prepared for some light camping, and be ready to spend a lot of time outdoors even when they're skulking around civilization.

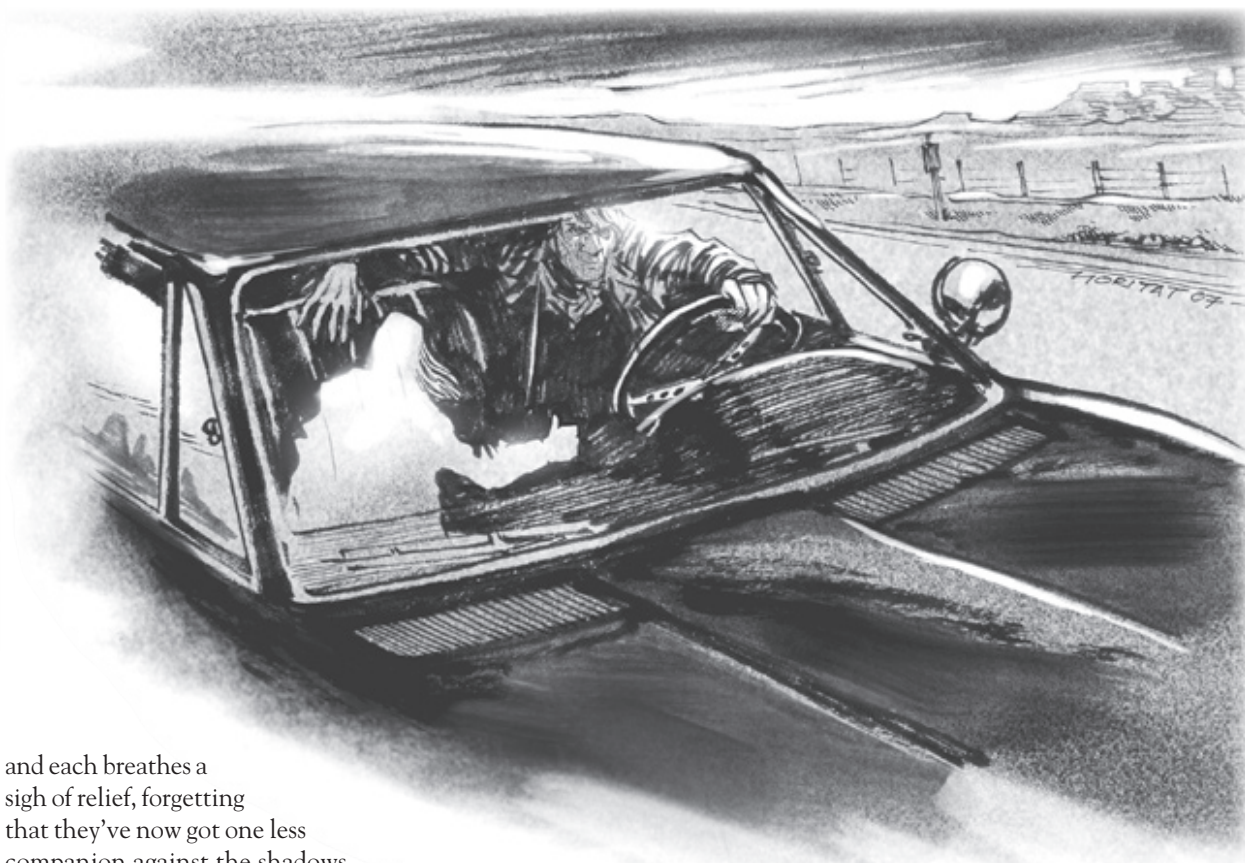
Stops

Part of the beauty of hitchhiking is stopping and starting wherever your ride does. Hitchhikers piggyback on existing transportation networks, grabbing rides at highway on-ramps, truck stops, gas stations, you name it. With such modern equipment as Internet-connected cell phones, a hitchhiker can even plan rides in advance, while she's already on the road.

The Art of the Hitch

A pickup is a delicate dance between the driver and the potential passenger, each trying to convince the other that he's not a rapist, a robber or a killer. (For your troupe's characters, this is likely to be complicated by the fact that they're almost always hiding *something*.) The potential passengers rarely have much to offer; if they had or were willing to spend money, they wouldn't be hitching. Occasionally, they have something to barter, such as drugs or jewelry . . . but they must be desperate if they're not selling those things for cash. Some hitchhikers trade sex for rides, but that has its own hazards, and the offer can put potential rides on their guard as often as it tempts them.

In the World of Darkness, there's more than one kind of barter, and more than one way to sell your body. There are creatures traveling the roads willing to offer safe passage for a drop of infant's blood, a lock of your mother's hair or perhaps your memories of daylight. The driver-passenger relationship doesn't necessarily smooth over once they're on the road. Oh, sure, there's almost certainly going to be small talk, because the highways of the World of Darkness are lonely and unnerving even in the daylight, but the question of what each party really wants still lurks in the background. The driver has the advantage of knowing his own vehicle, and potentially of calling the whole thing to a stop. The passenger has the advantage of being far more anonymous than the driver. Of course, that can make it easier for the driver to dispose of the passenger's body. Give and take. So, usually, they talk about baseball, all the while wondering vaguely when the other's going to pull the knife. Then they reach their stop and go their separate ways,



and each breathes a sigh of relief, forgetting that they've now got one less companion against the shadows.

Systems associated with hitchhiking can be found on p. 47.

Plot Hooks

- A half-dozen hitchhikers have disappeared, from spots all over the Midwest. Evidence of a bad ride? Not if they all took rides with different people . . . up until they vanished at their final destinations. Whoever is stalking the hitchers has been watching their communications on the Internet, pinpointing where they're going. Why does the kidnapper need travelers, though?

- A new character joins by hitching a ride with the others . . . and the group finds themselves on a road trip through the horrors between worlds. Is the new character a sorcerer, looking to sell her companions to creatures of the Abyss? Is she a werewolf, being hunted by spirits for the sins of her ancestors? Or is the whole group just Lost?

- A character makes the mistake of falling asleep in his ride's car . . . and wakes up on the side of the road, bruised and bleeding. The car's a few feet down the road, or at least parts of it are. Where's the rest of the car? Where's the driver? For that matter, where are the character's wallet and phone?

Buses

A bus is one of the best and safest ways to see the United States, if you know what you're doing and can travel

on someone else's schedule. With seats on a first-come, first-serve basis, a bus is also a great way to high-tail it out of town . . . provided you're all right with the bored scrutiny of a score of other passengers.

The atmosphere of a bus is close, in all the good and bad ways. The air's stuffy and the press of bodies is tight, but that makes characters hard to isolate. Safety in numbers. Modern intercity buses can have many comforts, such as large, cushioned chairs and on-board restrooms, but they still tend to be crowded.

A long bus ride makes an excellent way to introduce a new group of characters to each other. Travel by bus is also a good option for a road chronicle, providing the opportunities to meet strangers afforded by hitchhiking with the many destinations offered by driving a car. Just don't lose the schedule.

Gear

A ticket, the clothes on your back and whatever you need when you get off. The seasoned bus traveler also carries a few distractions, such as a music player and a decent book. (Similar to airports and train stations, bus stations have bookstores. Similar to airports and train stations, you're better off stealing something from the local library.) In case of an annoying or unnerving seat-mate, these can also serve as props.

Mister Blue

A well-dressed man in a blue suit, carrying a neat briefcase and a brand-new duffle. His skin is pale but healthy, and he's somehow tamed long, blond curls into a ponytail. Mister Blue's car broke down, and he'd be very grateful if someone could give him a lift. Just to a gas station or something, he doesn't want to be trouble. He'll even pay ... how's a hundred bucks sound? Oh, is that a lot?

He's not used to traveling the roads, you know. You must see all sorts of things. Say, what about that last town you visited? He's heard a lot of things about that town. He's not sure he'd want to go there. Still, not his to judge.

Once Mister Blue's in the car, he peppers the driver and passengers with questions, mostly about the last place they were. The drive to whatever nearby destination you agreed on seems interminable. Still, he's as good as his word, paying you off in crisp new bills as soon as you arrive. He makes a call, then a tow truck arrives to take him back the way he came.

You won't hear anything more about Mister Blue for a few days. If you told him good things about the town, you'll see a news story about something surprising and wonderful; an oil strike, perhaps, or an anonymous donor leaving the city an enormous donation. If you filled him in on the town's sins and dirty dealings, though, you'll hear about a horrible fire or other disaster.

Stops

Buses travel across the American landscape, from bustling cities to towns on life support. Stops range from expansive rest stops to city bus stations to places marked only by the crowds waiting to board. Drivers stick to strictly planned routes, but may be willing to make a quick, unscheduled stop for a sufficient bribe.

Important bus stops, such as those in cities or where several bus lines cross, may have terminals with food, toilets and even shopping. Intercity bus terminals in major cities, such as Union Station in Washington, DC, may be integrated with train stations, city bus terminals and city rail.

Plot Hooks

- Forget what we said up above — the air on this bus is positively clear and fresh. The noise isn't bad, either, just motor, wheels and the occasional bump. Blissful, and quite nice after all the misadventures the characters have had

lately. Of course, that begs the question: why isn't anybody else breathing?

- One of the characters is separated from the others by a shortage of seats. She spends the trip talking to an absolutely fascinating stranger, who inadvertently helps her put together a critical clue from a supernatural experience. He even invites her to visit him at his home, near the next stop. When the bus disembarks, though, he disappears into the crowd. The home address turns out to be a recently bulldozed lot. Was the encounter some kind of trick, or has the stranger been abducted? Is someone punishing him for helping the characters, or trying to lead them on?

- Traveling through a rainy valley, the bus passes through a town without stopping at an obvious bus station ... then another, and another. The stations aren't empty, either, they're packed with wan, gray-looking people. Why isn't the driver stopping? Do those people need help, or should they be avoided at any cost?

Trains

Trains built the United States, and they're still a vital part of the nation's economy. Similar to trucks, trains are effective ways of getting goods from Point A to Point B, and are not as prone to accidents or delays from traffic. Trains are a less attractive option for travelers going any distance. While mildly more comfortable than a bus, trains are slower and sometimes more expensive than air travel. Still, if you're willing to let go of the comfort, dodge security and risk life and limbs, there's another option. Steal a ride on the freight rail.

Jumping trains, similar to hitchhiking, is a tradition that dates back to the Great Depression. Hobos jumped on trains traveling between cities to try and find work. Trains were inspected before they left the yard, so stowing away was almost impossible. Instead, illegitimate passengers leapt on and off the train while it was in motion. Jumping became so common that the railroad companies hired "bulls," men who rode the rails full time and threw intruders off trains. Today, although freight and trains in general tend to be watched more closely, sneaking aboard may be slightly more practical, if only because it's so rarely done. Of course, modern security guards have firearms, and a character trespassing aboard a train is more likely to find herself facing a court than lying bruised in the countryside.

Unless you're running a period chronicle, jumping trains is unlikely to be the characters' primary method of transportation. Nonetheless, jumping trains can make for exciting escape and chase scenes and is a very quick way to get wherever that freight's going.

Gear

Characters planning to jump or stow away on a train are going to want to travel light. It's hard to hide with a full set of luggage, much less make one great leap with it.



The Crossing

Amazing how many accidents can happen in one place. This little intersection, at the bottom of a hill and a dozen feet from a railroad crossing, has seen more fatalities than the locals care to count. People get caught up watching out for the trains, and they forget to watch out for each other. The worst accident, though, happened on the crossing itself.

In 1998, a school bus's brakes failed, sending the bus coasting through the crossing as a train was coming. Twelve children were killed in the impact, and another died in the hospital hours later. A monument's been erected nearby, and you can always find fresh flowers there. People don't talk about the accident much. What is there to say except that, save for a moment of bad luck, those 13 children would be alive today? Ready to leave the town and start new lives far away, just like all the other kids their age?

That one horrible accident, or perhaps the grief that stems from it, has created one of the few truly benevolent supernatural forces in the World of Darkness. The intersection's as dangerous as ever, but if you should ever stop your car in the railroad tracks, if it stalls out and the train's coming, something will push you out of the way. If your car's dirty, and you can even think straight after being that close to being smashed to bits, have a look at your rear bumper. You'll find the smudges of little handprints.

Plot Hooks

- In 1931, a bull named Joe Davies was thrown from a train car during a scuffle with a hobo. He hit the ground head first, breaking his neck and splitting his skull. Joe's ghost still haunts the section of rail where he died. When he manifests, he directs his anger at anyone outside the train's engine — no matter who she is.

- An isolated mountain pass hosts a rarity: a community of Prometheans, settled there for nearly the last year. The three Created who founded the community felt they were "going to the wastes" — their phrase for a life of seclusion from humans. Alone in a wild and awful place, the Prometheans were looking for peace. Now, though, the community has grown to nearly a dozen, and the landscape is gradually being torn apart. Smooth, grassy rock faces have split, and the weeds descending them have blackened. Ordinarily, the effect would have forced the Prometheans to move on by now. Instead, though, the Wasteland seems to stop short of the railroad tracks that nearly encircle the

ramshackle village. What's buried underneath them, or fused in the metal, that can contain the spiritual fires of the Created? How long can it last?

- The train runs west through the mountains, and every now and again the train breaks through the foothills exactly at sunset. It's a stunning sight, but the combination of two transitions — out of the mountains, onto the plains and out of the day, into the night — makes the train a unique haven for spirits seeking to possess travelers. The people who get off that train might not be quite the same people who got on.

Motorcycles

Some men came back from World War II and started families. They took sensible jobs, married sensible women and bought sensible cars. For others, life just wasn't meant to be sensible. They'd spend enough time in foxholes and lead-filled skies to numb their sense of danger and make them sick of following orders. Many of these veterans were pretty close to their machines, especially the pilots. When they came home, they got into tinkering with cars in a big way, and then into motorcycles. Motorcycle clubs were a natural next step: groups of men and the occasional woman who got together just to ride. Early on, they started attracting negative press; notably, the Hollister Riot, when a convention for 200 people attracted more than 4,000. Hit movies, "true crime" comics and magazine articles all portrayed bikers as outlaws who flagrantly refused to abide by the laws of their society. Predictably, all that did was attract more bikers. Clubs built up a reputation for being loyal and brutal: in the World of Darkness, it's a reputation they deserve.

Clubs and enthusiasts no longer dominate motorcycling, and most bikers aren't outlaws any more than most campers are werewolves. Most bikers play at it a little, though. The characters aren't that likely to encounter regular bikers, though, are they? More likely they'll run into the hardest of the hard, the gangs that still ride wild across the American landscape, swarming over small towns like locusts and taking what they want. To outlaw bikers, sticking by your brothers and staying free on the road are top priorities. Those are the reasons to keep riding, and the reasons to kill. Bikers generally *want* to be feared; the less they get hassled, the better.

Despite bikers' unruly behavior, outlaw clubs are usually as well organized as their civilized counterparts. Outlaw clubs have a variety of elected positions and dues paid to the founding, or "mother" chapter. Run just as any business, these gangs are a feature of organized crime in the World of Darkness, providing security and enforcement for larger criminal organizations. Getting into these gangs is nearly as hard as resisting their onslaught. Hangers-on spend years as "prospects," doing difficult or tedious jobs for the club. For a prospect to become a real member, or "full patch," the entire chapter must vote on the prospect, which means impressing or toadying to senior members.

The veneer of order is thin, though: nobody takes power in an outlaw club unless he can back it up in a fight. Fighting over power is as much about friends as skill; bikers don't fight one-on-one duels, they rumble head-on with fists, knives and sometimes guns. New clubs are often the result of violent splits in old clubs.

A motorcycle is a practical way for a supernatural creature to travel, provided she can travel light. A bike can go anywhere a car can, and can be stored quite a few places a car can't. Clubs, on the other hand, are hard for monsters to join. Keeping secrets from their brothers is difficult. Clubs consisting entirely of supernatural creatures exist, but to join them, a character has to find them. A character needs to find out about the club's existence and habits first, then spend months on the road looking for them. The prospecting period that follows involves intense hazing, usually geared toward the creature's weaknesses.

Gear

Take the automobile and strip it down. Take away the plush insides and the weird safety devices, the cargo and passenger space, everything you don't absolutely *need* to make it run. Put all the responsibility for keeping balance and staying in one piece directly and explicitly on the driver's shoulders. You've got a classic motorcycle. Then take *that* apart till all you've got is the bare machine, exposed metal and growling engine, a bike that air flows through rather than over. You've got a chopper, the preferred style of vehicle for dedicated bikers.

Characters traveling by motorcycle have to face the elements head-on, and they're going to take their share of falls. A good set of motorcycle leathers goes a long way toward making that tolerable, and a helmet reduces the frequency of skull fractures. Helmets are required for adults in about a third of the United States, and nearly all states require minors to wear helmets.

Plot Hooks

- The characters enter a town that looks as if it had a riot. Glass is out all over the place, bullet holes riddle the walls buildings and city hall has been burnt out from

the inside. The locals say the town was invaded by bikers, who charged down Main Street robbing stores and then rode off into the night. If that's true, then why are there 13 bodies in club colors buried in shallow graves outside the town? What about those 13 bikes in the window of the local dealership?

- Real bikers don't wear helmets. Helmets mess up the feel of the wind in your hair and your woman behind you, not to mention block your peripheral vision. They don't do much in return, either . . . just look at Baptist. His head cracked like an egg when he hit the pavement, but his helmet was fine.

The characters end up possessing the helmet of Marc "Baptist" Batista, a longtime biker whose buddies still recall his incredible riding . . . and still shake their heads when they remember him being thrown from his bike when the back wheel flew off. Common theory is that he was murdered, but it's hard to narrow the list of suspects. Those same buddies never picked up his effects once the police investigation closed, and however the characters got hold of it, they're the first to find out that Baptist whispers to anybody who takes a ride wearing his helmet. He wants to be reunited with his girlfriend . . . but for love, or revenge?

- You're all alone on the road. Have been for hours, since before the sun slipped away. You haven't looked in your rearview since, actually, because the last time you did you got a nasty blast of low-angle sunlight. Now you're getting bored enough to drive safe again, you realize you're not alone. There's a whole fleet of cars behind you, long and black and driving without headlights. You can't make out any drivers, but surely that's just the dark, right? There's one biker riding in the lead, but you can't see his face. Do not look back. Forget what your dad taught you about safe driving. Do not look back. Just use the mirrors. As long as you're only looking at them in the mirror, those cars can't see you. The cars are on the hunt, and if you look right at them, you'll become prey. Once the Hunt has seen you, they can track you anywhere. No road is safe, and they'll re-emerge night after night until they've been christened with your blood. Just stay calm, keep looking ahead and they'll vanish the next time you cross a bridge. Oh, and for God's sake . . . let them pass.





The empty "Super Joe" cup rattled mockingly in the van's drink holder as Lloyd sped across the washboard timber road. The last set of signs had said 19 miles to Springfield, but that was several unmarked crossroads ago, and the cement two-lane road had dwindled down to a gravel path maybe a car and a half wide. This had to be the wrong way. Some shortcut.

"I'm never going to make Madison by dinner."

The sun had faded beyond the peaks around him, and he knew he had maybe an hour left of semi-sunlight before full dark fell.

None of which would have been a real issue, except that his bladder was about to explode. Each jarring bump in the road felt like a knife jab in his groin. Finding a wide spot in the road, Lloyd turned around, but before backtracking, he stopped to take a piss.

He fumbled with the zipper on his jeans and then let out an audible sigh of relief that blended with the unmistakable sound of 32 ounces of crappy convenience store coffee finally finding its freedom. A chilly breeze blew by, halfway through the job, and Lloyd turned to keep the stream "downwind."

He'd just finished shoving his shirt tails back down into his jeans when the crack of something stepping on a dry branch jolted him to alertness. He paused, one hand on the van door handle, scanning the dark underbrush of what had suddenly become a wild and untamed forest.

No noise. No birds. No squirrels chattering. Even the wind seemed to have stopped dead in its tracks, like Nature was holding its breath for a moment.

"Christ, I'm jumping at shadows now." He took a deep breath and yanked open the door of the van.

A gust of wind came out of nowhere, pushing at the door and swirling into the van. It picked up a handful of cellophane wrappers, napkins and the directions he'd jotted down on scratch paper before heading out that morning, and sucked them out past him onto the road way.

"Crap!" He didn't give a damn about the trash, but without his notes, he wouldn't be able to call Jack for directions once he did know where the hell he was. He chased the notes, which scuttled along the dirt road like some kind of paper rodents. The van door slammed shut.

Lloyd fell on the last piece of paper just before it would have blown into the culvert full of swampy green water at the far side of the road. "Ew. That would have been —"

Another branch snapped, and the area fell silent again. Lloyd turned in the direction of the noise, his gaze darting desperately into the dark underbrush.

A low growl sent him backpedaling toward the van as the creature stepped out of the darkness. "Don't piss in my woods, little man," it snarled through a mouth clearly not designed for human speech.



Chapter Two: Construction Ahead

The Road is an unforgiving place, and it takes will, wits, cunning and not a little bit of good, old-fashioned dumb luck to survive and thrive there. Those who manage to weather weeks, years or even centuries upon the highways and back roads of the World of Darkness certainly pick up a few tricks and learn skills that can benefit them, wherever they go.

Some survival mechanisms are genuine necessities on the road, while others are merely conveniences. Certain supernatural powers can render almost any sort of mundane skill obsolete, but not all those that dwell beyond the auspices of humanity have recourse to those sorts of abilities. Thus, even some of the most powerful paranormal nomads occasionally have to resort to regular methods of scrounging for food or thumbing a ride, and the wisest counsel sharpening those skills, lest one's capabilities be found wanting at an inopportune moment.

Surviving the Road

The Road provides a wide variety of hazards, and many basic needs that settled people have come to take for granted are actually quite difficult to procure when life is constant migration. Nomads eventually come to learn which of these needs *are* truly needs, and which ones can be classed as luxuries, because, sooner or later, most nomads have to do without.

Finding Food

Probably the most necessary of all commodities, sustenance ranks high up on any nomad's list of things to find. When the going gets *really* rough, a character can make do without a roof over her head or even clothes on her back, but she can't survive for long without whatever sort of food she requires.

With a few exceptions, most supernatural beings tend to eat the same sorts of things that normal people do. Though supernatural beings' preferences may run in different directions, the majority of such creatures can still digest fruits, vegetables, meats and grains, just like the rest of us. That's both good and bad for them — they're just as well off as the next guy when a source of what ordinary folks think of as food is nearby, but when they're far from such a resource, they starve with the rest of us.

Vampires have their own methods for hunting down their meals (literally, for the most part), but even they can make use of some of the systems here. After all, while animal blood may not taste anywhere near as good as human, relatively young Kindred can usually slake their thirst on such fare. Thus, some Kindred are as very nearly as capable of making use of a felled stag as a normal hunter.

System: When looking for food, a character needs to consider the environment. It doesn't generally do to go hunting for something edible in the bowels of a decaying metropolis in the same manner in which one might try to find something edible in untamed wilderness. In the broadest possible terms, this means that the players of characters looking for food must roll Wits + Streetwise (for urban environments) or Survival (for wilderness environments), modified by an appropriate bonus or penalty to represent the relative abundance or scarcity of anything edible.

Be prepared.

— Motto of the Boy
Scouts of America

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The character finds something that he thinks is edible, but which will sicken him if consumed: a diseased animal, canned vegetables that have gone bad or stagnant water, for example. Alternately, the character has a run-in with something else looking for food in the same place — something dangerous, such as a rabid dog, a bear or a drug-addled vagrant.

Failure: The character finds no food or water.

Success: The character finds enough edible food and potable water to sustain one normal person for a day.

Exceptional Success: The character finds twice as much food and water as he was looking for.

Possible Modifiers: The character needs or wants a specific kind of sustenance — only vegan fare, for instance, or an animal with ample blood in its veins (–1 to –3), poor weather or lighting (–2), character is hunting or scavenging for more than one day or more than one person (–2 per person or day worth of food and water).

If you wish to roleplay through an actual hunt in the wilds, you'll likely want to ask the players to make some rolls beyond simple the initial Survival roll, though that's certainly enough if they've got the proper equipment for hunting and you're just looking to see if their characters go hungry today. A successful Streetwise or Survival roll also presumes that the character finds enough fresh water for herself for the day, provided that any water is available at all. In the woods, the character might find a clean stream to drink from. In the city, she might just lift a big bottle of spring water momentarily set down when someone goes digging in his pockets for his ringing cell phone.

Shelter

Nearly as important as the need to eat is the need for a place to get in out of the elements and lay down one's head, even if only for a few hours. Characters looking for somewhere to get in out of the rain (or perhaps the sun) have ample options in some places and considerably fewer choices in others.

Different sorts of characters have different needs when it comes to shelter. A werewolf needs a lot less in the way of a secure enclosed space when bedding down than, say, a vampire. But the more exacting an individual's needs, the less likely she is to find something that matches her requirements.

Players of characters looking for shelter in a wilderness environment roll Wits + Survival to locate something suitable for use, while those searching in urban environments use Wits + Investigation, Larceny or Streetwise, depending upon where they're looking and how, and what options are open to them. If the character has sufficient supplies for making a shelter, the Storyteller may allow the player to roll Wits + Crafts instead.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The character finds something that seems suitable as a shelter, only to have it go awry: a sturdy

lean-to collapses under the fury of a blizzard, a bonfire in the basement of an abandoned tenement building starts a raging inferno, etc.

Failure: The character finds no shelter at all and must either go without rest or else rest out in the open and deal with the consequences of doing so. This ranges from a bad night's sleep (no Willpower recovered) to the possibility of damage from exposure to extreme cold or heat.

Success: The character finds a place that suits her bare minimum needs. It's probably far from ideal, but it's better than sleeping under a tree in the rain or under an overpass in the snow.

Exceptional Success: The character finds a very desirable spot that isn't presently occupied, or else has ample room to accommodate her, as well. Perhaps she locates an unoccupied hunting lodge in the mountains, or a recently abandoned building in which the utilities have not yet been turned off.

Possible Modifiers: Character is in terrain containing a large number of potential bolt holes, such as hills with many caves or a slum with many abandoned buildings (+1 to +3), character needs very little in the way of shelter (+1 to +3), character is small (Size 4 or less) (+1), character has special requirements — total absence of sunlight or needs a dry place in the middle of a downpour (–1 to –3), character is in an environment with a dearth of sheltering options (–1 to –3).

The Short Con

If played properly, the short con (which is to say, a scheme with a quick payoff, usually involving little in the way of necessary setup) can be a source of food, shelter, cash or almost any other needed or desired subsistence-level commodity.

The character may show up at an isolated farmhouse in the early evening, clutching her hat in her hands and begging for a hot meal and a warm bed, in exchange for a day's labor tomorrow (even though she intends to be gone well before sunrise). Or, perhaps, he just needs \$20 to put gas in his car, because he was laid-off from the factory months ago and there's no telling if he'll have the chance to say goodbye to his terminally ill grandmother in Cleveland if he doesn't get back on the road right now. Maybe he's a fine-looking man in a sharp suit, and he has to borrow a cell phone for just a moment, and may he have just a bit of privacy while he makes an important call?

The players of characters who wish to engage in short cons generally make Manipulation + Subterfuge rolls, contested by the Wits + Empathy of their chosen marks.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: Not only does the mark know that something is fishy, she makes an effort to contact local authorities. Depending upon her nature, she might allow herself to seem to be taken in, only to contact the police on the sly, or she might call for her husband to chase this freeloader off with two barrels of rock salt.



Failure: The player rolls no successes or the mark's successes exceed those accrued for the character. The mark blows the character off — "Get a damn job, you bum."

Success: The player's successes exceed those rolled for the mark. The mark gives the character what she was looking for, within reason — a few bucks, a hot meal, a dry spot to sleep in the barn, a few smokes from a new pack.

Exceptional Success: The successes rolled for the character exceed the mark's, and the player rolls five or more successes. The mark not only complies with the character's request; he goes out of his way to do something more for the character, such as renting her a room for one night at the local motel so that she can get a good night's sleep and a shower before that job interview tomorrow that she was telling him all about.

Possible Modifiers: Character's sad story is backed up by "hard" evidence — sunglasses and a red-tipped white cane, for instance (+1 to +3), character chooses a mark with the Virtue of Charity (+2), character looks menacing (-2), mark has the Greed Vice (-2), character attempts to acquire materials for more than one adult (-2 per person), character's appearance doesn't suit the nature of the con (-1 to -3).

Please note that begging from others and conning them out of time, money and resources, while a perfectly lucrative vocation for some, is also illegal in most places, and apt to get a character thrown in the lockup if she isn't careful about choosing not only her victims but also the right times and places to approach them.

Sealing a Vehicle

Different sorts of nomads need to seal up their vehicles for different reasons, but odds are that most will have to batten down the hatches at one point or another. Vampires have the most obvious reason for doing so, but others might find cause to do so, as well. Perhaps a particularly hideous Promethean doesn't want to attract undue notice while he rests, or a mage needs to insulate her car, so that the small magical heat source she's created doesn't bleed all of its warmth out into the snow that's already piled halfway up the doors.

Naturally, those that require only a casual sealing off of a vehicle have an easier time of it than those that need a total (or near-total) seal. In some cases, a full set of those folding reflectors for windshields and windows suffices, while, in others, every clear surface and vent needs to be covered in aluminum foil, duct tape and padding.

Sealing a vehicle requires a Wits + Crafts roll if the character is racing the clock (or the sunrise). If she can afford to take her time, the roll uses the higher of Wits or Intelligence + Crafts and is extended. In this case, each roll takes 10 minutes, and five successes are necessary for any Size vehicle up to a van (for larger vehicles, it might be easier to seal a small portion of the interior, but the Storyteller can adjudicate how many successes are necessary based on the vehicle's Size).

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The vehicle appears to be adequately sealed, but the seal fails at the most inopportune possible moment, quite possibly putting the character in grave danger.

Failure: The character doesn't seal the vehicle properly, and knows it.

Success: The character seals the vehicle well enough for a single rest period (approximately eight hours).

Exceptional Success: The character not only seals the vehicle well enough for a single rest period, but the seal imposes a -2 penalty to break-in attempts.

Possible Modifiers: Character has ample supplies (+1 to +3), vehicle contains a space within that can be more easily sealed off than the whole (+1 to +3), character has sparse supplies (-1 to -3), vehicle's windows are particularly large (-1 to -3).

Avoiding Notice

Most nomads end up having to sneak around at one point or another, whether to get past the sleeping dog in the junkyard or to avoid the attention of the campus police while looking for a quiet corner of the library in which to catch a couple of hours' rest. There are different sorts of stealth for different situations, however, and one doesn't use the same techniques for dodging security guards on private property that one uses to walk right past the front desk in a corporate building, acting for all the world as though one belongs there.

When trying to get a character through a location completely unnoticed, a player should roll Dexterity + Stealth. Any potential observer makes a contesting roll of Wits + Composure. When trying to simply evade notice without being literally unseen — making oneself inconspicuous, rather than invisible — the player rolls the character's Manipulation + Stealth (to blend in anonymously) or Subterfuge (to look like someone who belongs in the area), while a potential observer rolls Wits + Empathy. Sneaking past a guard animal requires Dexterity + Stealth if the animal is asleep or otherwise occupied, or Presence or Manipulation (depending upon one's approach) + Animal Ken if the animal is aware of the character's presence. The Storyteller rolls Wits + Composure for the animal to notice the intruder if it's unaware of her presence, or Intelligence + Composure to resist her manipulations if the animal is aware of her. To have a character sneak past an alarm, security camera or the like, the player rolls Intelligence or Wits (depending upon whether the character has time to work or is hurried, respectively) + Computer or Larceny, depending upon the specific nature of the device to be bypassed and the character's method for doing so.

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The character attracts notice in all the wrong ways — tripping an alarm, for example, riling up the attack dog or bumping into a security guard as he turns a corner.

Failure: The player accrues either no successes or else fewer successes than one or more potential observers, and is noticed.

Success: The player accrues more successes than are scored for all potential observers, and the character is not noticed.

Exceptional Success: The player rolls more successes than the observer, *and* the player's roll has at least five successes. In addition to going unnoticed, the character's comfortable awareness of her surroundings grants a +2 bonus on any Wits + Composure or Investigation rolls for the character to notice anything in her immediate environment.

Possible Modifiers: Character is dressed in clothing appropriate to whatever stealthy activity he is attempting (+1 to +3), character is especially familiar with the area (+1 to +3), character is inappropriately attired (-1 to -3), character is dealing with a good security system (-1 to -5, equal to the equipment bonus of the system).


Hitchhiking

As much an art as a science, hitching involves a surprising number of skill sets, considering that it all boils down to standing on the side of a road with one's thumb extended. But almost every nomad knows what it's like to run out of gas, break a vehicle (or have to abandon one) or otherwise end up stranded in the middle of nowhere, with no prospects for getting out of there other than the kindness of a passing motorist.

One can certainly thumb a ride on just any road, but chances improve when one finds a thoroughfare that benefits from a decent flow of traffic: not too much and not too little. Highways are particularly bad for hitchhiking, as they're not only exceedingly dangerous for someone on foot but are also likely to be patrolled by state police. Conversely, isolated back roads are often unhelpful for the hitchhiker, due to poor traffic flow and the fact that any vehicle on the road probably isn't going in any useful direction, even if someone *were* to stop. Naturally, if one is on a given stretch of road — wherever that might be — and a car comes rolling by, then the would-be hitcher is well advised to give it a shot, especially if the alternative is the possibility of several more hours without another soul in sight.

If a car *does* stop, then the hitchhiker needs to make a quick assessment regarding how safe the driver appears to be. Experienced hitchhikers say that any sort of "bad vibe" at all is sufficient cause to claim that the driver isn't going your way, but thanks, anyway. Of course, many supernatural creatures are probably monsters far more dangerous (if not necessarily more loathsome) than almost any ominous motorist, but one can never really be *completely* certain. Even if the driver seems to be okay, however, there's a decent chance that she simply doesn't happen to be traveling toward the character's destination. Unless, of course, the character doesn't have a particular destination, or is just trying to get away from somewhere, rather than toward somewhere else. If the character needs to get to a certain





place, or at least move in a certain direction, he still might be able to convince the motorist to go a little bit out of her way, but that depends largely on how charitable the driver is feeling and how persuasive the character can be.

Locating a good place to hitchhike requires a Wits + Streetwise (in an urban or suburban environment) or Survival (in rural or wilderness surroundings) roll. In this case, however, success doesn't guarantee finding a ride but merely a favorable place to find a ride. There's no mundane skill, unfortunately, for producing passing cars out of thin air, and the character is forced to fall back on a certain degree of luck in this sort of situation. Even promising stretches of road sometimes come up dry.

When a car passes by, no roll is generally involved as to whether or not a motorist decides to stop. Some people occasionally pull over for hitchhikers, and others simply do not. Of course, certain factors (such as the Striking Looks Merit, for example) may incline even a normally wary driver to let down her guard "just this once," but it really is more a matter of luck than skill.

Reading a potential driver's overall trustworthiness involves a Wits + Empathy roll, contested by the subject's Manipulation + Subterfuge (if, indeed, she has any unsavory intentions), as normal. If there's anything *truly* bizarre about the driver, the Storyteller may instead request a Wits + Occult roll.

If the character figures that the driver is reasonably safe, then the character can try to get a ride wherever it is that he's going, or at least travel for a little ways in that general direction. The driver may well be going that way, anyway. If not, she might be persuaded to go a little far afield of where she was intending to travel, though. To have his character talk someone into going somewhere that she might not normally agree to, the player rolls Presence or Manipulation (depending upon approach) + Persuasion, contested by the subject's Resolve + Composure. (Naturally, these systems assume interactions between a player character and a Storyteller character. For interactions between player characters, such things should be resolved through roleplaying.)

Roll Results

Dramatic Failure: The subject blows the character off completely, and may do something more, such as calling the police after she drives off and informing them about "some weird hitchhiker at the intersection of Route 9 and Greeley Avenue"

Failure: The player accrues fewer successes than those garnered for the driver, who refuses, politely or otherwise, to change her direction for the character.

Success: The player accrues more successes than the driver, who agrees to a short jaunt out of her way.

Exceptional Success: The player accrues more successes than the driver, and at least five successes, total. The driver agrees to go significantly out of her way for the character.

Possible Modifiers: Driver has a Virtue of Charity (+2), character offers some money (or other compensation) to the driver for her trouble (+1 to +3), character asks to bring along multiple people (-2 per additional person).

The Hobo Code

Of uncertain origins, the so-called hobo code was (and still is, along a few lonely stretches of road) a system of rough pictograms used to indicate certain general concepts. While the images varied from place to place, and year to year, certain symbols became fixed in their shape and their meaning. A crude drawing or carving of a cat, for example, indicated the presence of a kindly woman, while the depiction of three diagonal lines, side-by-side, warned of danger nearby. Interestingly, the configurations of some of these glyphs demonstrate the possibility of influence by the pictograms and trail markers of certain types of supernatural beings, especially werewolves and Prometheans.

Some nomads among these two "races" still make use of such signs and signals, concealing the more conventional sigils of their respective kinds within modified variants of the markings of the hobo code. Experienced Uratha and Promethean wanderers are often able to decipher the hidden meanings within these symbols, though they look like nothing more than nonsensical images to most people. Those versed in the nuances of the hobo code — a rare breed, indeed, these days — may recognize the pictograms used to hide the deeper meaning being conveyed, but the variation inherent to the code insures that the occult languages under the surface remain safely hidden.

Successfully recognizing and reading Forsaken and Promethean versions of the symbols of the hobo code involves a Wits + Occult roll at a -3 penalty. The creator of the symbols, however, may choose to take up to a -3 penalty on his Wits + Expression roll to alleviate points of penalty for members of his own kind, on a one-for-one basis. Thus, a skilled artist is capable of making these images more readily understandable for creatures of his type, while keeping them unclear to those not versed in the intricacies of such forms of communication.

Hitchhiking is, to one degree or another, illegal almost everywhere, nowadays, though certain places are more vigorous in prosecuting the crime than others. In whatever case, it pays to know the local statutes regarding hitching, as certain areas actually have rather strict penalties in place to dissuade pedestrians from undertaking such an activity.

It is also worth noting that thumbing a ride is a great feeding strategy for a vampire in an isolated locale. Conversely, picking up hitchhikers is also a good way for vampire on the long road to grab a quick bite to eat. Indeed, a car may offer an equipment bonus to a hunting vampire out looking to prey upon the lost and stranded.

Where the Rubber Hits the Road

The automobile. For most, it's just a means to an end — a way to get from one location to another with some degree of swiftness. For others, it's a symbol of some luxury, a comfortable emblem of style and circumstance.

In terms of narrative, though, an automobile can play a far more dramatic role. Imagine a character gripping the roof with pained fingers, trying not to slide off and hit the road as the car lurches forward down a rough highway. Or another character trying to punch the brakes before slamming into that tractor trailer just a hundred yards ahead and finding that the pedal is soft, unresponsive, heralding a swift and grisly demise. What about two trucks smashing into one another? Or four? Or a car clipping a pedestrian just as he steps off the curb into traffic? Or a character driving his certified POS compact car from the late 1990s down a serpentine road coated with black ice, trying to escape whatever shadowy hounds seem hell-bent to tear him to ribbons?

In your story, the automobile is more than just a means to an end. It's a narrative icon, a mechanical symbol of movement and suspense. And here, we give you the rules you need for where the rubber hits the road.

The Crafts Skill

Crafts is a versatile Skill. Those who possess it are theoretically capable mechanics, plumbers and carpenters. It's important, however, to look at the Crafts Skill as more than just an umbrella covering a wide variety of hands-on disciplines — here, we're going to look at the Skill and how it applies to working with automobiles.

Specialties

It's not explicitly necessary that a character possesses the appropriate Specialties when hoping to work on an automobile. Specialties are meant to provide bonuses, not determine penalties when a character doesn't possess them. That being said, a Storyteller *may* rule that certain fixes or mechanical attempts are beyond the reach of someone with a low Crafts score and no relevant Specialties. Trying to rebuild a transmission is a whole different bag of tricks than, say, changing tires or oil. A Storyteller may say to someone with a Crafts 1 and no appropriate Specialties, "I don't believe you possess the ability to even begin this

task, much less finish it." The use of Specialties confirms one's ability to work in certain arenas. For the most part, if the character possesses the overarching Skill Specialty of "Automobiles," that's good enough for any attempt, even with one dot of Crafts.

A word to Storytellers: be careful with this. A low dice pool, such as the one already likely represented by Crafts 1, may be punishment enough. Use your judgment. If the character possesses the Crafts Skill because she is an expert seamstress, it seems sound to deny the character the chance to rebuild an engine block. If the character is an airplane mechanic, though, he has a shot. Discuss it with the player, and see if together you can reach a consensus of what can be truly attempted with the Crafts Skill.

Some characters may be professional mechanics or simply possess deeper Specialties than the generic "Automobiles." Certainly, the more Specialties stacked upon the score, the more precise work one can accomplish. It's important, however, to walk the line with Specialties and not make them *too* specific. Specialties such as "Brake Repair" or "Oil Change" are fine if you really want them, but consider how often they'll come into play. Probably rarely, since the narrative is unlikely to hinge on these tasks in any meaningful way. So, what Specialties might walk the line between being too specific to see use and so vague that they apply to every Crafts roll made?

Auto Repair: This Specialty covers the general repair of an automobile, whether it means banging out dents in body repair, replacing an alternator, fixing the electrical system, whatever.

Chop Shop: This Specialty allows a character a little extra know-how when it comes to breaking down a vehicle into its constituent parts for sale on a legal — or black — market.

Diagnosis: Sometimes, the character may want to make a Perception-based roll (Wits + Crafts) to examine an automobile for past, current or future problems. Maybe he wants to see if it's had its oil changed recently, or if the distributor cap has a hole in it where it's spraying green antifreeze all over the road like alien blood. Maybe he wants to see if the car might have problems coming up: brake pads running down, perhaps, or an oil filter starting to go bad.

Design: Characters to build or design cars might have this Specialty. (Consider a character who has drawn up plans for a sleek, swift concept car that runs on biodiesel or some other alternate fuel systems. Then consider just who wants to cut short those plans because it'll dig into their profit margins.)

Jury-Rigging: Sometimes, the car just needs a booster shot of duct tape, bungee cord and some Gorilla Glue to get back on the road. (See "Jury-Rigging," below.)

Maintenance: Automobiles need maintenance to keep from suffering breakdowns. This Specialty helps cover basic and advanced tune-ups. (See "Degradation," below.)

Modification: Lots of people tweak their cars, from putting on flashy rims to spoilers to nitrous boosters. This Specialty cov-



ers decorative work as well as stuff that would definitely violate a manufacturer's warranty. (See "Modification," below.)

Sabotage: Crafts isn't all about creating or fixing. Sometimes it's about destroying. This doesn't apply to when a character attacks a car with a sledgehammer — that's Weaponry. But this involves doing mechanical damage to the car in a skillful way — cutting the brake line, perhaps, or causing a slow coolant leak. (See "Sabotage," below.)

Modification

Modding one's ride requires a standard Repair Item roll (see p. 58, the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Some sample modifications are described below, with successes needed and general effects:

Decorative: Shiny rims. New paint job. Dark windows (illegal in some states). Such modifications are purely decorative and do little but may up the Cost of the vehicle by one dot. Four successes necessary for most decorative mods. Cost • to ••••• (shiny rims might be ••, whereas anything gold-plated gets up into the •••• to ••••• range).

Lowriders: Hydraulic systems put into cars that allow them to change their height with a series of switches inside the car. It's mostly decorative, but in some communities might grant a proxy +1 to Status (urban gangs, racers, lowrider clubs, etc.). When driving in the low position, the car takes one point of Structure damage when going above the Safe Speed, regardless of the vehicle's Durability. Why? Because riding low causes the car to suffer damage from minor road obstructions such as potholes or raised manholes. Ten successes necessary. Cost •••.

Nitrous: Tanks of nitrous oxide allow for fuel to be burned at a faster rate. Thus, nitrous increases an automobile's power output by about 45% to 50%. For the remainder of the scene, an automobile expending its nitrous boost doubles its Acceleration (note, however, that this doesn't change its Safe or Maximum Speeds). However, during this scene the car suffers a -1 to Handling, and suffers one point of Structure damage (nitrous isn't good for the longevity of a car, and can damage an engine). Nitrous systems are generally legal, but the speeds achieved usually aren't. Cops sometimes arrest drivers on the purposefully mistaken supposition that the drivers intend to inhale the nitrous oxide as a drug (though auto-level nitrous would kill the inhaler). Seven total successes are necessary. Cost •••.

Suspension Tuning: Modifying the springs (such as making them shorter), tuning up the shock absorbers or adding in a sway bar (a stabilizing bar connecting opposite wheels) can help the car's performance. In most cases, a suspension mod will give a car +1 Handling, except in cases of particularly rough road (where many of a suspension mod's advantages are not only tempered, but truly lost). Rough road causes a car to lose 1 from its normal Handling score. Seven successes required. Cost ••.

Jury-Rigging

It's a sailing term, actually — an improvised mast made when the main mast fails is called a "jury rig" or "injury

rig." (Some, however, mistakenly call it "jerry-rig," which is taken from "jerry-built," which has nothing to do with the Germans in WWI or WWII despite popular legend.) The point of jury-rigging is to improvise a mechanical fix to keep your vessel — in this case, a car — up and running.

It's never a permanent fix, of course. Whether using duct tape to patch a leak or switching caps to prevent fluids escaping, the fix won't keep the car running for long.

Jury-rigging requires a Wits + Crafts roll. An equipment bonus cannot exceed +2 dice (because if a character had enough for more, he probably wouldn't be jury-rigging it). Penalties might include those from distractions or environmental concerns (loud highway, sand blowing in one's eyes, the threat of danger swiftly approaching).

Successes equal how many miles the car will go before breaking down again. Another jury-rig attempt can be made after the car breaks down, but for every subsequent breakdown after the first, the roll suffers a cumulative -2 penalty. And, after every subsequent breakdown, the car's Handling also takes a cumulative -2 penalty.

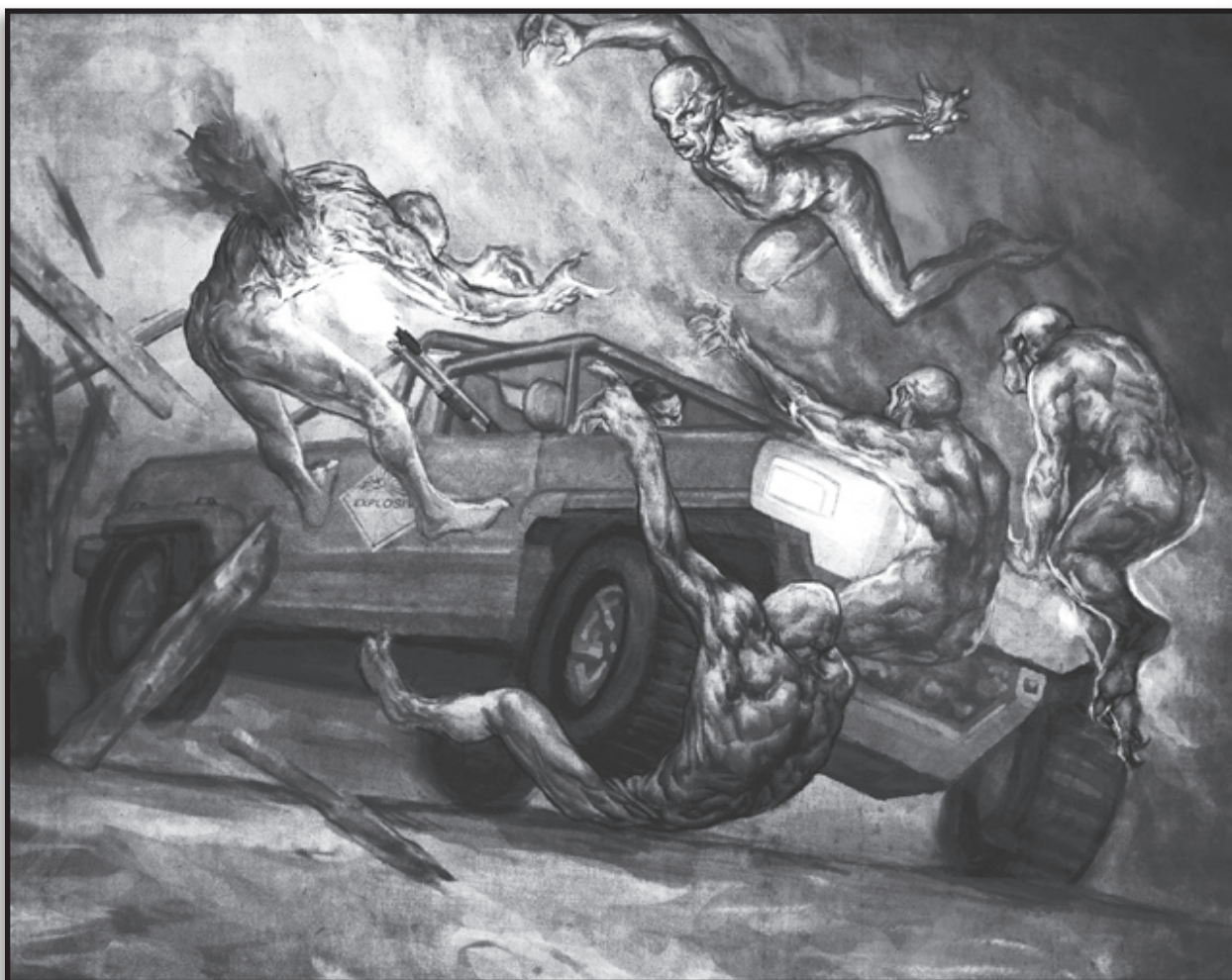
Note that jury-rigging really only works on minor mechanical problems — fluid leaks, damaged tires, loose parts. If a transmission fails, no amount of jury-rigging on the side of a desolate highway will get the car up and running again (magic and such aside).

Sabotage

A character may use the Crafts Skill to damage a car mechanically instead of repair it or its systems. A Dexterity + Crafts roll with equipment, same as the Repair Item roll (see p. 58 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**), does the trick. Except here, the number of successes required is determined by the complexity of the sabotage at hand. Below are a number of sabotage tasks one might perform to damage a car. Each is listed with requisite successes as well as the consequences of performing such an action:

Car Bomb: Car bombs come in a few types. One is detonated at the time the keys turns in the ignition — trickier to install in cars with alarm systems, as putting any kind of drain on the electrical system will trigger the alarm during installation. The other is a bomb put somewhere on or in the car, and is then triggered remotely. The final type is a bomb that goes off upon impact (also tricky, because if the car hits a rough patch of road, the bomb might go off prematurely). Installing the bomb demands 12 successes. This *does* presuppose that the character has built or purchased a bomb, however. The stats of the explosion are determined by whatever type of device the character installs. (See "Explosives," pp. 178–179 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**.) Some groups of particularly devoted vampire hunters are said to drive into the havens of such creatures using suicide cars rigged with fiery explosives.

Cutting Brake Lines: Brakes lose pressure when the lines that carry fluid to the calipers are cut. This means that the brakes stop working properly (though pumping them can still give them some function). Cutting brake lines



requires seven successes. Doing so means that over time the fluid to the brakes drains completely and the character won't be able to stop his car using the brake pedal. If this occurs at a high-pressure moment (driver needs to brake when approaching a sharp curve, tractor trailer, stoplight, whatever), a Dexterity + Drive + Handling roll is necessary to avoid crashing. This roll is penalized by -2 dice (and this penalty can increase if the driver is exceeding the Safe Speed of the car, as noted on p. 143 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). The character can eventually stop accelerating and slow the car down to a stop. Also, smart characters (an Intelligence + Drive roll might be necessary) will realize that the emergency brake works. Worth noting is that an Intelligence + Investigation roll (proactive, not a reflexive roll) might allow a character to detect brake fluid from such sabotage before getting in his car. Brake fluid evaporates quickly, though (within two hours).

Generic: Not every player knows just what he wants to have happen to the car, so he might simply determine that he wants his character to wreak a little havoc on the car's mechanical systems without any real rhyme or reason. The character can determine the penalty he wants the car's Handling to suffer, -1 to -5 dice. Multiply that penalty by three to determine the number of successes necessary

(three successes to cause a -1 penalty, nine successes for a -3 penalty and 15 for a -5 penalty).

Remote Control Sabotage: This is tricky for all but the most adept with a car's electrical and mechanical systems (and is also a trick used by agencies such as the Spetsnaz): one can build a very simple remote control that controls either the car's electrical or brake system. The former relies purely on interrupting an electrical circuit. The latter demands installing a "parasite" braking system, usually involving a cylinder of compressed air (such as a small scuba-diving tank) that allows one to take control of the brakes from afar. This requires 15 successes. It demands also that a character be within 200 yards for the remote to work. The remote sabotage is largely meant to cause a breakdown — the electrical system denies engine functionality, or the brake system forces the car to stop where the remote-wielder demands.

Slow Leaks: By loosening a few hoses, it's possible to cause slow leaks of other fluids (particularly oil and coolant) that will occur over time during driving. Sabotaging a car in this manner requires six successes. Within the first two hours of driving the car, the car begins to overheat (the idiot light will come on, the temperature gauge will shoot into the red and the engine will begin to smoke). If the driver stops, the

car can be saved. If he keeps driving into the red, the engine will eventually need to be replaced *and* the car might burst into flames (especially if this happens on a hot day).

Hotwiring

It's a simple principle — open the car's ignition lock, figure out which wire is which and connect the always-live wire ("hot" wire) to the wire that provides the charge to the car's ignition coil. In older cars, practiced thieves can do it in less than a minute. In newer cars, countermeasures make it easier to wait until the car owner returns and mug him for his keys.

Hotwiring a car requires access either to the car's ignition (and thus the interior of the car) or, for some models, the engine compartment (and thus getting under the hood). At that point, the player rolls Wits + Larceny in an extended action. The number of successes varies depending on how advanced the car's security measures are. If the car is an older model without much in the way of countermeasures, it might only require five successes to get the car started. In a newer car, countermeasures might require hotwiring the security system and then the engine itself, for a total of perhaps 10 successes. In either case, each roll requires one minute of work.

It is possible, on some cars, to break open the ignition lock and turn the tumblers manually, obviating the need to twist or crimp wires. The player must roll to break open the lock (see "Breaking Objects," p. 136 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Such locks generally have Durability 1 and Structure 2.

Car Chases

Car chases. Certainly an earmark of action movies, but car chases work to create suspense and tension, and hence work in any scene of terror, as well. Car chases can be done in countless ways, but here we're going to present two opposing ideas on how you might want to run a car chase in your game. Note that the rules are technically the same for both (see "Vehicle Pursuit," pp. 69-71, the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). What we're talking about here is the *narrative* approach.

The Short Sharp Shock

In real life, car chases tend to be brutal. It's why in many urban and suburban areas the police have "no chase" rules, because a car chase inevitably ends in someone dying (be it the perp or an innocent pedestrian) and serious property damage. They aren't lengthy affairs, because as soon as the perp drives into a busy intersection, there's the inevitable crash of metal-on-metal.

So, in running a car chase, presuppose that it's profoundly dangerous. This is no action movie where a car scrapes through an intersection or alley by the skin of its side mirrors. Players aren't rolling Dexterity + Drive so

Vandalism

Note that it doesn't really take a Crafts roll to vandalize a car — keying the paint, gluing coins to it, shellacking the thing with egg whites and hair-spray, filling the hubcap with a handful of metal ball bearings, puncturing tires, pissing in the gas tank, whatever. While some of these things certainly mess with the car's functionality, they're overt and don't count as Crafts-inspired sabotage.

their characters can make some swift 180 in the middle of a busy highway. No, the Drive roll is to see if they can stop in time so as not to slam headlong into that garbage truck up ahead. Such scenes of vehicular pursuit rarely last more than a handful of turns (unless the car chase takes place way out on the open road, but even out in the middle of nowhere one must contend with potholes, cows, construction, etc.). It's less about skill and more about luck. And, in many cases, a car chase ends with a wreck — small or large, with bruises formed or blood spilled. That's not to say a car chase doesn't still give a character the chance to either escape (after crashing, he limps away into a dark alley) or to catch his prey if he's the pursuer (maybe the prey fishtails out on the highway, allowing the character the time to get out and point his gun).

Crazy and Cinematic

Cinematic car chases are a thing of beauty, a mad ballet of cars weaving through traffic and obstacles like stags bolting through a dense forest. This is far less about luck and much more about skill. Players roll Drive not to avoid certain death but to deftly dodge the loose shopping cart rolling across the street or to slide through a busy intersection the way a knife eases between two ribs.

For one thing, you need turn-by-turn drama. Every couple of turns should be some new slice of orchestrated chaos for both drivers to navigate. Throw around lots of penalties and bonuses as a child runs out in front of the pursuit vehicle or a sudden detour marks a bad road (and maybe even an inadvertent ramp formed by a board leaning against a pile of railroad ties). Can one car cross the tracks before the onrushing train? Can both cars navigate the upcoming turn slick with midnight ice? Can blasting the car through a locked gate work — and, even better, can the resultant gate debris slow down a pursuer? Think of every turn as some new awesome thing to happen. If a character takes the car and smashes it into a shopping mall, go for it. The goal of this is to build a persistent level of tension that escalates — start with minor penalties and bonuses, and get bigger and crazier as it goes. Just like it does in the movies.

Eventually, of course, someone's going to fail a Drive roll. First, failing a roll doesn't necessarily end the chase. Maybe it causes a tire to blow. Or maybe the car drives under a flatbed truck and shears the top half of the car off (requiring a character's player to make a roll to duck in time so his head doesn't go with the rest of the obliterated metal). Second, as befits the style you seek, failing should be *dramatic*. It needn't be silly — a car doesn't necessarily hit a ramp and turn end over end before driving into a gas station, which blows up an entire city block. But think about glass going everywhere, about the visual chaos that occurs. Cars don't just need to smash flat on into a wall — they *can* flip, or tumble down an embankment or even fishtail wildly into an ongoing parade.

Other Systems

Below you'll find a handful of miscellaneous vehicle-related systems meant to add to those found in the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, pp. 141–147.

Car Surfing

Car surfing is the act of either hanging onto an open car door and “surfing” the road or literally surfing a piece of wood or metal dragged behind the car. Some do it for fun, but a dramatic situation might occur in which a character is hanging onto the car so as to either enter the vehicle in transit or to avoid becoming roadkill. Car surfing in any form requires a successful Dexterity + Athletics roll. This roll is penalized by one die for every 10 miles per hour above 10 miles per hour (so, 20 miles per hour incurs a –1 penalty, and 50 miles per hour incurs a –4 penalty). Success is enough to maintain grip and balance, but any time the car makes a sudden movement or bump (perhaps orchestrated by the driver), the roll must be made again. If the surfing character falls, see the rules for jumping from a moving vehicle (see pp. 143–144, the **World of Darkness Rulebook**).

Combat Inside the Vehicle

Consider: Your character is driving. Someone hits the roof, shatters the glass and slides into the car with preternatural agility, and suddenly your character has to fight this enemy off — while still maintaining control of the car. If he possesses the Stunt Driver Merit, fine. He can fight each turn and still drive without penalty. Without the Stunt Driver Merit, the character can still attempt to fight, but the Storyteller makes a chance roll each turn to see if the car crashes (see “Skill Tests,” p. 143, the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Also note that combat within the vehicle is penalized by –3 dice for all combatants — it's hard to throw punches or pull a gun in such close quarters. Defense still applies, though, but only at half, rounded up. Failed shots also might inflict damage to the Structure of the car, at the Storyteller's discretion.

Degradation

Vehicles degrade, suffering wear-and-tear over the miles. Every two years or 30,000 miles, the car suffers a loss equal to –1 Structure, –2 Acceleration. Every three years or 50,000 miles, the car suffers a –1 to its Handling. Degradation can be halted or even reversed by a regular schedule of maintenance and repair.

Driving While Intoxicated

Driving while inebriated is a bad idea, both for legal and practical reasons, but there's no accounting for stupidity. One's Drive roll is penalized during intoxication — a character's Dexterity is hampered per the penalties found on p. 177 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**. Strange as it sounds, though, driving drunk can have a positive effect, albeit one that only occurs *after* a car wreck and people are probably dead or dying. Some of the injuries caused to drivers and passengers in automobile accidents are due to the rigidity of the body; one seizes up, locking arms and legs, stiffening the back. Drunks often fail to do this. They don't necessarily foresee the crash and, due to intoxication, tend to be “looser” of body (and obviously, mind). For every Dexterity die penalized, the intoxicated individual can ignore one level of damage, bashing or lethal (whichever occurs). If the drunk is hampered by a penalty of –3 Dexterity and the car crash causes him six points of lethal damage, he instead takes only three of those levels. (Ever wonder how drunks get up and stumble away, sometimes unscathed, from harrowing car accidents? This is how.)

High-Traffic Driving

Driving is often a physical effort: lots of hand-eye-coordination, making the car an extension of one's body. But, at times it can be more of a *mental* task. Consider high-traffic driving, in which a character drives a hurtling car along at 60+ miles per hour, but is in bumper-to-bumper traffic featuring other cars driving at the same swift skip. In such times, the roll for driving is Resolve + Drive, not Dexterity + Drive.

Impact Damage

Damage suffered in a car crash is generally lethal, whether inside the car or outside of it: glass cuts, metal crushes legs, a bumper shatters a pelvis and the road rash takes care of the rest. That being said, *some* car impact damage can be bashing. If it is a vehicle-on-vehicle impact, and both cars were going under 35 miles per hour (Speed of 52), the damage suffered by those inside the vehicles should be considered bashing. This doesn't apply to motorcycles. That damage is always lethal.

Weapon Car

It might seem silly, but it's possible to fit a vehicle with objects that increase its general deadliness — pieces





Car Theft, Starring Subterfuge!

Characters don't necessarily need the Larceny Skill to steal cars. Try this on for size. A character who copies the VIN number off a car — easy to do, it's often right there through the windshield — can take that number back to the dealership from where the car was purchased. (Many cars have the dealership's emblem on the car or plate.) Back at the dealership, they can cut a new key (or even program a new automatic key, if the car features that option) using the VIN number. Sure, they "require" license and registration as proof. But that's where Subterfuge comes in. A character might lie and say, "Oh, I left those in the glove compartment, and obviously the car is locked." Successful deception might earn the character a key. It usually costs about two to five bucks to get a new key made, and many salesmen want to spin good will toward the customer into a future sale, so they're careful not to upset the desperate driver (i.e., the thief).

of fence, spears, strips of razors, anything to make the car deadlier to others upon impact. Modifying a car thus counts as Modification (see above) and requires at least six successes. This increases the potential damage to those struck by the vehicle, adding two dice. However, it adds nothing if the car hits another car — the addition of little weapons is paltry given the force of a speeding half-ton car.

Cars and the Supernatural

The World of Darkness is infused with hidden magic. From things unburied in a person's yard to hungry vampires and mad-eyed sorcerers lingering in the shadows, magic is real. And it's foolish to think it doesn't seep into the roads, into chrome bumpers, into hissing pistons.

What Magic Can Do

The monsters of the World of Darkness can enact their supernatural will upon an automobile, doing it great harm or boosting its abilities. The powers and abilities mentioned below for the various supernatural "races" are found in their respective core books (**Vampire: The Requiem**, **Werewolf: The Forsaken**, **Mage: The Awakening**, **Promethean: The Created** and **Changeling: The Lost**) and mentioned by name in *italics* along with their descriptions.

A werewolf can, by calling upon the Gifts taught to him by certain spirits of metal and stone, take a car in his bare hands and smooth out any dings or dents . . . or he can just *twist* with two fists, ruining the metal and any mechanical systems caught in his hands (*Shaping Gifts*). He can awaken the spirit of the car, sending it into paroxysms of rage, or he can become one with the spirit of the car, learning all that the vehicle's headlights have seen and tires have felt (*Technology Gifts*).

A mage, even young and untested, can shape a car's function to her will — she can shield or deflect a car from an accident about to happen (*Fate*), or increase the output of fuel in her car and thus giving the vehicle a sudden boost of Acceleration (*Matter*). She can even silence the car entirely so that nobody will ever hear the black Lincoln Town Car sliding through the darkness like an owl's shadow (*Forces*). More potent mages can tap a far more frightening wealth of power. Could a mage give life to her car and make it hungry for fuel, or even human meat? Could she use her car as a vehicle that carries her between worlds, driving her straight into the Shadow? Could she make her 1967 Mustang invisible? Yes (*Life/Matter*), yes (*Spirit*), and yes (*Forces*). And it's almost too frightening to ponder a mage's destructive capabilities: turning gasoline to something useless (such as sugar) or volatile (such as nitroglycerin), making the car's Durability so weak that even the slightest accident wrecks it (*Matter*), or cursing a vehicle with such bad luck that every trip down the road is as perilous as surfing with sharks (*Fate*).

What of Prometheans, those creatures who are essentially machines made of stolen flesh, muscle and bone? One of the Created could power a car with his own vital electric energies (*Electrification Transmutations*). He could improve or destroy a vehicle by infusing it with his own Pyros. He could turn a rubber tire into glass by influencing the alchemical matrix (*Alchemicus Transmutations*). He could stand in the middle of a busy intersection and simply *pulse* his inner energies, sending an electromagnetic wave out that fries the electrical systems of every car within sight (*Electrification Transmutations*, again). Or, if he can't do any of those things, think about the monster who can jump out of a swiftly-speeding car and not suffer a bit of damage . . . or just pick up the car and throw it off a bridge in a fit of anger (*Vitality* or *Corporeum Transmutations*, or just the Promethean's natural might).

Changelings have earned relationships with the fundamental elements that make up the world — they cannot speak to metal or to the machine systems that make up a car, but they know the old clauses and secret rules that allow them to jury-rig a car with things such as leaves and sticks and shards of pottery (*Contracts of Artifice*), or bless a vehicle with such luck that it turns on a dime and seems to float through traffic (*Contracts of Hearth*). Of course, a changeling can do stranger things, too. He can stare at a vehicle and wound it with his eyes, and he can even take his car and make it into something far stranger: a hovercraft, a tank, a bomb (*Contracts of Artifice*, again).

The bloodsucking vampires don't have any direct abilities that might affect a car, but consider that the Kindred

are preternaturally tough and swift. One could run as fast as (or even faster than) a speeding vehicle, or simply step out into traffic and take the hit from a hurtling pickup . . . only to heal his wounds as he stands, ready to pick through the wreckage for fresh blood.

Bad Memory of Worse Cars

The blood may have long dried and flaked off the rubber. Bone spurs and tufts of hair have probably fallen out of the car's grill long ago. But some cars have memory, especially when terrible things happen to them, with them or within them. A man mows down an unfaithful lover in a parking lot, a woman chokes her sister to death in the passenger seat, a suicide victim leaps out in front of the vehicle as it speeds down the highway. A character can fix the car. Get it up and running again. But that doesn't mean the car doesn't remember. That the history of darkness hasn't seeped into the pistons, the leather seats and each and every lug nut. The car may either become possessed by or actually *become* the ghost of someone who died in or around the car: therefore, the car may actually possess Numina and traits, similar to a ghost. Some Numina are more common than others: Ghost Sign, Ghost Speech, Magnetic Disruption and Telekinesis.

Shadowcross Cars

Some cars — or other vehicles, such as trains or even boats — suffer a kind of *stain* left behind from spirit activity. The car may itself have a spirit slumbering within or may have simply suffered the effects of some kind of spirit attack or residue from an otherworldly effect.

Whatever it is that “taints” the car, the car becomes able to drive through the Gauntlet and into the spiritual realm of the Shadow. How is this done?

First, it must be done at an intersection, particularly one where no onlookers can see the character and the Shadowcrossing car.

Second, the character's player must spend a Willpower point . . . however, some cars do not afford the luxury of choice in this matter, and actually leech the point of Willpower on their own, thus activating the effect with a kind of machine consciousness. If the car contains more than one character, *all* characters must expend (or lose) a Willpower point.

Provided that these two parameters are in place, the car slides through the Gauntlet and into the spirit realm. Doing so, however, is neither safe nor sane for any characters within the vehicle making this transition between worlds. The characters suffer one of the following derangements upon crossing into the Shadow, the effects of which are active for the entire time that character is within the Shadow: Fixation, Irrationality or Phobia. (If the character possesses the mild version already, she suffers its severe analog.)

When the car crosses back over (again, at an intersection), all characters within must expend two Willpower points this time, voluntarily or not.

(Legends from the 1950s tell of cars that do not enter the Shadow via intersections, but instead enter the world of Thorns and dreams known as the Hedge. This is done only by driving through a tunnel or some kind of gateway — again, requiring Willpower expenditure and no onlookers.)



The Free Energy Car

They say it was made by Nikola Tesla, and certainly there lurks some evidence of this: the box, installed under the front seat with two red wires leading to a car's engine, is typical Tesla fare: vacuum tubes, two heavy magnetic rods, a jagged antenna that must be affixed outside the car.

What does it do? It allows the car to function without gasoline or any other kind of fuel, reportedly pulling energy from the air itself. Moreover, any car (or other vehicle) attached to this box drives with minimal changes to its functionality (the car suffers -4 to Acceleration and -10 to both Safe Speed and Maximum Speed). The vehicle runs hot, requiring some kind of cooling fan to be placed near the box. No cooling fan means that the box runs for only one scene, and anybody who touches the box suffers one lethal point of damage (per turn if the touch is extended) from a burn.

Some of Tesla's early detractors claim that such a car must run on "black magic," and one must wonder if they're right (or, alternately, if this car wasn't ever one of Tesla's invention to begin with).

The car isn't really a free energy device, despite all appearances. It slowly drains energy from the driver of the vehicle. It reduces the driver's Health score by one dot for every day the driver drives the car. It doesn't matter if he drives it for only 10 minutes; it still demands its "energy" once per day (however, once this dot is paid, the vehicle doesn't demand it from any other driver that day). Note that the car doesn't cause points of damage: the car instead reduces one's overall Health score, reducing the amount of damage that the character can suffer.

These dots of Health do come back at a rate of one dot per week. However, that whole week must be spent without starting the car. Turning the key is the moment at which the Health is drained, and to "regrow" lost levels, a character must not turn that key during that week.

New Merits

The Merits listed here are suitable for any World of Darkness character who travels the Road, either as a lifestyle or as a temporary situation.

Driver's Charm (• to •••••)

Effect: Some drivers have good luck charms for their vehicles. A hula girl on the dashboard, a Saint Christopher medal on one's keychain, a pair of beloved fuzzy dice, a cup holder full of the knucklebones of a vanquished enemy. Sometimes, such items are just icons of luck that doesn't really manifest. Other times, the driver imparts a tiny portion of his own soul and will into the artifact, and it genuinely grants him some measure of luck when driving. For every dot purchased, the charm can increase by +1 the following statistics of a chosen vehicle: Durability, Structure, Acceleration, Handling. **Drawback:** The driver's charm works for

only a single scene once per day, and requires one Willpower point from the driver to become active. Also, the charm is "attuned" only to one vehicle. If that vehicle wrecks, the charm (if it survived) can be re-attuned to a new vehicle, but doing so costs the driver a dot of Willpower. (Remember that recouping a dot of lost or spent Willpower costs eight experience points.)

Driving Style: High Performance Driving

(• to •••••)

Prerequisites: Dexterity •••, Resolve ••, Drive ••

Effect: Your character is trained in advanced driving techniques. Maybe he's a cop or a federal agent. Maybe he's a stuntman for film and TV or the wheelman in a heist gang.

Dots purchases in this Merit allow access to special driving maneuvers. Each maneuver is a prerequisite for the next. Your character cannot possess "Smuggler's Turn" until he has "Speed Demon." Maneuvers and effects are described below.

Speed Demon (•): For this character, a vehicle's Maximum Speed is now the same as the vehicle's Safe Speed. The character is very comfortable with driving fast, and thus does not suffer penalties for driving in excess of a vehicle's Safe Speed (see p.143, the **World of Darkness Rulebook**).

Smuggler's Turn (••): Also known as a J-Turn, this is essentially a radical U-turn used at high speed: the driver puts the car into a controlled skid, the car turns around, and as it's turning, he puts it into gear and keeps driving — except now, in the other direction. Used by bootleggers during Prohibition, it's a great way to escape a pursuing vehicle, if it works. The character must succeed on a Dexterity + Drive + Handling roll to make this turn. In doing so, any pursuing vehicles lose the Handling bonus when trying to follow, unless the pursuing driver also possesses this Merit.

Safe Passage (•••): Driving through strange or unsafe conditions — icy road, debris-littered highway, grid-locked highway — invokes penalties for most drivers, but not this character. He's able to zip past wreckage and control his car even when in a fishtailing hydroplane. Doing so still requires a Dexterity + Drive + Handling roll, but the character can ignore up to three dice of penalty caused by bad or unsafe conditions.

Offensive Driving (••••): When locked in vehicle pursuit (see pp. 69–71, the **World of Darkness Rulebook**), it's good to drive in a way that distracts and disrupts the other driver. Whether the character is the pursuer or the pursued, he can perform a number of distracting and disrupting techniques to hamper the other car. The quarry might drive over the median, clip trashcans with his bumper to knock them over or even careen through a busy intersection. The pursuer can perform maneuvers such as bumping the back end of the fleeing car or distracting the fleeing driver by weaving in and out of traffic behind him (even disappearing momentarily behind, say, an 18-wheeler) in



an effort to draw the driver's attention away from what he *should* be paying attention to: the road. The effect is the same for whether the character is the pursuer or the pursued: the tricky driving hampers an opponent's driving. The opponent's Acceleration and Handling scores are *halved* (round up) as he is distracted. **Drawback:** The character must expend a Willpower point at the beginning of vehicle pursuit to achieve this effect. Moreover, by the end of it, the vehicle the character was driving assumes an automatic loss of two Structure from the highly offensive driving.

Fighting Style: Improvised Weaponry (● to ●●●)

Prerequisites: Wits 3, Weaponry 1

During the course of their journeys upon the Road, wanderers find themselves in bad circumstances with nothing even remotely resembling a respectable weapon at hand. Perhaps the first, best rule of the nomadic life, however, is to make do with what you've got. Thus, certain improvisational fighting strategies have become time-honored traditions for people who get knocked on their asses and have to reach for the nearest solid object to avoid a serious beating, or worse.

Note that, unlike most other Fighting Style Merits, Improvised Weaponry isn't formally taught. Characters

invariably pick up this brutal, sloppy style of combat at the school of hard knocks.

Always Armed (●): The character has an instinct for grabbing something dangerous in almost any situation and maximizing its lethality once in hand. On her character's initiative in any given turn, the player may make a reflexive Wits + Weaponry roll to have the character pick up an object suitable for use as a weapon in any save the most barren environment. (The player is encouraged to work with the Storyteller to determine an appropriate item — a large, jagged rock outdoors, for example, or a heavy glass ashtray with one sharp, broken edge in a dive bar.) Regardless of what it is, this object is treated as a Size 1, one lethal weapon with a Durability of 2. On an exceptional success, provided that her surroundings allow for it, the character may instead grab a Size 2, two lethal improvised weapon with a Durability of 2.

In Harm's Way (●●): By interposing her weapon (no matter how small or inappropriate for parrying it might be) in the path of an oncoming Brawl or Weaponry attack, the character learns to increase her chances of walking away from a given attack unscathed. While wielding an improvised weapon acquired with the first technique of this Fighting Style, the character may, at the beginning of a turn, treat the Structure of her weapon as armor, but any damage

inflicted upon her *also* inflicts an equal amount of damage to the improvised weapon, bypassing its Durability.

Breaking Point (•••): One sure way to win a fight is to hit the other guy so hard that he doesn't get back up, even if that means losing a weapon in the process. When the character uses the all-out-attack option in a fight while wielding an improvised weapon acquired with the first technique of this Fighting Style, her player may exchange points of the weapon's Structure, down to a minimum of zero, for added equipment bonus for the duration of a single strike. The player must declare the use of this option before the attack is made, and the weapon still takes the damage even if the attack is unsuccessful (perhaps striking a brick wall, a parked car or some other heavy object.) If the weapon is reduced to zero Structure, the weapon is automatically destroyed *after the attack is resolved*, though the target is still damaged as normal if successfully struck. Note that the character may use this technique in conjunction with the previous one, allowing her to parry an attack made on a higher Initiative than her own and then go on the offensive with her improvised weapon, provided that it didn't sustain enough damage to destroy it.

Ingratiating Wanderer (••)

Prerequisites: Manipulation 3

Upon first rolling into town, making contact with the powers-that-be usually proves to be a notion as difficult to follow through with as it is wise. Some individuals, however, possess an almost uncanny sense for the best places to look for the people in charge and how best to approach them. Such people are prized by many of those who take to the road, as a little insight into the local power structure — not to mention the chance to earn a bit of favor — can go a long way, indeed. Certain of these individuals are like charming snake oil salesmen, while others are just approachable and assertive, but all have a knack for getting a foot in the door.

The character receives a +2 bonus to all rolls made to track down a local authority figure of her supernatural “type” (Kindred, Forsaken, Lost, etc.), provided that such exists. Further, this bonus applies to all mundane social rolls made to establish a positive first impression with said authority figure. The character may ruin the good graces she's established through her subsequent actions, but the initial reaction that she receives is likely to be a good one. Note that this Merit's effects may come into play again in the same city if the local



power structure undergoes a significant shake-up while the nomads are away, or if the characters look different, disguise themselves or have simply been forgotten by the time they return.

Outdoorsman (●●)

Prerequisites: Survival 3

The character is a natural at making her way in the wilderness, and she has a knack for surviving situations that would prove deadly to most. She can find food and shelter where others see only the possibility of hunger and exposure to the harshness of the elements, and she knows the signs and subtle tells of the outdoors as though they were her native tongue.

Characters with this Merit may ignore up to three points of penalties from environmental sources applied to any roll involving the Survival Skill. If a Survival roll is not penalized, then the character instead receives a +1 modifier to her dice pool.

Steady Driver (●)

Prerequisites: Drive ●●

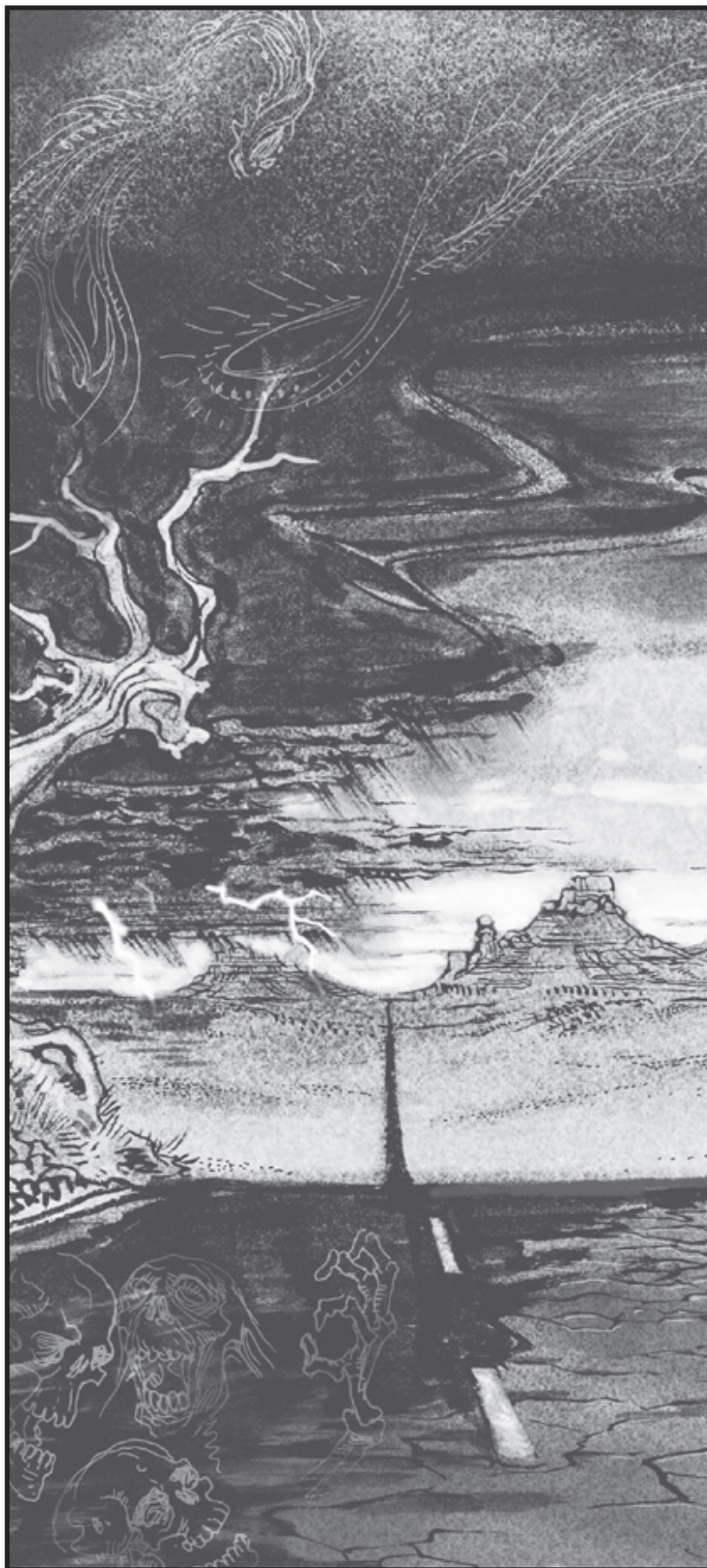
Effects: Sometimes, effective driving is about achieving calmness, about driving with your head more than your hands. A character who possesses this Merit does just that: when driving, the character *always* makes Resolve + Drive rolls instead of using Dexterity, whether or not it's a high-traffic scenario (see above, "High-traffic Driving").

Wheelman (●●)

Prerequisites: Dexterity 2, Drive 2

Some people were born to sit behind the wheel of a car (truck, van, etc.). Likewise, there are those for whom steering a motorcycle is as natural as moving their own limbs by will alone. Such individuals often take to the nomad lifestyle with the eagerness of a natural wanderer.

Characters with this Merit receive the benefit of the 9-again rule with respect to all rolls involving the Drive Skill.





They hid in the tall grass by the post-and-rail fence, watching the lightning bugs flit and whirl over the empty highway. Cicadas droned on all around them.

The two 12-year-olds hadn't said a peep in 10 minutes.

Why? Because for 10 minutes, they'd been hearing the distant warble of approaching calliope music. The steam organ piped and purged its discordant music from far down the vanishing point of the highway.

The carnival was coming to town.

Thankfully, not their town.

Bobby started to say something, but Becky shushed him.

Torchlight grew from a faint ember to a full wash, illuminating the road. A pair of heavy-hoofed horses pulled a rickety RV camper with a flat tire (thup-thup, thup-thup, thup-thup). The torches were stuck to the top of the camper's cab, thrust forward like fiery horns. Sitting between those torches and holding onto the horses' reins was a man in a skull mask. Or maybe he wasn't a man (and maybe, just maybe, that wasn't a mask).

Behind the RV rode two bicycles, each piloted by a clown with sharp white teeth that caught the moonlight all too easily. Tarot cards stuck out from the spokes (thwip, thwip, thwip). The clowns laughed as though unable to stop.

Behind them came the procession of old cars. Painted with dizzying colors that glowed as if under a black light. Heads without faces stared out the windows. Massive men with oiled chests pulled the cars along, grunting with each step (nnngh, nnnngh, nnnnngh). Bobby saw that they didn't have eyes. He wanted to cry out, but dared not make a peep.

Trailing at the rear came the steam organ itself, dragged on a wobbly trailer. Bits of yellow straw stuck out of the pipes, hissing with each musical burst of steam. Nobody played the calliope. Its music was all its own.

The carnival kept going, slowly eking its way down the empty highway.

Heading toward Bricksville.

The carnival faded into the night, though the two kids could still see the faint glow from the cars and the torchlight for many minutes after.

Bobby let out a breath.

"That was scary," he whispered, still keeping his head below the grass.

"Nothing to worry about," Becky said.

"But how do we know they won't steal us away like they do with other kids?"

Becky shook her head. "Don't be such a scaredy-cat. We're from Avalon. The Carnival only steals children from Bricksville."

To reassure him, Becky reached down and took Bobby's hand in her own. It might've been the happiest day of his adolescent life.

Chapter Three: Road Hazards

You never know what you'll find on the Road. Travelers who go looking for trouble do tend to find it, but the true horror of the Road comes when characters who are just looking to get from place to place find themselves chased, attacked, wounded or lost.

This chapter includes sample destinations, characters, creatures and situations that Storytellers might wish to include in Road-based stories. The story hooks presented here are less specific than the ones found in the following chapter. These hooks vary in format but are more versatile. Consider this chapter to be an atlas of sorts, an overhead view of the Road. The cracks in the concrete, as it were, can be found in Chapter Four.

On the Lam

Two hundred miles, and all I can remember is that weird eye tic of his, twitching at me from the backseat in the rearview mirror. He didn't say more than a dozen words, answered our questions with shrugs and grunts, and eventually we just stopped asking.

I started getting a weird feeling about him when he didn't get out of the car when we stopped for gas. I mean, who doesn't at least get out to stretch their legs after being stuck in the backseat of a Beetle for a couple of hours? But not this guy. No pit stop, no smoke break, just pulled his ball cap down over his eyes and hunkered down the whole time we were filling up. I could tell Nikki was feeling it, too.

"We gotta get rid of him," she hissed at me as I handed the clerk a couple of crumpled tens.

"Nikki, it's the middle of nowhere," I countered. I mean, it wasn't that I disagreed, but I wasn't looking forward to a confrontation with Mr. Twitchy. It was only another hour or so to Riverside, where we had told him we were heading. "We can dump him when we hit town, and it won't be a big deal. It's only a little bit further."

"I'm not getting back into the car with him." Nikki frowned, crossing her arms over her chest.

I sighed. "How am I supposed to —" My complaint was interrupted by the unmistakable sputter of the VW's engine. "What the —"

I hit the door running, just in time to see him pull back onto the highway without us.

Not every encounter between here and there will be about the characters and their goals, and not every individual they encounter will be a supernatural ally or enemy bent on aiding or destroying them. As with anywhere else, the people the characters interact with out on the open roads have their own agendas, goals and timelines, many of which will have nothing in particular to do with the characters whatsoever.

Take, for example, the scruffy hitchhiker. While he could be a hunting vampire, a lonely Promethean or an ally-seeking ghost, it's more likely that he's just a plain old human being. But that doesn't necessarily mean that an encounter with him will not affect the characters in any way. Maybe he's working with a group of highway bandits who carjack unsuspecting do-gooders after planting a gun-toting shill in the backseat with them. Maybe he's on the lam from the cops and will bring the long arm of the law down on those who are foolish enough to give him a ride.

**Stay on the road.
Keep clear of the
moors.**

**— An American
Werewolf in London**

Or maybe he's just in a hurry. Could be his sob story is true and his wife's in labor in the next state over. Or his dad's undergoing surgery, or his mom's on her death bed. The details can be customized as needed. What's important is that all he wants is to get a little further down the road a little faster than the characters are willing or able to provide. Add a handgun, access to the keys or the opportunity for hotwiring and the situation quickly spins out of the character's control.

On the Lam Sample Character: Michael the Lost

Quote: *Where'm I heading? That way. As far and as fast as I can go.*

Background: Michael's not at all sure how he ended up out in the middle of nowhere, but he's sure he doesn't want to be there any longer than he has to. He's looking for a ride, and he doesn't much care what it takes to get one. He'll offer just about anything, take on just about any role, as long as it earns him a few more miles away from . . . whatever it was he was running from.

Description: Michael's one of those good-looking guys who could just as easily be 16 or 36 — until you get to his eyes. Then he looks far, far older than the rest of his appearance would allow. His skin has been scratched up, like he fought his way through barbed wire or blackberry brambles, and his clothing is torn through in places. He's traveling light, no backpack or bag, but he's got something wrapped up in what looks like a torn strip of red silk.

Storytelling Hints: Michael could be a changeling, fresh from the Hedge and fearing the hoof-beats of his Keeper's Hunt on his trail, if the Storyteller wants to incorporate **Changeling: The Lost** into her game. Just slap a starting changeling template on the Traits below and run with it. Or, for a Storyteller with an interest in **Promethean: The Created**, he could be newly made, a Galateid who has escaped an obsessive creator and knows little about who (or what) he is. Add a Refinement and a few Transmutations, and you're ready to go. Likewise, he could be a werewolf just out of his First Change or a vampire's ghoul on the run from his (now-deceased) master's enemies. Or, he could be just what he seems — a frightened young man with a case of amnesia and possibly a checkered past, whose good looks likely led him into places he should never have gone. In that case, use the Traits below as offered and add in background worthy of him being pursued by supernatural creatures, the Mafia or the police.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3

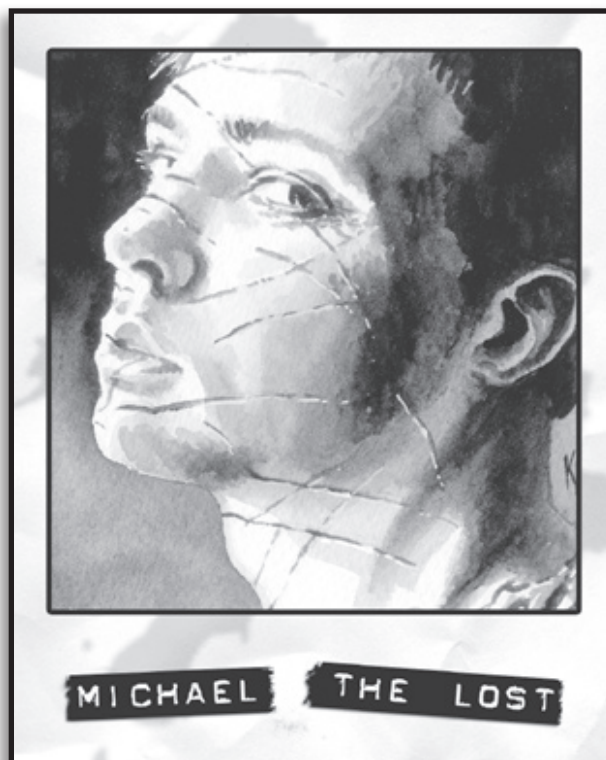
Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 3, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Investigation 2, Occult 2 (As appropriate for specific background)

Physical Skills: Athletics 1, Brawl 2, Drive 1, Larceny (Hotwiring) 1, Stealth 2, Survival 2, Weaponry (Improvised Weapons) 2

Social Skills: Empathy 2, Persuasion 3, Streetwise 1, Subterfuge 2



Merits: Danger Sense, Direction Sense, Fighting Style: Improvised Weaponry 3 (p. 57), Striking Looks 4

Willpower: 5

Morality: 4 (Adjust type as appropriate)

Virtue: Hope

Vice: Greed

Initiative: 4

Defense: 2

Speed: 9

Health: 7

Vanishing Hitchhikers

He's been on the road all night, and he can feel it, in his neck, his wrists and most especially his eyes. He's gotten so used to the long black ahead that he's almost given up seeing. He doesn't notice the figure at the road side until his second or third glance. For a second or two after that, he doesn't believe it. What's she doing out here, all alone? He slows the car. Maybe he sees her thumb, or just the weary-hopeful look in her eyes. He opens the door, and from there things get terribly strange. . . .

Oh, her company's good enough, even if she's a little quiet and keeps very much to the passenger seat. They reach her destination all too soon, but she leaves something behind. . . a sweater, a suitcase, a promise. Something the driver can't let go. He tries to find her, but he finds only the truth. She's long gone, and he's not the first to take her home.

In the World of Darkness, most of the Road's dark secrets stay undiscovered, and those that are found out stay untold. Vanishing hitchhikers are the exception. Everyone knows someone who's carried one. The stories go back fur-



ther, too, further than highways and further than dirt roads, as far back as you care to look. From ghosts to angels to the Big Bad Wolf, supernatural passengers have been always been helpful, horrifying or heartbreaking.

For the driver, the Vanishing Hitchhiker is a brush with the unexplained, a glimpse of a reality he hadn't considered before. Here are a few possibilities about the truth behind those glimpses:

Vampire

Quote: *Must be lonely out here. Lucky you found me.*

Cassie's sire taught her the hitchhiker trick, and it's an old one. Draw the victim in with your thumb, wrap him around your finger, get him between your teeth. Her sire was a wild woman, though, and what happened next was inevitably messy. Cassie hates messes and entanglements. If she didn't, she wouldn't be on the road (and, more to the point, she might still be alive). So she's got her own way of making sure dinner doesn't come back to haunt her: unique, straightforward and murder-free.

From the moment she catches the victim's eye, Cassie keeps him entranced with her powers. A few minutes are all she needs to have him convinced he can't live without her. She makes him give it up, then, somewhere in the middle of the bite, she flips hot to cold, projecting her own nightmares of abandonment right into the poor sap's skull. He's struck by the impossible, shattering feeling that

the woman who means everything has just disappeared . . . even as she continues to suck at his throat.

Werewolf

Quote: *Oh, dear, I must have lost track of the time.*

The driver picks up an old woman wandering dazed near the side of the road, with nothing but a torn dress and an oversized purse. The old lady is grateful but vague about what she was doing out in the first place, and the driver's concern turns to suspicion. He sees that her arms are hairy, like a man's. What looked like mud on her dress looks more like dried blood, now that he can see it better. He speeds her to her destination, then pulls over at a nearby police station. An officer listens to his story, but isn't impressed until the motorist hands over the purse. Inside is a butcher's knife, dripping with blood.

The old lady is Granny Singer, a werewolf whose age and senility haven't dulled her lust for the hunt. The rest of her pack have died out, and these nights she's more wolf than woman, running with the moon and slaying beasts until she can run no more. Exhausted and temporarily human, she looks for her next ride.

Mage

Quote: *If you want to help me, find my father.*

He calls himself Highwayman, and he considers himself a modern-day gentleman thief. He's a thief, at any rate. Highwayman uses his impressive command of the magical arts to induce

motorists to stop and give him a lift. He makes cryptic comments about his father and how “cold” he is (and uses simple spells to lower the temperature of the car while he rides), and then vanishes, again using magic. He leaves behind a knapsack with some decayed and broken trinkets and a letter to his “father.” The address on the letter is just a little outside of the next major city, and if Highwayman has chosen his mark correctly, the mark goes to the address and knocks on the door.

The house, though, is always empty (the inhabitants are usually just on vacation, though Highwayman has been known to incapacitate them to make the con work). While the motorist is fulfilling his role in the “vanishing hitchhiker” story, Highwayman steals the poor sap’s car and flees, strips it of anything of value and sells it to a chop shop or abandons it.

Promethean

Quote: *See me again? I’d like that. You wouldn’t.*

Poor, lonely Diana. She was stitched and wired to be the woman of everyone’s dreams, but, just as her Progenitor before her, Diana’s flawed. Look too close, and her skin isn’t soft and warm but hard, cold marble. Think about her too long, and the stirrings of love become the aches of resentment.

Diana knows that. Too many times, she’s let herself get close to people she met on the road, even thought about stopping for a while. Still, she can’t handle being alone for long. So she hitches, she makes friends, then she leaves them behind, the trip nothing more than a footnote in their memories and a ramble in her diary. She stays the woman of their dreams.

Changeling

Quote: *Sorry. I made a mistake. You can let me out.*

She doesn’t remember her name, where she is from or anything about her human life. She *does* remember the land beyond the Thorns, and what her Mistress made her do, every day, for hours. She won’t speak of that. She isn’t going back.

She remembers the car, though. She was in a car when her Mistress took her and pulled her screaming into the Thorns. The car was red . . . maybe tan. It was small . . . but it could have been one of those not-quite-SUV-sized cars. Maybe a Jeep. She gets into a lot of cars now, and when she realizes that they aren’t *her* car, she gets out. Most times the drivers don’t notice.

If she ever finds the car, maybe she will remember herself, and maybe get away from this highway. For now, she lives at truck stops. Some people call her a “lot lizard,” and she doesn’t know what that means, but she does know that what the truckers want her to do is better than what Mistress made her do.

On the Lam Story Hooks

- When the characters pick up a woman and child hitching between towns, the characters don’t expect the mother to disappear without a trace from out of the back-

Fellow Travelers

Ancient versions of the Vanishing Hitchhiker blur with tales of other phantom travelers.

In the Book of Tobit, a pious young man named Tobiah is aided by the angel Raphael. An apocalyptic Swedish text from the early 17th century tells the story of a vicar who aids a young girl on the way home from a fair. When they stop for dinner, the girl’s beer turns to blood . . . a sign she easily reads. She warns the clergyman of coming war, and vanishes before his eyes.

Vanishing hitchhikers appear in other **World of Darkness** products. **World of Darkness: Chicago** has a sidebar on Resurrection Mary, a local spook well known to residents of the Windy City. **World of Darkness: Urban Legends** includes a complete story of wistful ghosts and human obsession.

seat — while the car is doing 70 miles an hour. The boy wakes and is inconsolable, and begins screaming “You’re not my parents!” What do the characters do with their new “ward,” and how do they explain to the authorities how they’ve come into custody of the child and what happened to his mysteriously vanishing parent?

- Characters discover a stowaway in their trunk — a girl in her early teens, dressed in skimpy clothing and garish makeup. The girl claims to have been escaping a gang of motorcyclists who’d kidnapped her with nefarious intentions. When the characters try to connect her with her parents or the authorities, however, the girl balks at giving any information, instead wanting to stay with her newfound “friends.”

- He must be at least 90, and his suit and luggage definitely harken back to another era. They pick him up miles from the nearest town, where he is looking for the train station. After a few minutes of conversation, and a few miles of travel, however, it becomes clear that not all of his questions were directed at them, and not all of the questions he answers are ones they’d asked. They can’t see or hear “Mabel,” but apparently he can. Who is this mysterious Mabel, and what exactly is that smell coming from his suitcase?

Lone Patrolman

“What the hell?”

From out of nowhere, flashing lights pulled up behind the car, and the sound of sirens filled the air. They were miles from the nearest town, and it was just her luck to speed past the one cop in the entire county.

Lynne pulled over to the shoulder and started digging for her paperwork in the cluttered glove compartment. The

officer's boot steps heralded his arrival as his shadow filled her open car window. "I'm sure I've got the registration right here, somewhere . . ."

"I'm going to need you to step out of the car, ma'am." The officer's cold tone suggested there was more involved here than a speeding ticket.

In the empty places between cities, often little in the way of law enforcement exists. Long stretches of back road or minor highway that fall between town lines (or are within city limits of small towns where the borders stretch far beyond the actual city) are the jurisdiction of officers who rarely have the time, budget or manpower to adequately police these roads. This often means long stretches go unmonitored by any official authorities for hours, days or even weeks. It also means that, in areas that are monitored, there is little in the way of checks and balances of authority.

Unfortunately, at least for travelers, this scarcity can result in a number of peculiar mindsets in the law enforcement officers who do monitor an area. For some, the absence of moderation brought about by overlap of duties and the necessity of personal responsibility brought about by being the sole bastion of authority in their particular jurisdiction cause officers to take on a tyrannical personality. Seeing themselves as judge, jury and sometimes executioner, these officers go about their duties alone or in pairs, inflicting swift and merciless justice on any whom the officers perceive have violated the laws of their land. Unfortunately for travelers, these laws include as many unwritten rules as legally ordained ones. Violating the speed limit is sure cause for censure, but so is "giving me the eyeball," or "dressing like some kinda weirdo." These officers may well believe they're doing their utmost to "Protect and Serve" their community by routing out "bad eggs" before they can cause trouble to the good folk of their town, county or state. Unfortunately for characters caught between these backwater Barney's sense of propriety and the next state line, their definition of troublemaker includes anyone who isn't from around here or looks like they might be up to something shady.

For other officers, the absence of outside authority brings out not a sense of protection but of predation. These highway hyenas use their badges and uniforms as protective cover to play out their own personal perversions. Some may pull over solitary travelers and play the heavy-handed authority figure, dealing out the hundreds of dollars worth of fines their victim has incurred for real or fraudulent moving violations, threatening to have her vehicle impounded and then giving the victim the opportunity to "earn" her way out of them. If pure financial threat doesn't bring about the appropriate "bribe" reaction in their victim, these road jackals have been known to force illegal pat-downs and strip searches, which often cross the border into outright rape. In other cases, the unscrupulous officers will roughhouse or outright assault their victims, taking advantage of the "our word against theirs" situation to play out their own sadistic tendencies to the fullest.

Even more dangerous are "cuckoo cops" who take

advantage of the recent trend toward unmarked vehicles. These fiends haunt stretches of roadway between towns and, using adapter kits available through many online retailers, pull over their victims using faux police lights and sirens. Wearing easily obtained uniforms and flashing official-looking badges, these fake officers find travelers, who are trained by society to obey the orders of the police, make an easy mark for robbery, rape or murder.

Lone Patrolman Sample Character: Cuckoo Cop

Quote: *I'm afraid you'll have to come with me, ma'am.*

Background: Using the plumage of a police officer, this psychopath preys upon unsuspecting victims who often do not realize they're not dealing with a legitimate authority figure until it's far too late. Their vehicles are left, abandoned by the roadside, and their bodies, if they are ever discovered, are found miles away.

Description: Nondescript, neatly tailored uniform covered with official-looking patches and insignia. Often wears dark glasses to prevent those whom he only robs or humiliates from reporting his appearance to the legitimate authorities. Well-maintained, newer model vehicle outfitted with siren and lights that can be activated when desired but are not noticeable when not being used.

Storytelling Hints: Not all Cuckoo Cops use this gambit to kill their victims, although many are goaded on to this extreme by the ease with which they carry out lesser crimes. The single unifying feature of those who use this façade, however, seems to be a sense of superiority over their victims and a disdain for those whom the Cuckoo Cops victimize.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 3

Physical Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics (Police Procedures) 1, Investigation 1, Politics 1, Science 1

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 2, Drive 3, Firearms (Pistol) 2, Weaponry 2

Social Skills: Empathy (Bullying) 2, Intimidation (Faking Authority) 3, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 3

Merits: Fast Reflexes 2, Fleet of Foot 2

Willpower: 6

Morality: 2

Virtue: Justice

Vice: Pride

Initiative: 8 (with Fast Reflexes)

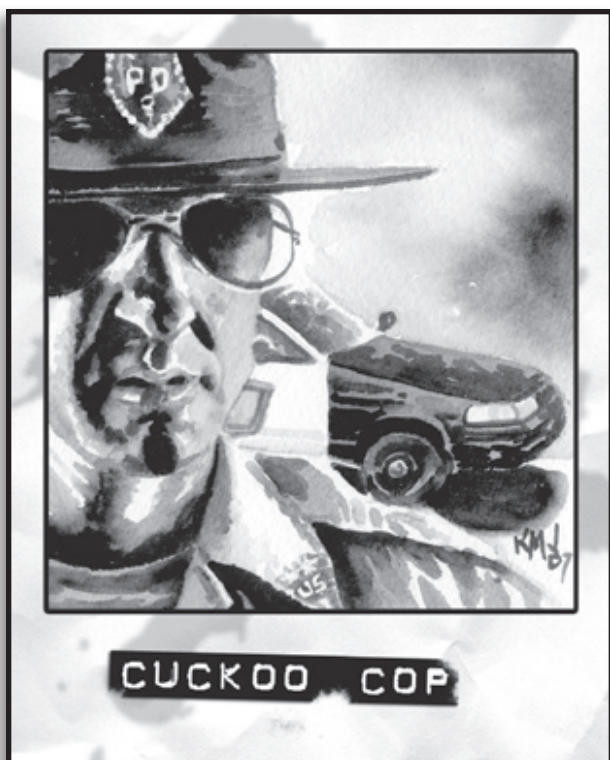
Defense: 3

Speed: 13 (with Fleet of Foot)

Health: 7

Lone Patrolman Story Hooks

- Despite doing the speed limit, using their signals and coming to a full stop at the appropriate intersections, the characters find themselves the focus of flashing lights and



wailing sirens. There's something . . . off . . . about the cop car, however. It's got no visible license plates, and the siren and lights seem a little wrong. Do the characters pull over and potentially put themselves at the mercy of an imposter officer, or do they make a run for it and maybe end up with an all-state APB?

- What's a roadblock doing out in the middle of nowhere? One police cruiser and a pair of sawhorse signs don't pose much of a threat, but stopping means potentially having their identification ran through state data-banks (or having to explain their lack of ID, should that be the case).

- An emergency broadcast breaks through the character's favorite road-trip music, alerting all citizens to be on the lookout for a dangerous group of gunmen who recently held up a gas station and gunned down the lone clerk. To the characters' chagrin, the description exactly matches their vehicle. Do they make a break for it, or turn themselves in and try to clear up the problem before they're tracked down?

The Plight of the Good Samaritan

The passenger-side window felt cool against her forehead as she watched mile after dreary, rain-soaked mile pass by. They'd turned the radio off an hour ago, when static ate up

all of the radio stations, and now there was no sound but the hum of the tires on the pavement, the rhythmic squeak-and-thump of the windshield wipers and the occasional low growl of thunder. She'd long since grown tired of staring out into the pool of speeding highway the headlamps revealed, and let her eyes (and her mind) drift out the side window, where the occasional lightning flash in the distance revealed a snapshot of desert landscape before fading back to full night.

Another fork of white pierced the sky, illuminating the deep ditch half-filled with rainwater that ran between the road and the miles of empty wilderness beyond. Something metallic and human-made gleamed wetly, half-in and half-out of the raging ravine. The car was hood-deep in water, but the tail lights were still on.

"Josh, we have to stop!"

In many countries, Good Samaritan laws require those who see others in distress to aid them, unless doing so would put the Samaritan in harm's way. In the United States and Canada, where lawsuits are epidemic, Good Samaritan laws protect those who do come to the aid of others against being sued for their aid. Whether by literal legislation or unwritten law of the land, however, there is an expectation that travelers will stop to help one another, especially in isolated situations where the normal avenues of aid — police, firefighters, ambulances and the like — are not realistically available.

Although the original parable of the Good Samaritan teaches that it is an admirable thing to stop and aid your fellow traveler, in the World of Darkness such stories often end quite differently.

Breakdowns

Muggers, carjackers and highway bandits often use an apparent vehicle breakdown in the middle of nowhere as bait for unsuspecting Samaritans. When someone stops to help fix a flat, offer a ride to the nearest gas station or just take a peek under the hood, the supposedly stranded individual shows his or her true colors, absconding with the well-intentioned target's wallet, valuables and vehicle. An apparently helpless (and sometimes under-dressed) bait-driver often sweetens the pot, luring in those who might otherwise keep driving. Such bait also has the added impact of attracting not only those who honestly wish to help but also those who may, themselves have nefarious purposes. More than one highway vigilante has played helpless victim until ill-intentioned ne'er-do-wells descend upon him, whereupon he turns the criminals' trick back on them. Characters may well be caught in any stage of this technique if they stop to aid someone who is apparently in need. They may be beset by criminals, be treated as if they were marauding thugs out to take advantage of the stranded driver or may become the victims of mistaken identity by some road-side do-gooder who is using this technique to mete out justice in his own way.



Accidents

While it might be easy to assuage one's guilt by simply calling 911 to report someone has broken down, run out of gas or had a flat tire, rather than stopping, if there has been an accident with potential bodily injury, the situation becomes stickier. Those of low moral stature (or pressing need) are not, however, above using this knowledge to their own advantage.

Sometimes it may be simply a matter of desperation. If someone believes she is fleeing for her life (or rushing to save the life of another), she may see an accident that makes her vehicle undriveable as a legitimate excuse to steal one that is working to continue onward. Similarly, those who feel their need for weapons, money (or things that can be sold to obtain either) is more pressing than those who currently possess them may take advantage of the chaos surrounding an accident to divest the former owners of their belongings. This could be a crime against either a Morality 6 or 7, depending on the value of the stolen items, or even against Morality 4, if the thief intentionally ignores an obviously gravely injured person's needs in order to steal instead. In most cases, however, these crimes are acts of desperation, rather than pre-meditated or planned ones.

In other cases, the entire accident may be a ruse for criminal perpetrators. Carjackers and other criminals sometimes stage accidents, using a single unthreatening dupe, often with apparent injuries, to lure unsuspecting drivers into stopping to offer aid. Then, when their targets have left

the safety of their vehicles, the rest of the criminals come out from hiding and descend upon the Good Samaritans, robbing them of their wallets, valuables, vehicles and sometimes their lives.

The Real Deal

Sometimes, however, the situation a Good Samaritan stumbles across is not orchestrated by ill-intentioned others but is actually a flat tire, breakdown or accident. That doesn't mean, however, that the encounter is uncomplicated or exactly what meets the eye. Perhaps the breakdown is a group of supernatural creatures, or humans fleeing from the same. Perhaps the delivery truck with the flat tire is transporting a shipment of museum artifacts — and a seemingly incongruous sepulcher-shaped crate. *Or perhaps the accident involved perfectly normal humans, including one who happens to have the "knack" for sensing when something "weird" is going on around her* (see the Unseen Sense Merit on p. 109 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). Strange coincidences happen every day, and in the World of Darkness, strange is just a part of life.

Tables Turned

Characters aren't the only (intentional or unintentional) Good Samaritans on the road. Sometimes it might be the characters themselves who get a flat tire, run out of gas, suffer engine trouble or even lay a trap for an unsuspect-

Intentional Accidents

Other criminals don't trust to their victims' good nature; such criminals involve the victims directly in the accident. Three of the most commonly used ruses are the Swoop and Squat, the Fast Pass and the T-Bone. All three are best perpetrated in locations where there are no witnesses and the possibility of aid arriving is low, such as the long stretches between towns or in rural areas or on rarely used back roads.

Swoop and Squat — In the Swoop and Squat, two vehicles work together to set up an unavoidable accident. One pulls in front of the target and the other drives alongside, blocking the victim in. The front car slows quickly to force the target to come to a halt, or steps abruptly on its brakes, more than likely causing the victim to rear-end him. The car that pulled up alongside blocks the target in, preventing him from swerving to the side to avoid the collision. This technique is especially useful in areas with narrow shoulders due to drop-offs or cliff walls.

Fast Pass — Speed is of essence in the Fast Pass. A car comes up behind its target at a breakneck pace, usually on a two-lane road. After spending a few minutes riding on the victim's bumper, the assaulting vehicle (normally a solidly built older-model) pulls out as if to pass but pulls back into the target's lane before completing the maneuver, clipping the rear quarter-panel with enough side-momentum to send the target's car into a spin. This technique is popular in flat areas with broad shoulders, where the possibility of vehicles spinning to a stop without flipping is high.

T-Bone — This simple maneuver requires little in the way of driving finesse and can be perpetrated by even slow vehicles or inept drivers. The attacker simply waits at a crossroad or intersection for a vehicle to come by and then accelerates quickly to ram into the target. Often those who use this method will attempt to bully bribes out of their victims by claiming they had been "waved on" or encouraged to go by their target, but as in most cases, the accident is most often an excuse to stop the victims and get them vulnerable (out of their vehicle) so that the assailant can then use firearms, force or overwhelming numbers to rob the victims of their money, vehicle or worse.

ing traveler. Those who stop to help may be the authorities (see Lone Patrolman, p. 65 for an example of twists on the typical police officer) or private citizens. Their interests may be well-intentioned, or predatory. And, in the World of Darkness, there's a chance they'll just be . . . different.

Good Samaritan Sample Character:

Jacob Mosely

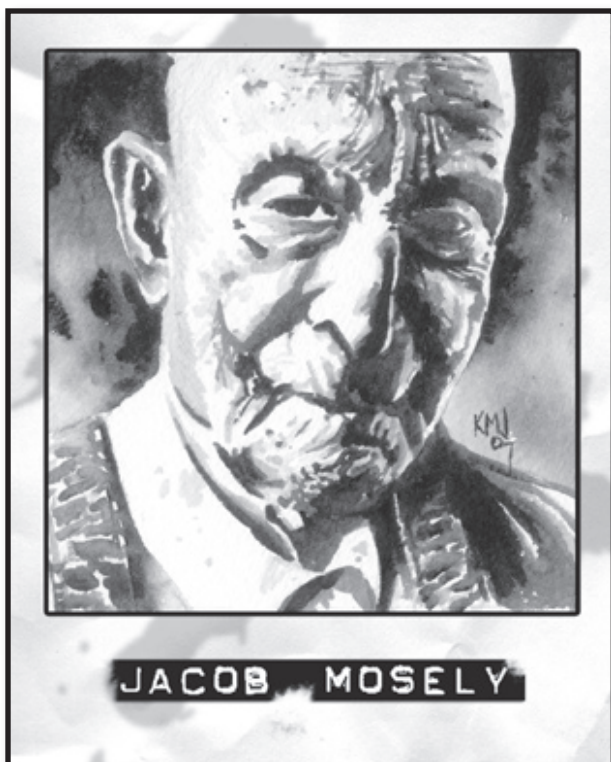
Quote: *Yeee-upp. Looks like it's the carburetor . . . or whatever passes for it on these newfangled engines. Durned ferr'en parts. Showing up everywhere.*

Background: Jacob Mosely's been working on cars for as long as there have been cars, and there's nothing mechanical that he doesn't know how to fix. He's got a decided malevolence against "newfangled" equipment in general, however and against "ferr'en" automobiles in particular. This might have something to do with the fact that Mr. Mosely himself passed away at the height of the "Yellow Menace" in 1943. Since that time, the cranky ghost has haunted the highways and byways around what used to be his family farm, aiding travelers thereabouts with his provincial (and yet often correct) advice on their transportational woes. The only exception is when those who break down are driving foreign model cars or are of any sort of obvious Asian heritage (Japanese, Chinese, East Indian, Mongol, Tibetan or Pacific Islander — Mosely is long on prejudice and World War II propaganda, and short on real experience with anyone of non-European descent). In those cases, the otherwise peaceful ghostly gent makes his displeasure known.

Jacob Mosely spent his whole life on and around the land that was once his family farm. He was born in the family farmhouse and died less than a mile from the same spot, run off the road by a U.S. Army truck transporting several families of Japanese heritage who had recently been released from a relocation camp. Although the acreage has long since been converted to other uses, Jacob returned there after his death, in part to aid those who he feels "belong" there, and in part to seek opportunity to exact his revenge on those who do not.

Description: Jacob Mosely was 74 years old when he died, in the winter of '43. Hard work and hard times gave him more than his fair share of wrinkles, and in many ways, he resembled a man even older than his advanced years. He dresses, as he always has, in a cotton workshirt, denim bib overalls and work boots. His short white hair is neatly slicked back away from his face and thin enough to see his scalp through. His hands, although gnarled with age and arthritis, are steady, and his voice is gravelly but firm.

As a ghost, Mosely has the ability to manifest in an almost entirely human physical form when he chooses (see p. 210 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). In other circumstances (see below) he remains incorporeal and uses the Telekinesis and Terrify Numina to interact with the human world.



Storytelling Hints: For many years after his death, Jacob Mosely's ghost was predominantly benevolent. Most vehicles that broke down near his farm were American-made at that point, and even after statements were issued that relocation camps were undesirable institutions, to be removed from the American scene as soon as possible, his rural area was far from fully integrated racially. Thus, his interaction with "ferr'en" vehicles and "ferr'eners" was limited, and he was perceived predominantly as a quaint piece of local supernatural color. As the years passed, however, times changed, but Jacob Mosely's views didn't adapt with them. Now, many of the vehicles that break down in his territory are foreign made, and ethnically diverse travelers are much more common. For the ghost's "stuck in 1943" mentality, this is a constant and ever-growing source of irritation, and he rarely is given circumstances to manifest in a positive fashion these days.

On those occasions when the vehicle that breaks down in his area is predominantly American-made, Mosely uses the combination of Manifestation and the Ghost Speech Numen (see p. 211 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**) to interact peaceably. He appears, literally from thin air, and offers advice and diagnosis and suggests a mechanic if it becomes obvious the travelers are ill equipped to deal with the problem themselves. He usually says that he'd fix the problem himself, but his hands aren't what they used to be. Once the problem has been diagnosed, but before outside help arrives, Mosely simply fades away.

His reaction is quite different, however, when the vehicle is perceived as foreign. (Determination left to Storyteller's discretion; however, the ghost is likely to judge on a simple basis: is the maker "ferr'en" sounding? American Motors, Ford and GM sound "domestic," while Nissan, Honda and Toyota do not.) Mosely rarely deigns

to manifest in such situations, instead using the Telekinesis Numen (see p. 212 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**) to throw a literal or figurative monkey wrench into whatever repair work may be happening on the vehicle.

When the vehicle is American, but at least part of the group who has broken down bears obvious Asian (or Indian or Arabic or any non-African non-Western European) racial heritage, Mosely's reaction varies. If possible, he appears to the other group members and try to warn or poison them against their companion(s). If not, he does not manifest at all, instead reacting as when the vehicle is foreign-made (above) and using the Terrify Numen on any characters who he believes to be "ferr'eners."

Attributes: Power 2, Finesse 5, Resistance 3

Willpower: 5

Morality: 5

Virtue: Temperance

Vice: Wrath

Initiative: 8

Defense: 5

Speed: 17

Corpus: 8

Numina: Ghost Speech (dice pool 7), Telekinesis (dice pool 7), Terrify (dice pool 7)

anchors: The stretch of road surrounding what used to be his farm. A battered tool box full of rusting wrenches located in a ramshackle outbuilding that has somehow managed to avoid being destroyed in the modernization of the former farm.

Good Samaritan Story Hooks

- Lone drivers on a particular stretch of highway are turning up dead in their vehicles. Most show no signs of foul play, save for a pair of puncture wounds somewhere on their body. The media is labeling the perpetrator the "the Drive-by Dracula," but is the real monster a vampire, or someone who is trying to throw investigators off his trail?

- An entire gang of motorcycle thugs that was well-known for terrorizing a major interstate are found sprawled dead around their ruined bikes. Miles away, a thug with a line of rape-warrants as long as his arm shows up with a broken neck next to his still-running pick-up. A blonde wig and woman's clothing are found discarded nearby. A town away, an entire family is killed by a would-be thief when their station wagon gets a flat tire after driving over an assortment of nails and glass in the road. Their killer, however, is found near the car, shot in the back of the head with his own gun. Unidentified tire tracks at all three crime scenes match up. Someone is playing roadside vigilante — but who and why?

- The characters come across a horrific accident scene. A series of arcing rubber tire tracks mark where at least one vehicle tried unsuccessfully to brake and avoid impact, glass and metal debris litter the roadway and just off the road three cars still burn in a mangled pyre of automotive destruction. All three, however, are empty. What happened to the survivors or, for that matter, the victims?

Watching the World Go By

"The map says it should be right here." Grace poked the stiff paper as if the action would somehow make the town manifest around them.

Lee craned his neck, first in one direction and then the other, although the effort was hardly necessary. There hadn't been a turn-off for miles, and the land around them was flat and featureless clear out to the hills on the far horizon. Other than the stream of yellow lines in the center of the road and telephone poles on one side as they passed, the only motion was waves of heat rolling up from the hard-baked ground around them.

"Well, it's not here. You must have read it wrong." His words were clipped shorter than he'd intended. They'd been driving since before dawn, and his patience was running as low as their fuel gauge.

They drove a few more miles in uncomfortable silence broken only by Grace folding and refolding the map, and then the road dipped into a canyon, invisible from a distance.

Squatting in the hollow off to the side of the road was an ancient single pump gas station and a square wooden building. As they pulled up to the pump, Lee could barely make out what had once been a sign but was now little more than mottled wood and peeling paint.

WELCOME TO PLEASANT SPRINGS. ENJOY YOUR STAY.

Not all of the strange people characters will meet up with on the road are travelers themselves. Entire communities exist in areas most people just pass on through, rarely slowing down long enough to recognize the residents exist. Many old towns were originally formed around crossroads between major trade routes, or at convenient stopping points along the way from one established place to another. Even today, in rural areas, exits and byways often house small communities of their own, focusing on providing services to travelers and local residents.

Even on the most remote roadways, one can usually find some sort of refueling station every hour and a half to two hours' driving time. In areas where services are scarce, these locations are often heralded through road signs that warn 48 MILES TO NEXT FUEL or NEXT REST AREA 56 MILES. And, even in these remote locations, small truck stops, convenience stores and gas stations all require employees to live within commuting distance, if not directly on site.

In very rural or remote areas, away from major transportation routes and urban hubs, many of the refueling stops are multi-service. Convenience store and gas station combinations are common, as are truck stops with gas and simple diner food. Sometimes the pairings are less intuitive, however. Gas station/galleries are found surprisingly often, most frequently manned by the artist who showcases his own work there. The remote location and low traffic

flow offer almost unlimited opportunity to work on his "true calling," while the low cost of living (and high rates travelers expect to pay for necessities in remote locations) allows him to eke out a living "until he's discovered." The biggest problem travelers may have at such stops is getting the attention of the owner long enough to get their vehicles refueled.

Other unlikely combinations pair gas stations with middle-of-nowhere liquor stores or bars (popular with remote farming or timber communities that may not have access to any other entertainment) and gift shops, often times for long-defunct tourist attractions.

All in all, while such locations may not have much in the way of selection, they do offer characters the opportunity to refuel themselves and their vehicles between major destinations. And, perhaps more importantly, for the creative Storyteller, some of the individuals who inhabit such out-of-the-way places are certain to lend a touch of the strange (and sometimes an element of danger) to the lives of the travelers who encounter these individuals.

Watching the World Go By

Sample Character: Lucille Datlow

Quote: *You may wanna check your fluid levels before ya head out. It's gonna be a scorcher, and Centerville's a good three hours down the road.*

Background: Lucille's been the only resident of the never-quite-thriving-but-now-mostly dead community of Pleasant Springs for years now. Her husband, known affectionately as That Bastard, died long ago, leaving Lucille as both owner and operator of the single pump station and tiny convenience store/diner. It's not much, but she owns it outright and makes enough from the occasional lost tourist and long-haul trucker to keep the lights on and the shelves somewhat stocked (mostly with canned goods and other imperishables that have, like everything else in Pleasant Springs, been covered with a fine layer of dust). When requested, she can rustle up simple meals for travelers, but few stick around long enough to ask.

Description: Lucille's no beauty, but her looks are as timeless as the dust flats surrounding Pleasant Springs. Her hair and skin might once have had color, but now they are, like her clothing and her business, bereft of distinguishing details. Everything in the area takes on a dry, gritty element to it, and Lucille is no exception.

In another place, Lucille might have been described as in her late 40s, slim, even petite. But in Pleasant Springs, the only adjective that springs to mind (for Lucille or anything else) is dusty.

Storytelling Hints: Lucille always takes good care of those who come through her little town/shop, but she's also content to see them go on their way. She sees herself as a fixture of the area, similar to an oasis or supply cache that lets folks pass safely through an area of otherwise-hostile terrain. She doesn't have a phone or much else in the way of modern facilities. Thus, she doesn't take checks or credit



cards, but is more than willing to let good-natured individuals work off a few gallons worth of gas to get them out of Pleasant Springs and back out to civilization.

Abilities:

Auto Repair (dice pool 6): Lucille isn't a mechanic by trade, but she's picked up enough tricks over her lifetime to be competent under the hood.

Shotgun (dice pool 5): Can't be too careful, living alone. Lucille keeps a double-barreled shotgun under the counter.

Watching the World Go By: Rest Stop

Three reasons you're going to end up here eventually: Gas. Food. Lodging.

The food court and retail center is a circular, brick and concrete building painted what used to be a cheery yellow. Except for the color, it's identical to most of the others in this state. The architect called them "big tops." When the place was new, the state flag flying from its peak, it sure did look welcoming.

Welcome to what, though? The clustering of retail space in a circle just within the wall is efficient, sure; it leaves a lot of room for lines to form and for travelers to sit down at tables. Comes at a price, though. The only natural light comes through the glass double doors, and under the cavernous big top, it doesn't go very far. Once you're inside, it might be any time of day at all, any weather. The staff hand over trinkets and scoop slop onto buns. If they're thinking of anything, it's of release. Under the cheap fluorescent lights, their skin looks strained and waxy. They look like the living dead.

There's excitement, occasionally. The same year the main building was erected, two men from nearby cities were found in the woods behind the rest stop, their necks opened with a straight razor. Police identified the killer quickly: 28-year-old Darren Scott Cook, a nightshift dishwasher in one of the restaurants. Coworkers saw Darren leaving the restaurant with the men, and police found a bloody razor in his locker. Darren hauled out of town fast as he could.

He might have gotten away, too, if he'd killed the men for money or fun. But Darren killed those men for blood. He was a vampire, and he got stupid. He figured his Kindred would protect him. They might have, even, if there had been locals. Instead, he fled north, to a city where he didn't have anything to offer. He found the trail signs his sire taught him, and within a few nights, he managed to find other vampires. They represented the Invictus, a society devoted to keeping the existence of vampires a secret.

Darren was fed, and given a shower and a place to crash. Next night, he was stuffed in a trunk and hauled back home.

As far as the cops are concerned, Darren Scott Cook is still a wanted man, but 30 years on, they don't think they'll ever find him. They're probably right; Darren's in a cement slab under the main building's boiler room. It's even marked. "DSC4EVR." He's doing what those vampires up north thought their kind should do best — hide in plain sight.

Characters: A full staff of food service and gift shop employees, from their teens through middle age. Somebody trying to shoplift a state flag keychain. Security guards.

Activity: People come and go at all hours, and one whining tourist family doesn't look much different from another. There's usually at least one cop car in the parking lot, and an officer or two wandering around the area, as well as private security staff. At night, the parking lots fill with the idling cars of travelers who don't want to spring for a hotel.

Trouble: Darren's presence sets vampires on edge. Really sensitive ones might be pushed to frenzy. Any looking to take up residence might decide to dig him up and put him out of his misery.

Watching the World Go By: Gas Station in a Strange Town

Rest stops and truck stops are all well and good, but sometimes you need fuel with a little more urgency. So you pull off the highway, you spend 20 minutes cruising around some practically abandoned town while your gas gauge looks at you slit-eyed and sullen. You find the nightspot, the burger joint, the elementary school, everything but the damn gas station.

The gas station, mashed in the armpit of a county building and a grocery store, is brand new. Steel, brick and a fair bit of bulletproof glass form three vehicle bays, a convenience store and two aisles of pumps. The prices are crazy-high, which means this probably is the only gas station in town.

Getting gas is pretty easy. Walk to the cashier's window, pick a pump, pay too much. Using any of the station's other amenities is hard, because the clerk on duty is inevitably Ray, who's sure the characters are going to rob him. Or kidnap him, or something. He'll check every purchase they make twice and talk loud about his Ranger training. After dark, he won't even let more than one person into the store at a time. He remembers back when he got to sit in a fully enclosed booth, and he wishes for those secure days. He could even light up in there, 'cause the security camera didn't catch him right.

Sometimes Sunita's around to mollify him, but even then, she's often more interested in stocking shelves while she listens to Ray fail to overcome his fear of human beings.

Characters: Ray, the paranoid 20-something cashier. Sunita, his teenage minder. Various locals on their way to and from work, particularly those who work at the county building next door.

Activity: The town's probably too small to have a rush hour, but a lot of cars stop by in the morning nonetheless. As locals, they know how to navigate the station's quirky driveway blindfolded, and they're likely to pound the horn on out-of-towners who can't. Late at night, the station's deserted, except for Ray and his listless, paranoid stare.


Trouble: Ray freaks and pulls a pistol on the characters (maybe they even *were* trying to rob him). A character takes a wrong turn on the way to the restroom and discovers a bunch of long crates with bodies in them. Very well-preserved bodies.

Motel Hell

Until the 1940s in America, motels as they are known today were unheard of. Travelers, whether for business or recreation, had only a few choices of lodging. Upscale inns and hotels were available in larger towns, but were cost prohibitive for most. In some places, families let out rooms for travelers, advertising with signs to draw in passers by. Those who couldn't afford one or the other (or who were traveling to or through areas where such amenities weren't available) camped out. At first, tourists camps were undeveloped areas, but eventually property owners recognized the profit potential of attracting campers to otherwise unused pieces of land, and competition to provide amenities that would lure in more business arose. The first motels (short for motor or motorists' hotels) began to spring up in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and were little more than crudely built cabins arranged around a central courtyard where travelers who didn't want to have to bring their own tent while vacationing could stay. By the 1940s, mom-and-pop-run motels, many of which still resembled a scattering of cabins around a common lawn, sprang up all over the country, and were immensely popular until the 1950s when corporate motel chains regulated travel lodging and blurred the lines between motels and proper hotels.

Many of the little family-run motels went out of business within the next few decades, as chains sprang up across the country, but family-run motels still cling to life here and





there, often still run by the same family that started them, years in the past.

Whether privately owned or part of a franchise, motels see much of the seedy underbelly of life on the road. They're a cheap way to ensure relative privacy, and (especially at smaller and more remote sites) anonymity for whatever clandestine, confidential or questionable activities people might need to accomplish. Because of this, motel staff are often exposed to activities, individuals and situations that would shock, frighten or nauseate the average traveler. Those who stay for long in the motor hospitality industry are often dedicated, desperate or a bit on the bizarre side themselves.

Sometimes the strangest thing about a motel, however, is not the folks who run it, but the other travelers. Motels are perfect locations for unrelated paths to meet out on the road. After all, (almost) everyone's got to sleep sometime, right? With the right precautions, a cheap motel might provide a safe temporary haven for a traveling vampire on a budget or a quick rest for a nomadic Promethean who can't stay risk staying long in any one place. As well, low budget motels (the kind that deal in cash and have no problem with clients who'd rather not show ID) are practically de rigueur for kidnappers, escaped convicts, serial killers or anyone trying to hide out from the authorities.

Motel Hell Sample Location: Good Nite Inn

Dusty, squat and cheap, but damn if it doesn't have color TV. Cable, too, although you have to call the front desk if you want the dirty channels. It's the kind of place where even the high tech comes with a personal touch.

The motel is a three-sided building embracing a parking lot. In the middle of the lot is an island with flowers and a concrete Pieta. Mary's by herself now, Jesus having been long since worn away by the wind and exhaust fumes. Even with her features eroded and someone's initials scrawled across her pedestal, it's hard not to look at the statue, to search for the eyes beneath the stony hood.

Rooms on the first and second floors are relentlessly average, with the state-mandated still landscape paintings and Gideon-supplied Bibles. (In Room 215, some wag replaced the Bible with a copy of *The Demon-haunted World*.) The beds and bathrooms are clean, but more the way somebody expecting company cleans up than the soothing sterility of chain hotels. At night, it's easy to sleep to the sound of ice machines and crickets.

The original owner was a retired construction contractor, and his son built the place. Neither had any experience with motels, so they didn't think twice about putting in a full set of basement rooms. Unlike the first and second stories, which are accessible from the front, guests enter the basement rooms via a recessed walk around the back. The walk's dirty and the rooms are dark, making them almost impossible to rent for more than a single night. Given the

difficulties, subsequent owners have phased out about half of them. The current owner, Rich, has repurposed two others as an apartment for himself. When the janitor slept on site, she lived in another one. Most of her stuff is still there.

Ugly as they are, and much as they're damp year-round, the basement rooms are a good option for a traveler looking to keep out of the way. Or the sun.

At night, the motel's sign covers the lot in a white glare, with the only shadows hiding beneath Mary's hood. In the morning, the sun rises fast and bleaches everything in sight. There's a flurry of activity between the eleven o'clock checkout and noon, when the manager rousts the stragglers. Guests trickle in throughout the day and night, but there are never enough to make the place seem lively.

Motel Hell Sample Character:

Rodney Hall

Quote: *You sure you don't need help with your bags?*

Background: Rodney's been working that the Good Nite Inn since he was a teen, first doing yardwork and running errands, and then for the last 30 years as the on-site maintenance crew. He takes care of repair work, remodeling and upgrades on the 39 units that, due to their location well off the main interstate, have managed to maintain a reasonable popularity with three generations of tourists and travelers.

Those who remember Rodney at all describe him as a polite, unassuming gentleman, always helpful and kind to those who stay at the motel and those who work there. He never complains when the housekeeping team asks for help with cleanup, even after particularly destructive guests check out.

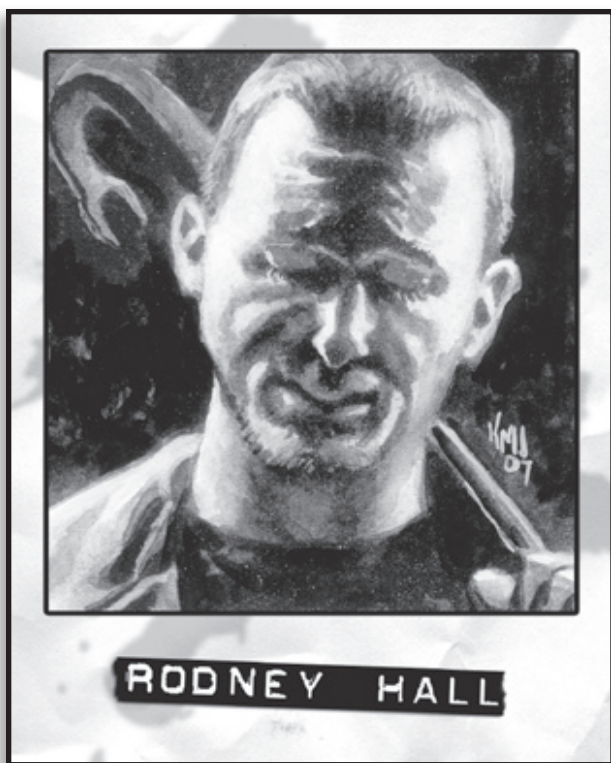
For Rodney, life revolves around the motel. He has no social life outside of the Inn, preferring to retire to the privacy of his quarters, where he waits for the next emergency plumbing or thermostat repair call to come in. The Inn is his life, and after four decades, he knows every inch of it like the back of his hand.

Even the parts no one else knows are there.

Description: Rodney's a small man, but he's wiry — anyone who's seen the 150-pound man muscle a queen-sized box springs set into place by himself would admit to that. He's well-known for being able to fix anything around the motel that breaks: furniture, mechanical parts, electronics. He's a real wiz with his hands.

He's quiet, too. Except for the occasional greeting or offer to help one of the staff or guests with a chore, he's rarely heard as he goes about his business.

In partial compensation for wages that have barely increased in the past 30 years, Rodney has a small but comfortable set of rooms in the basement of the Inn. His utilities are paid for, and he eats most of his meals there in the comfort of his kitchenette. One alcove of the room is outfitted with a workbench, where Rodney fixes phones, lamps and remote controls for the motel, and tinkers with



projects for the rooms, including many the manager and rest of the staff have no idea about.

Storytelling Hints: Over the 36 years he's lived and worked at the Good Nite Inn, Rodney has become as much a fixture of the place as the cement statuary in the center of the pull-through drive or the "quaint" knotty pine paneling. No one, not even the owner (who purchased the property only a couple of years ago after the former owner passed away) knows the motel like Rodney does, and he uses this knowledge to his quiet advantage.

Every room in the motel (including the manager's private apartment that abuts the front desk) has a secret that only Rodney knows. Some contain two-way mirrors that face the bed or shower. Others have peepholes hidden in the artwork or remote feed cameras disguised as smoke detectors or thermostats. The phones, which all feed through a central switchboard in the main office, are also all bugged, and Rodney can (and does) record any incoming or outgoing calls that pique his interest.

Over the years, Rodney's amassed quite a store of information about the world around him, as provided by those who work at or visit the Inn. He's got information on everything from state senators to supernatural creatures, archived safely away in his own little vault beneath the hotel. In more than 30 years, he's never shared any of it with anyone else, and none of his secrets have been discovered by others. Someday that might change. But for now, Rodney just waits . . . and watches.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 4, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 1, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Computer (Surveillance) 2, Crafts (Hidden Devices) 4, Investigation 4, Occult 2, Politics 2, Science 2

Physical Skills: Athletics 3, Larceny 4, Stealth 4, Survival 2

Social Skills: Empathy 2, Persuasion 1, Socialize 1, Subterfuge 3

Merits: Encyclopedic Knowledge, Unseen Sense

Willpower: 5

Morality: 7

Virtue: Temperance

Vice: Lust

Initiative: 6

Defense: 3

Speed: 11

Health: 8

Motel Hell Story Hooks

- While staying at a motel, characters overhear information they should not have from the room next door. A man hires someone to murder his wife. A politician accepts a bribe to sway his vote in an upcoming ballot. The veil between the supernatural world and the mundane one is jerked aside just long enough for them to get an eyeful. And, to make matters worse, the wrong-doing neighbors know that the characters know.

- An ally calls to arrange a meeting at a local motel, saying she's found something the characters need to know about. They arrive to find her dead in the pre-arranged room, and within moments the police have been tipped off to the murder. What, if anything, did the ally have for them, and who killed her to get it (and set them up to take the fall for the death)?

- While idly exploring the contents of their room before sleep, characters find a hastily scribbled note tucked inside the room Bible. Written on the hotel "scratch pad" letterhead, it starts out "I'm Becky Gunderson, and they're going to kill me if they find this." A few more lines detail her captors using terms like "monsters" and "evil," and give a brief description of their vehicle. The note is dated the day before the characters checked into the motel.

Crossroads

There wasn't even a town there, just a place on the map where two lines crossed. But he was sitting there like the letter said he would be. Gone two weeks, without a trace, and then back like nothing had happened.

The sun was sinking, but there was still plenty of light to see him there, a black shadow leaning hard the wooden signpost like he'd been there for years.

As I pulled up next to him, Jake rolled down the window, and the summer heat rushed into the car like a flamethrower had been turned on it.

"Johnson, where the hell you been?"

Mr. Johnson smiled slowly from beneath the brim of his fedora, his teeth yellow against his mahogany skin. He lowered his dark glasses, looking over the rims at us, and as the setting sun reflected from his eyes, it was like the fires of Hell were burning in them.

It was all I could do to keep from stomping my foot down on the accelerator and leaving him grinning in our dust.

Since at least the times of Ancient Greece, crossroads have been considered places of particular import. Hermes, the Greek god of boundaries and travel, and his Roman successor, Mercury, were paid homage by worshipers who left phallic stone statues of the gods at any place where two or more roads met.

Historically, almost every culture of every nation has recognized crossroads as being of significant magical, religious or spiritual import, as well as the obvious defense, trade and communication advantages that a crossing of major routes entails. Crossroads are the places where two roads (and frequently two cultures — figuratively speaking, two different worlds) meet. Thus, crossroads were often seen as a place "between," where travelers could pass not only from one road to the next, but sometimes from one world to another, and consequently, things from other worlds could pass into this one.

Crossroads have also long been associated with ghosts and the walking dead, perhaps because of this same "between" status. Many cultures traditionally either buried or executed undesirables at crossroads. Suicides, suspected witches, those who seemed at risk to return as vampires, criminals and the cursed were often interred at crossroads, perhaps out of a hope that the multiple paths leading away from the gravesite would confuse any ghost who rose from the grave enough to prevent it from returning to take revenge on those who killed it, or haunting those who had made the ghost miserable enough to take its own life. This same logic might apply to gallows being placed at crossroads, although it's also possible that a junction of roads simply made public hangings easier for local townsfolk to attend.

In modern times, much of the mystery and magic behind crossroads have been hidden by ignorance and skepticism. But just because the shift of belief in the unique nature of crossroads may have changed doesn't mean they've lost their power. Centuries of people, hundreds of generations, knew the truth: crossroads are more than just where roads meet. They're places of power and of potential.

Crossroads Sample Character:

The Dark Man

Quote: *You've come here looking for something. What is it that your heart truly desires?*

Background: For as long as there have been crossroads, there have been stories about those who've gone to crossroads to make deals with the gods, spirits or devils who dwell or visit there. Some of the stories are just that: interesting yarns told to scare children or entertain each other around

Guardians of the Crossroads

To the Greeks, Hekate, the triple-faced goddess watched over crossroads, as did her male counterpart, Hermes. Chimata-No-Kami (or alternately, Sarutahiko Ohkami) guarded Japanese crossroads, while Heimdall, guardian of the Rainbow Bridge, is often associated with them in Norse legend. The Arch of Janus, the Roman two-faced god of doorways, is a four-fronted arch across a crossroads in Rome. Lord Maam (and his Catholic guise of Maximón, or Saint Simon) was often depicted as seated at a crossroads in ancient Mayan spiritual art.

The Voudon loa Papa Ghede and Legba (as well as Legba's twin, Kalfu) have all been venerated at or associated with crossroads, as were Lares Compitales, the Roman guardian spirits of crossroads.

a fire. But at the heart of most stories, there's a kernel of truth. So it is with the crossroads and the Dark Man.

Description: The Dark Man can appear in many forms. Some claim he's a strapping young man with blue-black skin and pearl-white teeth. Others claim he's wrinkled and old, with white hair and a bent back. A few claim he's not a man at all, but some sort of creature near on to a dog in size and shape, but with hands rather than paws.



THE DARK MAN

Whatever form he takes, the Dark Man appears only at the stroke of midnight, and only to those who come seeking him with a burning need to fulfill their heart's desire.

Storytelling Hints: Depending on the Storyteller's needs, the Dark Man can be a spirit, a ghost, a god or a demon, and Storytellers are welcome to create appropriate traits for him as desired. In truth, however, he needs none, because he exists in a chronicle only as a means of asking important questions of the characters: "What do you want most?" and "What are you willing to trade for it?"

The Dark Man can come and go at will. He can take a corporeal form, but can also disappear instantly. He will not fight, and is not a source of information (unless, of course, that information is someone's highest desire, in which case a bargain might be struck). He cannot be killed, though he might be banished for a time. He is Temptation manifest, and is as little or as great of an ally or adversary as that makes him to any given character.

The Dark Man can't be forced into anything. He can't be made to appear, but instead must be cajoled, beseeched, awaited in the proper location until he deigns to make his presence known. He can't be bullied into giving what must, instead, be traded for. He offers anything: talent, wealth, fame, love — but there's always a price. In stories, the Dark Man asks for your soul, but in the real world, his price is usually more tangible. A devoted son wants to win the loyalty of a faithless woman he's smitten with? Done. But, there will be a price to pay, and he will know it up front before agreeing to the deal. Perhaps it will cost him his mother's life. Or her love. An aspiring musician claims to not care about the money, he just wants to be the best guitarist in the world. Done. But when he dies alone and penniless, having watched his children starve and his wife leave him for a man who could put a roof over her head, he may wonder if the trade (talent for wealth) was worth it.

True Crossroads

To find the Dark Man, travelers first must find a true crossroads — not just any spot where modern streets meet will do. There are paths that have been used for as long as creatures with feet walked the earth, and flows of water, molten rock and energy that ran even before that. It is at a juncture of these that those who would seek the Dark Man must look, for he is older than interstates, older than concrete, older than any streets made by man.

That is not to say, however that he is not found where a crossroads now exists. It is the nature of such places to attract and direct travel, and in many such locations the physical reality mirrors the supernatural one with paths, back roads or highways converging in the same site that ley lines, magnetic fields or underground water sources come together, marking the site as ancient (and true) "crossroads."

Crossroads Story Hooks

- Travelers in a particular rural area intersection begin to report "alien abductions" — bright lights, missing time, mysterious minor injuries. In the same area, others go missing from their cars, never to be seen again. Has this area been targeted by something extraterrestrial, or some worldly predator out to use alien myths as a cover?

- There's no intersection shown here on the map, although one this large should certainly have been listed. The sign reads simply HELL and points off into the distance. Surely, someone's playing tricks?

- The car's headlights pick out some sort of scuffle ahead. Turns out there's a small group of angry people all set to string someone up at the crossroads. They scatter, leaving the still-struggling body trussed up on the ground. The victim claims not to know what he's done to earn their wrath, but after speaking to him for a few minutes, even the characters can feel there's something . . . wrong . . . with him. Perhaps they should have let the mob finish the job?

Stuck

Miri didn't even look at the road. Too slow to bother. Instead, she watched Jason, who was staring blankly at the map. It was sweet of him to try and help. As they crested the hill and stopped again, she glanced ahead. More cars, yeah, but beyond them, police lights, crumpled metal and a long streak of red on the asphalt. Jason started to crane his neck, to see what she was looking at.

"Don't," Miri sighed. "It'll just make you hungry."

One of those rules of a road trip: you don't want to get stuck. Not in traffic, not in snow and not in some podunk jail cell. In the World of Darkness, the consequences can be a lot worse than a shortened vacation or a missed appointment. Being stopped at the wrong time could mean the monsters catching up with you . . . or your prey escaping.

Snow

One of the easiest ways to get stuck is plain old bad weather. In the city, there are timely plows, and folks drink cider while they sing "White Christmas." Out on the road, though, especially up north, a snowstorm can be deadly. Whiteout and ice sheets can cause wrecks, but heavy snowfall can block entire road systems for days at a time. Unless mortal characters came specifically prepared, they aren't going much of anywhere once a blizzard hits. Snowstorms can also knock out electricity and disrupt radio communications. Characters heading out of town with a full tank of gas and a charged-up cell phone can quickly find themselves stranded and out of touch anyway.

A blizzard can make even ordinary highway driving a nerve-racking challenge. Some parts of the highway system shut down or reroute entirely with enough snow.

Locals and professional drivers memorize these routes, but characters, particularly those who didn't plan on a road trip, are likely to be confused. Even if the roads aren't blocked up, you've got to keep your eyes locked ahead so you don't hit the guy in front of you if he has to stop suddenly. Even then, you'll only get a flash of red lights and a second or two to hit your brakes. Assuming they work.

Monsters get a few edges. Werewolves and Prometheans are a lot sturdier than human beings. Vampires aren't affected by cold unless they spend time sleeping in it. As a general rule, though, if a character needed a car to get someplace, he probably couldn't get there on foot. Storms may even be the work of monsters themselves, seeking to strand characters or drive them into the monsters' arms and jaws.

Foot chases through snow are desperate affairs, with the cold and wet as much an enemy as a hungry vampire. Snow conceals terrain features and can prevent a character from keeping sight of her pursuer or prey. Worse, charging recklessly across some terrain can cause avalanches, trapping a character under several feet of snow and ice, and too disoriented to tell which way is up.

At best, the characters are stuck in their hotel. At worst, they're stranded in a white desert with no way home and nobody but each other to rely on. What if they get stranded in a makeshift community locked in by the storm? What do they do when the food runs out, or when they realize there are (other) monsters trapped with them?

Sample Snow Character: Snow Brides

Quote: *The road's closed up ahead. Help me stay warm, or we'll never last the night.*

The ice has its own monsters, creatures that seem to exist only when the snow is falling and skin begins to freeze. These are the Snow Brides. The old story goes like this: married men lost in the snow see pretty girls, who lure them into an embrace. They feel their bones warming until they're burning, and then their hearts stop. Later, when the thaw comes, the bodies of the men are found, dead of exposure.

Simple enough, but if that's ever how the Snow Brides worked, they've diversified today. Whatever they are and wherever they come from, they always emerge hungry, needing the heat of human bodies for whatever the Snow Brides do when it's not snowing. As a result, they've gotten efficient with luring in victims. They'll yell a lot of things into the snow: "I need help." "The road's closed." "We're here to rescue you." A lot of different words, but the message is always the same: step away from the road. Come to us.

Snow Brides suffer physical damage just as any normal living creature would, except that they do not suffer damage from extremes of cold or from fire. They

only appear, however, when at least six inches of snow have fallen on the area within the last 24 hours. Snow Brides are incapable of walking upon or crossing roads.

Description: Snow Brides are identical, uniformly 5'5" with an average build and brown eyes. Their skin is unnaturally pink, simulating the blush brought on by cold. They don't feel the cold themselves, though, except as a gnawing hunger in the pits of their stomachs. To compensate for being physically identical, they dress in a variety of winter gear, often approximating the clothing of likely rescuers, such as police or firefighters. Their clothing is convincing from a distance, but up close, the details are wrong: name patches are filled with gibberish, buttons and zippers are missing as if the creature was sewn into its garments. Disguise seems to be something they've learned from brief observations rather than extended study. Brides are stronger and sturdier than their physical bodies would indicate, but are usually unarmed, even in disguise.

Storytelling Hints: Once they've lured a victim away from the road, they surround him in a group and bind him. They strip off any clothing providing significant insulation, and then they huddle around him like a campfire, draining off heat and heartbeats until the victim dies of exposure. When the snow stops, and all that's left is white powder blowing slowly over their victim's corpse, the Snow Brides disappear as if evaporating.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 4, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 4, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 4, Manipulation 3, Composure 2



SNOW BRIDES



Mental Skills: Investigation 1

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl (Grappling) 3, Stealth (Snow) 3, Survival (Knots) 2, Weaponry 1

Social Skills: Intimidation 3, Persuasion (Seduction) 3, Subterfuge 3

Merits: Fast Reflexes 2, Fleet of Foot 3, Striking Looks 4

Willpower: 4

Morality: N/A

Health: 8

Initiative: 7 (with Fast Reflexes)

Defense: 3

Speed: 15 (with Fleet of Foot)

Size: 5

Supernatural Powers: Lure — Snow Brides can alter their skin texture and appearance to mimic clothing or, presumably, the fur of a werewolf. They cannot change Size ratings using this power, and they can't appear to be male. No matter what alterations the Snow Bride makes, she always appears undeniably female to an observer. The changes the Snow Brides make are purely visible. They cannot disguise scent or voice; they smell like biting winter air, and their voices are soft and lyrical.

Drain Heat — Once the Snow Bride has immobilized and stripped a victim of his clothing, she sets about taking away his heat. The Snow Bride simply needs to sit in proximity to the character and keep him immobile to do this. As the character loses Health to exposure (see p. 181 of the

World of Darkness Rulebook), the Snow Bride soaks up the warmth. This is the only way in which the Snow Bride can heal lost Health points. For every point of exposure damage that a victim takes, all Snow Brides huddled near him heal one point of damage (no matter what type).

Snow Running — Snow Brides do not leave footprints. They walk on top of fallen snow in complete silence; any attempt to hear a Snow Bride (if she isn't speaking) or to track one suffers a -5 penalty.

Accident Scene

When you see a wreck in the middle of the road, all you've got to deal with is the pull of your conscience and whether you can get around using the shoulder. When somebody else has spotted it, you've got to deal with cop cars, fire engines, ambulances . . . and all the damn rubber-neckers in front of you.

Accidents are generally only temporary delays, unless the characters are in the accidents. The delays can add up, though, and what looks like a patch of traffic can turn into long hours waiting for the police to clear a multi-car pileup. First responders are going to want to interview witnesses, especially if the accident looks suspicious, or if the characters do. Automobile accidents also bring out the biggest and fanciest emergency hardware:

Cutters, Rams and Spreaders: These are hydraulic tools used to remove the twisted metal of a wrecked car from a fragile human body. Rescuers first stabilize the vehicle to avoid shifting during the disassembly. Next, they set up a portable engine, to which any of the tools can attach. They use the spreader to pull apart pieces of the car structure, the cutter to chomp through roofs and doors and a ram is a simple piston for smashing things out of the way. In the World of Darkness, characters might want to use these life-saving tools for decidedly more violent purposes. With, for instance, 12,000 pounds of cutting force, it's easy to imagine why. On the other hand, anything that takes that much force to cut through isn't likely to sit still long enough for the operation.

MedEvac: Helicopters used to carry the wounded from the accident site to a medical facility. These are employed at remote accident sites, or when speed is especially critical.

In a serious car accident, there's a danger of fire or explosion, but a wrecked car can be deadly for bystanders or rescuers even without combustion. The electrical systems in newer cars can produce a fatal shock, particularly if the car has not (or cannot) be turned off before the extraction takes place. Unexpected airbag inflation can push a rescuer into danger or send shrapnel flying short distances.

Characters: The whole cast of emergency services, not to mention gawkers and the poor bastards who got in the accident in the first place.

Activity: Police are often first on the scene, particularly on major highways or in rural areas.

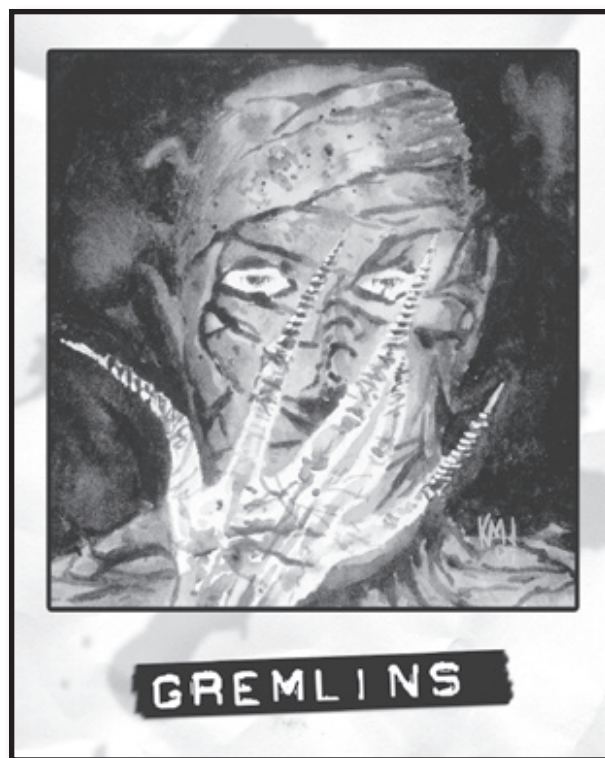
Trouble: Accidents mean law enforcement, and many characters wouldn't like the scrutiny. Fire's bad news for vampires and Prometheans particularly, but no one enjoys burning.

Sample Accident Scene Character: Gremlins

Quote: *Don't worry. I can fix that.*

Gremlins don't sabotage machines. Not on purpose, anyway. Gremlins just have a very simple understanding of the world. If something's moving, it works. If it stops, it's broken. If it's broken, gremlins will come to fix it. If you're broken, they'll fix you, with whatever they can find. Or use you to fix something else. Your car, maybe.

Unlike most spirits, gremlins keep corporeal lairs — a necessity to accumulate spare parts. They prefer small, abandoned buildings, but will settle for caves, pits or even forest clearings. Gremlins fill their nests to overflowing with parts: gears, spark plugs, spinal columns and whatever else they've come across is sorted and piled throughout the garage. More sophisticated gremlins may find a way to obtain electricity and even refrigeration, to jump-start machines or protect precious organic components. Smarter gremlins sometimes try to replicate human artifacts out of whatever the gremlins have at hand, fashioning cars from the meat of dead cattle or infants from metal scrap. These creations are usually abandoned when they fail to function as expected.



Characters who can communicate with spirits can attempt conversation with gremlins, but will find holding their interest difficult if the subject does not concern repairs.

Description: Gremlins spend most of their time at the roadsides, watching for opportunities to help. As spirits, gremlins take corporeal form only when retrieving parts or things to fix from the road. Gremlins manifest as crouched figures with skin made of bits of oil-stained cloth and plastic. They smell of gasoline and rust, and tend to have swapped off the ends of their long fingers for scalpels or drill bits.

Storytelling Hints: Gremlins are horrific little monsters, especially considering their motives. They don't want to hurt anyone, but they don't care that they do — they just want everything to run smoothly. How the gremlins got the idea that integrating human organics with machines would help them run smoothly is a bit of a mystery. Shamans, be they werewolves, mages or just spiritually aware mortals, note that gremlins are fully conversant in human languages and demonstrate an uncanny knowledge of how cars, computers and all things mechanical and electrical work. Perhaps gremlins aren't spirits of machines per se, but spirits of something more esoteric, such as humanity's relationship *with* machines? Or are gremlins just an aberration that has somehow managed to survive out on the Road?

Spirits are similar to ghosts, mechanically speaking. Gremlins cannot Manifest as ghosts can, however, and must instead use their Materialize Numen. Gremlins also have a special condition called a *ban* — they are incapable of letting any damaged object or being alone. No matter how much it would weaken the gremlin, it *must* Materialize and attempt to “repair” the broken item or person, or take it apart for scrap.

Attributes: Power 3, Finesse 6, Resistance 3

Initiative: 9

Speed: 15 (species factor 6)

Size: 3

Corpus: 6

Essence: 12 (max 15)

Numina: Materialize, Gremlin Repairs

Gremlin Repairs: Gremlins are capable of repairing mechanical and electrical devices with extreme skill, but only stop tinkering once those devices begin significant motion or noise. “Repairs” get progressively more destructive as the object refuses to “work.” Eventually, the gremlin gives up and breaks the object down into any interesting parts.

Gremlins treat flesh and blood machines the same way. Gremlins attempt to stop “leaks” and identify and replace damaged body parts. Replacement pieces from other beings of the same species function as intended, though they cause constant pain and probable psychological trauma. Gremlin repairs suppress severe immune reaction to mechanical or organic transplants.

In the absence of suitable replacement parts from the same species, though, gremlins attempt to fix living beings using parts from any other creature or from machines. These “repairs” do not turn people into cyborgs. Such ministrations are a death sentence, because the gremlin cannot fix a person using car parts. Thus, the person still appears “broken” to the gremlin, which means that the gremlin cannot leave the person alone, and attempts more repairs . . . eventually, the person dies from shock or blood loss, and the gremlin sadly dismembers its “project,” keeping the best parts in its lair.

The Storyteller spends one point of Essence and rolls the gremlin’s Power + Finesse. This action is extended. Each roll requires 30 minutes of work, but the target number depends on what the gremlin is trying to do. If the gremlin is trying to fix a being or machine and has appropriate parts to do so (a wrecked car to fix another wrecked car, or a dead person to fix a dying one), the target number is five successes per point of Health or Structure that the target has suffered. Once the work is complete, the target bears the scars of being patched together from spare parts, but the spare parts work. A man sewn together after receiving new organs from his recently deceased friends might well wind up with a derangement or two, at the Storyteller’s discretion.

On the other hand, if the gremlin is trying to fix a living being with parts from a machine or a different species, the target number is the number of Health points that the being has *remaining* that are not filled with aggravated damage. For instance, a man with Health 7 survives a car wreck, but suffers eight points of lethal damage in the process. He has six boxes that are not marked with aggravated damage (since one point “wrapped” and became aggravated), and so a gremlin trying to fix him with parts from his car needs six successes to do so. Once this target is reached, the victim is a horrid mishmash of organic parts and machinery (see below for an example). This unfortunate being lives only until the gremlin’s Materialize Numen expires (see below), and then the being dies.

Materialize: This Numen allows the gremlin to change its form from ephemera to matter, dropping the gremlin

abruptly into the material world. Spend three Essence and roll the spirit’s Power + Finesse to allow the gremlin to reshape itself into matter. The number of successes indicates the number of hours that the gremlin can remain in the material world before reverting to ephemera. The spirit must then choose between remaining in the material world (and either anchoring itself or losing a point of Essence every hour) or slipping immediately back through the Gauntlet.

Sample Accident Scene Character: Gremlin Victim

Quote: *Oil. They filled my guts with oil.*

This poor unfortunate had a tire blow at something way over the speed limit on an open but empty road. By the time anybody else came along, gremlins had scuttled away with his unconscious body and begun repairing it. They dug out the fragments of his splintered ribs, kept his heart beating with bits of an old alarm clock and gave him a solid metal chassis underneath his chest. He didn’t do much more than moan and squirm a little, though, so they began to look for other problems. Ultimately, they replaced his entire trunk with plastic and rubber, and replaced his clumsy digestive system with a processing plant for simple diesel.

The characters might discover the Gremlin Victim dying by the side of the road, desperate for fuel, or they might be sent to rescue him when he doesn’t arrive somewhere as planned. Of course, he’s not long for the world after the gremlins finish with him — unless the gremlins have a way of staying in the material world longer than usual.

Lockup


You got framed for a crime you didn’t commit . . . or got caught committing one. The cell smells like piss; the surly deputy who’s watching you isn’t even in spitting distance. The occasional sound of him turning a page or the guy in the next cell retching only makes the silence more annoying. The only good thing about the town jail is that there’s no cafeteria or anything, so they have to get you fast food. Not like they ask what you want, though. There are four cells, and the deputies will spread arrestees between them as much as possible. For mortal characters, a violent escape is almost impossible. The cells use older, mechanical locks, but the outer door has a modern keypad lock, which can be disabled from the outside. A monitor room exists just beyond the cell block, but the cameras are usually watched from an office down the hall.

For monsters, the jail is as much a time bomb as it is a delay. Werewolves don’t do well in enclosed spaces, Prometheans drive people crazy by their very proximity and vampires don’t like those oh-so-humane windows.

Characters: Gerry Steves, a bored deputy reading a copy of *Thinner*. A sauced and battered drunk whose occasional moans come through from the cell next door.

Activity: There’s a shift change every six hours. The lights over the security monitors blink once every two seconds, and





are about a half-second out of sync. (It's quiet enough you'll count them eventually.)

Trouble: It's not a jail, it's a larder. There's a new prisoner, and he doesn't like how you smell. Despite precautions, somebody hanged herself in here last month, and she wants a word with you.

Attractions

Some things are simply worth seeing, worth experiencing, worth stopping for. However strong the pull of the road, however tempting the prize ahead or painful the heartbreak behind, some places are worth checking out.

The Caverns

Who knows how long ago water sculpted this cathedral ceiling, how many millennia it took to carve out all these aisles and corridors? Who knows what ancient Americans did in these caves when they crawled into them with torches and stared up in awe? Well, you could start with the plaque to your left. The Caverns are ancient and awe-inspiring, but they've been the subject of attention from scientists and tourists ever since prospector Andrew Blakely opened the Caverns to the public in 1924. Blakely's son, Charles Thomas Blakely, renovated the caves as a major tourist attraction in the mid-1950s. Charles not only revamped the lighting and educational exhibits, but he built a large golf course and later a health spa aboveground. Along with extensive promotional campaigns and partnership with a local university, Charles's add-on attractions helped preserve the Caverns from the time when every town had a show cave up to the present day, when they're a relative rarity. Some of Charles's claims are dubious: for example, this far from the sea, it's unlikely that the main hall was ever a storage site for bootleggers. On the other hand, there are signs that human beings lived part of the year in the caves as late as the 16th century.

The upper portion of the Caverns is a maze of low, twisting passages. All but the path down to the Main Hall are blocked off to the public, but one leads to a small cave where an archaeological dig is in progress. The Main Hall is a cathedral-like room with a ceiling up to 60 feet high, with fluted stalactites plunging and merging with stalagmites to form faintly Mediterranean columns. The lighting is designed to highlight the natural colors of the cavern walls, and the main hall has occasionally been used for art exhibitions. Surrounding and running beneath the Main Hall are more passages and the so-called pantries, pocket-chambers expanding from the passages. The lowest levels of the Caverns are filled by an underground lake and stream. The exact depth isn't recorded, and the lighting stops short of the Lake Hall's perimeter, creating the illusion of an infinite, drowned abyss.

While the Caverns have been efficiently exploited, they haven't yet been fully explored. They may connect with cave systems on adjacent parcels of land, and the site's occasional supernaturally sensitive visitors have gotten the impression that the Main Hall is less a cathedral, and more a tomb.

Characters: Molly Wayne, a graduate student excavating at one of several digs in the Caverns. Thomas Blakely, Andrew Blakely's grandson and the Caverns' current proprietor. Tim Lincoln, a security guard and occasional tour guide.

Activity: The Caverns are open to the public from 10:00 AM to 7:00 PM, with an admission fee. Scientists studying the Caverns or special tour groups sometimes visit outside of these hours. The spa is open varying hours depending on the season; the attached hotel offers check-in at 1:00 PM. The archeology students share two cabins on the west edge of the property.

Trouble: The characters become lost in the narrow passages; after a few hours in the dark, they become convinced they can hear the wind in the distance . . . or is that singing? The empty caves become infested with rats and insects, but what could they be eating? Archaeologists uncover a body in the Caverns, but the preservation is too good for the body to be an *ancient* corpse.

Novelty Museum

The Museum of Anatomical Anomalies is a droopy, Georgian mansion a couple of miles south of the state line. It's the kind of old-fashioned attraction that tends to impress tour guide writers, because they can't believe they've never been, and because it's just so *quirky*. That's what Noah Crayne relies on, because he's not going to get many visitors in otherwise. Without visitors, he'd never be able to fund his hobbies.

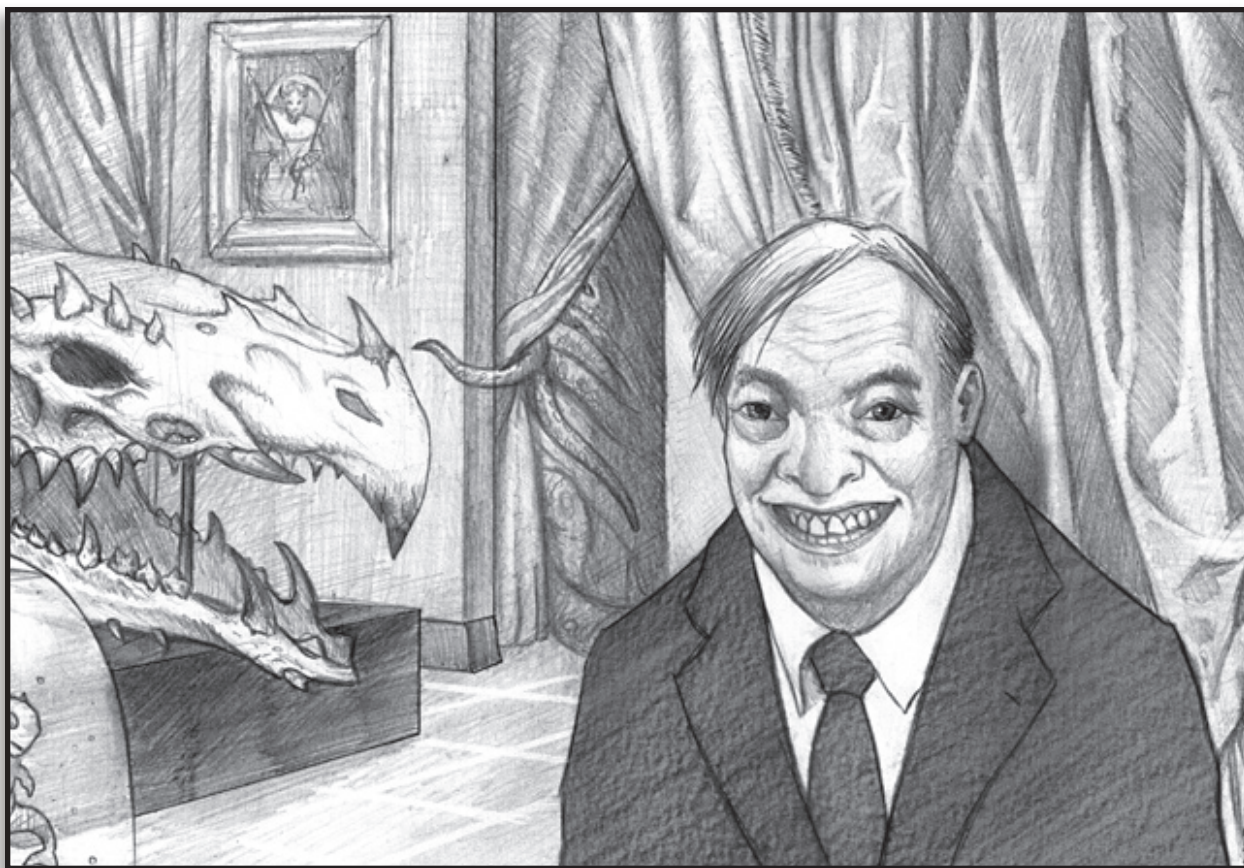
Noah, a thickset man with a professorial voice and a smile that makes his cheeks bulge, dresses as he feels an undertaker ought to. That's what he is, he tells his visitors, an undertaker to the strangest mysteries ever to greet human eyes. A fetal mermaid, for instance, preserved in a yellowing fluid, or the skull of a dragon, distinguishable by its burnt teeth. Noah gives exuberant tours of his thousand spectacular and unlikely specimens, each lovingly preserved and accompanied by paintings depicting the creatures as they might have lived. He delights in leaving visitors unsure whether or not he believes what he's saying.

He doesn't, and if the question is put to him bluntly enough, he'll admit it. Most of his exhibits, expensive as they are, are frauds. He should know, too. He's got a private gallery full of the genuine articles. He rarely gives tours of that one, or so he claims. Oh, it was originally his intention to show his werewolf's leg and bags of burnt vampire fat, but they're simply not that impressive-looking. So he's done up most of the museum to show the frauds, leaving the real treasures for his appreciation, and that of the particularly discerning guest. And, dare he say, customer?

Characters: Noah Crayne, the owner and curator. His dogs, Bessie and Hoover.

Activity: Noah, guiding yet another group through the galleries. A few other visitors, perhaps pondering scales from Loch Ness and flint arrowheads from Atlantis in the gift shop.

Trouble: Noah gets a line on a big find . . . and the characters want it, too. Something legitimately dangerous



needs hiding among the frauds. The eccentric museum owner is willing to produce his own exhibits.

Megachurch

Wherever two or three are gathered in His name, there Jesus is, allegedly. Really, though, why settle for two or three? That's the thinking behind Reverend Matthew Clayton's First Church of Christ the King, which draws more than 2,500 parishioners a week for Sunday services. Reverend Clayton has the booming voice and austere clarity of a proper pastor along with the fearlessness to address modern issues. He occasionally expresses nostalgia for a more faithful age, but his ministry is all about today and tomorrow, not shirking from the evils of war or homosexuality or any other contemporary sin.


From the highway, the church is almost blinding, with sunlight turning the glass and white stone into a wall of glare. At night, the spires take on a ghostly tone, ivory fingers clamoring toward Heaven. Every so often, somebody sprays "SURRENDER DOROTHY" on the side of a nearby overpass. Clayton smiles at that, says he knows he's a bit of a humbug, but that's okay because he knows the man behind the curtain. The joke always gets a laugh from the congregation.

The Megachurch is the modern equivalent of a medieval cathedral — with one vital difference. Whereas cathedrals were built in existing population centers, the Megachurch is attempting to anchor a new community around itself. The commute from the nearest city takes

just over an hour, and most of the early parishioners came from further away. This exercise in community-building wouldn't be possible without America's love affair with the automobile.

Reverend Clayton's vision, most of which he owes to his predecessor, the Reverend Beth Foster, is to build a community where the church is once again the center of people's lives. His large, suburban church is the first step. The second is taking place even now, as parishioners begin investing in land, townhouses and condominiums in the church's vicinity. He's not shy to talk about it in business terms, the same ones Reverend Foster used to explain it to him. He's offering what people need, he's offering it whenever they want it and he's building a community around it. It's a marketing strategy, not so different from the one employed by various corporate chains.

What Reverend Clayton is a little quieter about is his own part in the strategy. Handsome, with silver hair and chiseled features, he looks every inch the evangelist. He was cast in that role, auditioned and chosen by Reverend Foster to provide a strong, *male* face for her church. She wrote his sermons, designed his wardrobe and if he can buckle his own belt and walk where he wants, it's only because she taught him to do it for so many years. Similar to Reverend Clayton, the humble-looking old woman has good intentions . . . unlike him, she's willing to go to Hell for them. She believes in delivering souls to Christ by whatever means works. A glitzy, patriarchal church wins the most converts, but sometimes the faithful need chastening, particularly those faithful who foot the bills for white cathedrals and mul-



timed media sermons. Reverend Foster has a way of ensuring those who question her realize just how much peril their souls are in — a visit to the Hole to Hell (detailed later in this chapter). After a dose of transcendental horror, most begin to share her convictions . . . or fear challenging her again. Clayton himself has been spared supernatural intimidation. Foster wouldn't want to shake the confidence she selected him for.

Characters: Reverend Matthew Clayton, the pastor. Reverend Beth Foster, his predecessor and mentor. A large and diverse congregation representing a cross-section of the local population (although “local” is misleading, since the church attracts parishioners from a 50-mile radius).

Activity: Constant. The church hosts community programs seven days a week, and includes a food court and cafe for socializing after services. Things are lighter after 10 PM, but it's not unusual to find parishioners talking or waiting for rides later at night.

Trouble: Reverend Foster likes theater and spectacular conversions, and she might start getting ideas if she finds out the characters are spectacular sinners. Her “scared straight” approach to religion isn't so different from that of some vampires. She'd make a wealthy ghoul, and she could teach most Kindred preachers a thing or two, as she did Clayton.

The Hole to Hell

You're shit. The Devil doesn't want your worthless ass, much less your soul. You're not even evil, just pathetic. You're a sinner, and the only being in this universe that loves you is God. You better get good with Him, or you're going to be down here, alone, forever. Remember that when you get back to the surface. If you get back to the surface. You could stay. There's so much more to hear, and all of it's about you.

That's what the voices say, in the Hole to Hell. That's why this one mountain, in the heart of coal country, remains almost entirely untouched. The company dug only a few tunnels along the coal seam, and only one of them remains safe today. Safe for the body, anyway. The last attempt to explore the seam was in the 1980s, and a relatively modern system of support, lighting and transportation remains, stretching nearly as far as the tunnel itself.

The end of the tunnel is the bad part. The decline into the mountain gets steeper, and the only light is whatever the explorer is carrying. She starts to hear sounds . . . scraping somewhere down the tunnel. Then the sound stops, and her light goes out. Finding her way out is difficult, and claustrophobia and dizziness set in fast. When the character gives up on getting out, when she rests just a moment to get her bearings, that's when the voices start. They're very persuasive, and they know all the character's secret guilt and fears. All those sins are just as bad as she thought, but really, none of those crimes is as bad as the one she's been committing since she was born, the sin of being herself. When the character finally emerges, she's emotionally battered, may suffer from a temporary derangement (at the discretion of the Storyteller and player) and is likely to be profoundly grateful to whomever hauled her out.

Characters: Carl Syski and Benny Cooper, the security guards, childhood friends who'd be easy to mistake for brothers. They split the afternoon and night shifts, and share a cabin up the way. Neither would go down a mining tunnel in the first place, much less one the owner says is haunted. Benny gets the midnight to six shift to himself, though, and he's willing to let anybody stupid enough to want to and nice enough to pay him to go down there, like that old lady preacher and her friends.

Activity: None, unless Reverend Foster is around, taking people down into the Hole to confront their sins.

Trouble: One of the Created asks the characters to enter the Hole, convinced that one of her kin is causing the effect. The characters are lured to the spot believing it's a resource they can exploit. The Hole begins growing, gnawing on the spirit world around it.

Ghost Town

Drive in during the day, and you'll think you're pulling into civilization. Come during the night, and you'll stumble off a country road into a mass of dark, silent buildings. Every foot you drive forward kicks up more dust, clouding in the headlights like the conspicuously absent moths. Stop the car, if you like. The buildings are all locked up, but there's nobody to stop you breaking in and having a look. Take as long as you want. Sift through the silent remains of a thousand lives. Say a prayer at the church. Nobody is here to stop you. This isn't a town anymore.

Used to be. Near on a thousand citizens, too. Comfortable sort of a place, in the shadow of a mountain and nestled around a lake. There were a few farmers, a Civil War tourist trap and a growing number of wealthy retirees building cottages along the shoreline. Quiet on the supernatural front, too. One vampire, a hermit, who rarely took more than he needed to rise in the evening.

Then, one night, there was a sound, like the cry of an angel being smothered with a pillow. The lake churned and turned blood red, and something long buried arose and swept into the village. In minutes, everyone was dead. Every man, woman, dog, cow . . . dead, from the shoreline out to the farms. The vampire was feeding from one of his regular vessels when she choked and died.

Now, this was a few decades back, and the town was a little out of the way. Part of its charm. Anyway, it took a few days until a postal worker came along and found the bodies. Then came the police, and the National Guard, and the boys from the Pentagon and the Centers for Disease Control. There was some question of whether the Russians could be involved, or maybe Castro's people. It sounds silly, now. They buried the bodies, and they notified the families. They kept it out of the news, though. There wasn't a reason to keep the secret, not after they found out the truth, but who wanted to talk about it? A thousand people, dead in their own beds, along with everything for a dozen miles around. Unspeakable.

So they took down the signs, and they walked away. Nobody's been there since. The buildings are



still there. The high school, city hall, the beautiful lake shore cottages. There's a layer of dust, and paint flakes drift like dried leaves along the sidewalks. As for the truth, it turns out that a rational explanation for something that kills a thousand people and then disappears without a trace really does exist. The chain of volcanic activity that feeds the geysers and hot springs of the national park to the west also vents carbon dioxide into the lake. The gas built up, decade by decade, year by year, moment by moment, until it was just too much. The lake exploded, turned upside down. The red came from the iron silt that had been gathering at the lake bottom. The gas pushed out and blanketed the town. Suddenly the air was something nobody could breathe.

Characters: None, almost. Everyone in the town died. Nobody's moved there since. The only surviving resident is Edward Hale, a vampire who lived off the local population. Hale lost himself in a fit of fear and paranoia just after the disaster. He'd been warned about things outside the city that hunt vampires. He imagined one had come to find him, and staked himself in his haven. Edward is still there, in the book cages beneath the public library. If awakened by removing the stake from his chest, he'll react violently, sure the characters are part of whatever killed off his herd.

Activity: Nothing but a gentle breeze and waves lapping at the shore.

Trouble: The Ghost Town looks inviting, if somehow you get past the blocked roads. Once you're inside, though, it's practically a desert. There's no functioning water system, no electricity and certainly no cellular towers. The grocery store was stripped bare even of preserved goods when the CDC was investigating. Humans, mages and vampires are going to find themselves stuck in an out-of-the-way place with nothing to eat. Werewolves might have some success hunting, but only small game. On the other hand, a town that's physically and spiritually dead might make excellent neutral ground to meet an adversary. The eerie calm of the Ghost Town is likely to lead characters to look for a supernatural cause, even if they haven't had supernatural experiences before.

In Hiding

God, I hate locals. Not, you know, regular folk. I love regular folk. Salt of the earth, friendly people who don't lock their doors at night. I just never meet any. It's the ones who insist on telling me everything about their little town, like it's

something I haven't heard at the gas station, the liquor store and, if I was lucky, the cat house, in every town I've visited.

"... the school's dedicated to President Kennedy, by the way. One of the first, you know, just like ..."

The harpy behind the counter doesn't know that I hate her.

"... Civil War memorial, but it'd be nice if they'd keep it clean. Just last week ..."

I'm giving her the same sunburnt grin I always give, and hoping as always that it'll smooth over the curse long enough for me to get gone.

"... she's seeing the principal, you know, but you won't hear that from ..."

Funny thing about me. The damn locals open up when I come to town, every time. Pretty soon, though, they start figuring I'm at the root of all their stupid troubles.

"... Meier, who lost his wife in the war. Just serving the Fatherland, he says, but ..."

Wait. Fatherland?

Just like there are folk on the run, there are folk who don't want to be found. They just want to be left alone, to live with their ghosts or get on with their lives. Some are criminals of the worst kind, but most are hiding for simple, selfish reasons, such as family trouble or an unwillingness to share profits with erstwhile partners. Many supernatural creatures accept hiding as part of their daily existence; a changeling, for instance, might sympathize with someone living undercover, or she might not see what the big deal is. Even people hiding for the most prosaic reasons may react violently or cruelly to being found out. Nothing is more dangerous than a cornered animal.

Fugitives in hiding are a popular subject of urban legends and local folklore: the old guy at the end of the block becomes a mob boss in witness protection, or those tracks in the woods are a serial killer running from the police. Sometimes, the identity of a person is a surprisingly open secret. He's managed to live under his own name just by moving far enough away from his problems, or the entire community is covering for him.

Witness Protection

The one government conspiracy everybody knows about: the Federal Witness Security Program. Sometimes, federal prosecutors determine that they can't win a conviction without the testimony of a key witness, usually a traitor in an organized crime ring. Since the identities of witnesses must be disclosed at trial, they need a way to protect those key witnesses from retribution by their former colleagues. The United States Department of Justice, through the Marshals Service, provides resettlement and new identities to people essential to their cases.

Supernatural communities tend to buzz with rumors about Witness Protection. New identities are topics of interest and everyday fact for monsters. They're almost always interested in the techniques of hiding their pasts.

Monsters are also willing to believe rather extravagant stories of hidden identities and discovery, since they see weird ones in their own communities on a regular basis. Vampires and mages, for example, often discuss the possibility that their elders or enemies have resources connected to the program.

In Hiding Sample Character: Old Man Meier

Quote: *Just leave me alone.*

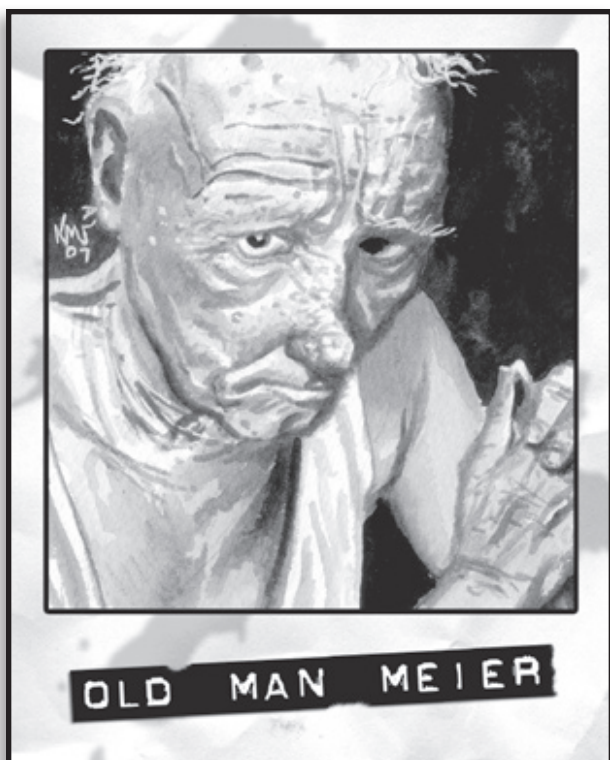
Background: Meier did something terrible in a war he tries to forget. He did it over and over, and at the time he'd freely admit he enjoyed it. His side lost, though, and the victors, along with his own ashamed people, have hunted his fellow soldiers down one by one. Through the years since, he's heard people talk about how terrible it was, he's seen them put up monuments to the dead and the martyrs and his desire to escape justice has become a backwards kind of guilt. His conscience tugs at him not so much for his sins, but for anything that reminds him of the man who committed them. He's gradually conflated this with his fear of capture, coming to believe that any trace of the man he was will somehow alert those who (he imagines) pursue him for his crimes. Yet, he can't let go of his memories, or his souvenirs.

Meier moved to this town in the late '70s and bought himself an old house on a secluded stretch of road. He values his privacy, and makes sure everybody knows it, but he's become a bit of a fixture in the community. He's one of the few older men who contributes to the church bake sale as something other than a customer, and he served a term as a scoutmaster before he realized the children found him frightening.

Description: Meier's face is craggy and pitted, and color fled his hair many years ago. (How many years ago is a matter for Storyteller discretion, depending on just what war he lost; see Storyteller Hints.) His eyes are dark and always open a little too wide, like an owl or a cat. His face seems permanently set in a sad expression; smiles don't come easily, and even his rage looks more like regret.

He hobbles along on a cane, troubled by a weakening left leg. He refuses to see a doctor about it, though several have offered to treat him free of charge.

Storytelling Hints: What war did Meier serve in, anyway? Straighten his back, slick back his hair and it would be easy to imagine him as a Nazi officer, ordering the murder of concentration camp victims by the dozen. More likely, he was a lowly propaganda artist, spending long nights over an easel to ensure that the Jews looked as foul and monstrous as possible, while the brave Aryan lads stood tall and noble. Alternatively, his crimes might have been a little closer to home for small-town America. Perhaps he was a soldier in Vietnam, who served as accomplice at a massacre like My Lai. Or a gang executioner, working for the Mafia or cocaine traffickers.



In the World of Darkness, Meier may have served in a war no one ever heard of. Was he the ghoul of a vampire, a blood-junkie murdering innocents across the decades to avenge the pride of one of the Damned? Maybe he was a sorcerer's apprentice, performing kidnappings and torture to further a feud between two cabals of the mysterious Pentacle. Finally, it might have been a war everyone's heard of, and one long before the atrocities of the 20th century. Maybe he fought in the American Revolution, or the Peloponnesian War. Perhaps Meier was once a creature of glorious light and bloody hands, an angel who rebelled against his master, or served too well . . . Today, though, he's just an old man. He wants to be left alone, and he'll do anything to make sure of it.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 3, Resolve 4

Physical Attributes: Strength 1, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 3, Manipulation 4, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Academics (History) 3, Medicine 1, Investigation 2, Occult 3, Politics 2

Physical Skills: Athletics 1, Brawl 1, Firearms 2, Larceny (Forgery) 2, Stealth 1, Survival 3

Social Skills: Empathy (Conceal Motive) 2, Persuasion 3, Streetwise 1, Subterfuge 2

Merits: Danger Sense, Language (as appropriate), Resources 3

Willpower: 6

Morality: 3

Virtue: Prudence

Vice: Pride

Initiative: 5

Defense: 3

Speed: 9

Health: 7

In Hiding Plot Hooks

- Family ties are hard to cut. One of the characters finds a letter addressed to his mother . . . a mother he's never met, or who died a long time ago. Does he go looking for her, suspecting full well that she doesn't want to be found? Do the other characters go with him willingly, or do they have to be persuaded? Why did she vanish, anyway, and isn't it a little convenient that this letter just fell into her son's lap?

- More than one resident of the town might be in hiding. There have always been urban legends about towns founded by escaped murderers, or pledged to the service of monstrous cults. Stranded by weather in a strange town, the characters must sort gossip from truth, threat from paranoia and friend from foe until they can escape. What if one of the villagers wants to come with the characters? Should they take him on, or will he be a serpent in their midst?

- Not everyone in hiding is trying to escape justice. The characters might be searching for someone trying to escape destiny. Maybe this person's destiny has an expiration date, after which it changes into a vicious and terrible fate, or maybe if he fails to fulfill his chosen role the characters will suffer somehow. In any case, the trick isn't finding him so much as persuading him to come back and claim his rightful place. And what if his role is the martyr? If a martyr refuses to go quietly to his fate, do the characters force him? What does that make them?



"This is so much easier than when she's awake," she said, looking into the backseat, where our daughter was sleeping in her car seat, slumped over against the head rest at the impossible angle toddlers will sleep at when sitting up. "She was out before we hit the highway . . . We should always travel at night."

"It is quieter, isn't it?"

That was the last thing I remember saying before we hit it . . . whatever it was. I looked over at her, and then back at the road, and it was just . . . there. There was nothing I could do.

I slammed on the brakes, I know that much. I can still hear them screaming before that dull thump that came when we hit . . . it. We didn't stop though. We couldn't, we were just going too fast. I kept pumping the brakes, trying to slow, but we were skidding sideways by then, and the brakes weren't doing a bit of good.

It was all in slow motion after that. The smooth skid. The jolt when we hit the guardrail. The impossible sense of weightlessness as the car rolled side over side. It seemed to take forever to hit the ground.

And then I was here. I must have been thrown clear as we fell, because I woke up back on the shoulder. Below me, I could see the whole thing. The broken glass. The torn metal. One hubcap that had somehow ended up as far away as I was. The car landed right side up, but there was no sound coming from it.

I started down the ravine just as another car came up the roadway. They must have seen the smashed railing and knew we'd need help. They stopped, and I could hear the woman calling for an ambulance while the man followed me down to the car.

We went to the back first. One of the doors had been torn off, and he pulled my daughter out. She wasn't moving. But I leaned close, and I could hear that she was still breathing. Oh my God, she was still breathing! She had slept through it. I've never heard such a sweet sound in my life as her breath that night.

But then he moved to the front seat, and I could tell the news wasn't good. He looked in and shook his head, and then moved back to my daughter's car seat.

"Wait!" I moved to the front of the car, and I could see my wife, her neck at an impossible angle. The airbag had deployed, keeping me from pulling her out, but I could feel her growing cold. There was no pulse.

No . . . No . . . No . . .

"We need to get you to somewhere safe . . ."
He picked up the car seat and started back to the roadway without looking back at me.

"Wait!"

He didn't respond.

I ran around the front of the car after him, unwilling to let my daughter out of my sight, when I saw it.

I saw . . . me.

Still behind the wheel.

Chapter Four: Dangerous Intersections

Life on the Road is lonely. Even those smitten with the romance of a modern nomadic lifestyle usually concede that the feelings of isolation and the utter lack of roots can be taxing, in body and in spirit. In the end, all you've got to count on is yourself, your vehicle, your equipment and the friends who've come along with you. Everything else is transitory and insubstantial.

Storytelling in such an environment presents different challenges and demands different solutions than doing so for a group of characters who are entrenched (or trying to become entrenched) in a more settled situation. These distinctions are certainly worth exploring, since they serve, in many ways, to *define* the nomad chronicle, giving it an aesthetic almost entirely distinct from more conventional sorts of stories told in the World of Darkness.

Tales of the Long Road

Naturally, you can't tell all of the same sorts of stories on the highways and byways that you can when dealing with a group of settled characters. The slow climb toward praxis doesn't work for vampire nomads, and wandering werewolves don't try to carve out territory from the lands claimed by other packs. The nomadic lifestyle demands a different sort of approach entirely. In broad strokes, most of the stories that take place on the road are stories of freedom, intrepidity and survival. It's about making the hard choice to exist with uncertainty for the sake of liberty, or love of the road.

But, then, there are other sorts of nomad tales to be told, as well. Characters may labor under a curse that prevents them from finding anything but suffering and strife should they settle in one place, and the stories that you tell are their quest to be free of the terrible burden of forever wandering. More mundanely, the characters may be marked in some obvious way as criminals against the laws of their kind, and be unable to find succor, save for temporary respite among the desperate, the undiscerning or those who intend to use the characters to distasteful ends.

You have many interesting options in telling the story of a group on the road, some of which work *far* better than they might for those who've put down roots. Some ideas:

- **Vignettes:** Perhaps the most critical distinction between the settled story and the nomad story is that you can easily tell your tale as a series of vignettes, rather than necessarily linking all of the sessions together. You may or may not have an overarching theme moving through the background (reflected, perhaps, by a few repeating elements, such as allies, enemies or a given location) that you come back to several times, to create a sense of continuity, but each episode is essentially a tale unto itself.

- **Isolation:** While you can certainly tell a story of isolation with a settled group, this is often the figurative isolation of being a half-step apart from the rest of the world. With wanderers, you can spin a yarn of *literal* isolation. Perhaps the RV has broken down along a lonely old road, badly maintained and infrequently used, and the characters will be spending a session with nothing but one another and their own thoughts for company. Maybe they've pulled into an inexplicably abandoned rest area because dawn is coming in another two hours, and this is the closest thing to shelter they've seen for 200 miles. And who can explain why a particular stretch of highway has continued on, featureless and unbroken, for several hours longer than the map would seem to indicate that it should?

So much of the
world is paved now.

– Stephen King,
“Trucks”

Tales of isolation on this scale tend to be psychologically charged stories, as the characters have an opportunity to explore their own thoughts and their relationships with the other members of the group.

- **Strangers in a Strange Land:** Nomads are strangers nearly everywhere that they go. Every new city has its own supernatural laws and customs, its own rulers and contenders. Every locale is an example of the exceptions that define the rules, and the characters don't know the specifics of a place that they haven't been. Likewise, any area that's significantly changed management since they last rolled through may be much different from what they remember. The feelings of mistrust and even paranoia that are common to many sedentary games set in the World of Darkness are heightened for wanderers, who know, for a fact, that no one is their friend and nearly everyone is either an enemy or an opportunist, or else disdainful of them and their lifestyle. Remember that cities are like small feudal fiefs, each one arranged according to the needs and desires of its rulers and its citizens, and that the characters, therefore, have to be ready for just about anything when they shift into park and go looking for others of their kind.

- **Freedom:** Even among the rebels and outcasts in a city, there exists some state of submission to the law, to the social order. Nomads need not necessarily subjugate themselves to such an arrangement, possessing as they do the means and the wherewithal to simply move on when things are no longer to their liking. There's a certain profound sense of freedom inherent in the ability to walk away from certainty and into the jaws of the unknown, all for the sake of preserving one's right to live as one wishes. For all save the more unusual wanderers, there's no one to give orders and no chain of command to abide by, just the rough pecking order of one's group and a sense of commitment to the principles, if any, that the group lives by.

- **Exploration:** Certainly, one can tell tales of exploration within a settled environment, but the scope of such a journey pales in comparison to what can be done with a group on the move. Perhaps the characters are hunting down the pieces of an ancient puzzle (or artifact), and their quest takes them from city to city, and to still other places, each one stranger than the last. Perhaps they're not looking for something specific, but rather a general sort of scholarship or treasure-hunting, such as compiling as comprehensive a vampiric history as possible or looking for any objects that they can find that contain the bizarre energies that animate the Created. This sort of story works particularly well with the vignette approach given above, as the knowledge or materials for which the characters are searching can easily constitute unto itself the better part of the overarching thread that binds the entire chronicle together.

Wanderers by Trade

Not all characters are equally well suited to existence on the road — a prim, proper and somewhat frail scholar

might make for a few humorous situations along the way, but the laughter isn't likely to be friendly, and such a character will soon become far more of a liability than a source of comic relief. Characters who are overly specialized in skill sets that don't directly contribute to survival on the road are probably not as well suited to nomadic life as they could be. Knowing everything that there is to be known about computers isn't usually good for much when the truck just ran out of gas 50 miles from the nearest station and it's already 105 degrees outside at 10 in the morning. On the other hand, being an expert survivalist can be a lifesaver in such a circumstance.


The nomad chronicle is one in which being a talented generalist can be of great benefit. Knowing a little something about everything makes you everyone's best friend, as you can serve as backup to almost anyone in almost any circumstance. A character may not be the best mechanic in the group, but she can assist when the dedicated Mr. Fix-it has to tinker with the engine to get one of the motorcycles up and running long enough to make it to the nearest town. Likewise, he may not be the group's best speaker, but he's good enough to go in as support, and to keep an eye on the local leadership's nearby associates, perhaps gauging their thoughts and feelings or else swaying them to sympathy for the nomads' plight.

Desirable highly specialized characters are often physical in nature: expert combatants, mechanics, outdoorsmen and the like. While a skilled fighter may, depending on her personality, be a pain in the ass to deal with when she's not "on the clock," no one complains when she's saving everyone's collective bacon in a life-or-death situation. In fact, many of the more successful wandering bands have two well-trained combatants, and perhaps even more, depending upon the size of the group. Of course, the best fighters are diversified a bit within their skill sets, so that one might be a shooter who's sneaky and good in the wilderness, while another is a master of multiple forms of combat, and still another is a brawler who wields a wrench with great facility, whether swinging it at someone's face or using it under the hood of a car.

A physical character need not necessarily be a combatant, however, to be of use to a group on the road. A nonviolent second-story man can still be an invaluable resource to a pack of nomads, and a skilled driver is practically worth her weight in gold when the enemy is closing in on a road buried beneath the onslaught of an icy blizzard. Because of the often physically demanding nature of a nomadic chronicle, physical characters have ample opportunity to shine, showcasing their abilities for the benefit of the group.

A face man (or woman) is also important, as everyone outside of the group is a potential sucker, client, ally or even friend. A good face man often knows the difference between those alternatives at a glance and where a given unknown fits in the greater scheme of things. Different face men employ different styles, and any approach that works is a successful one. One might be the disarming conniver





whose unctuous charm enables him to sleaze his way into the good graces of the local power structure, while another is a bluntly earnest straight-shooter, speaking her mind and doing others the respect of allowing them to know exactly where they stand. Still others have their own distinct methods, and there's no one "right way" to go about it.

Unfortunately, sages and scholars often get the shaft when it comes to life on the road. All of the book learning in the world amounts to exactly nothing when one is staring down a rabid grizzly with nothing but the cold sweat on his palms. In such circumstances, skill and experience — rather than an education in theory — save lives. That said, some cerebral characters find themselves in a position to do far better, for themselves and for a nomadic group, than others. Skilled investigators, for instance, can be in high demand in many cities, not to mention the asset that such training can provide for the group itself. Likewise, someone proficient in the Crafts Skill is almost always a useful member of the group, as that Skill is such a catch-all. Given the sorts of circumstances in which nomads often find themselves, a scholar of the paranormal is a welcome addition for most characters. On the other hand, a trained geneticist or political scientist has less to offer in most highway chronicles.

In terms of other assets to bring to the table, a broad selection of Merits exists that can be of considerable benefit to a group of characters making their lives on the road. Allies and Contacts in the right places, for example, can mean the difference between riding high and doing without. Resources (assuming access to a bank, working ATM or register that accepts credit cards) prove that money is the universal language. No one argues with the wisdom of having at least one Stunt Driver in a chronicle taking place on the long road, and someone skilled in a Fighting Style is a welcome addition to the group when tempers flare and weapons are drawn. Even something as seemingly insignificant as Eidetic Memory can make a big difference in a nomad chronicle ("Wait a minute, guys. I remember this stretch of road. We passed it fifteen minutes ago, and we've been going in a straight line that entire time . . .") In the end, almost *any* Merit, used properly, can have a positive impact upon the viability of a group on the road, helping them to survive when circumstances conspire to kill them, and to thrive when they might otherwise merely survive.

Lastly, we must consider supernatural powers. In determining the usefulness of a given paranormal ability to a nomad, keep in mind two primary factors: frequency of utility and scope of utility. Vampires who are able to sleep in the soil obviate the need for shelter during the day, making such a power of frequent utility, though the scope of the ability is somewhat limited (escaping the harmful effects of sunlight and perhaps the scrutiny of pursuers in a pinch). Conversely, a wise mage who can summon spirits to do her bidding probably don't want to do such a thing often, limiting the frequency of utility, but she quickly discovers the incredible diversity of effects available to one so skilled. Some powers are frequently needful and offer a broad spectrum of potential uses. Such powers include influencing the minds of others,

controlling natural phenomena and summoning or creating necessary items. Powers with a narrow focus tend to be less useful to wanderers, unless that focus is directly applicable to life on the road — the ability to inflict many differing shades of terror on a subject is a somewhat less desirable skill than, say, the power to generate any liquid at will.

The End of One Road . . .

At one point or another, almost any story that takes place on the road is going to roll into some manner of urban center, whether that means a bustling metropolis or a podunk town just east of nowhere. The Storytelling dynamic for such a transition, however, is remarkably different from that which is to be found in a more settled and sedentary chronicle. At best, the characters are guests or tourists and, at worst, foreign interlopers or reviled invaders. For the denizens of the supernatural, things tend to be worse. Paranormal beings invariably establish a sense of equilibrium within their respective environments, and the arrival of outsiders can very easily tilt that balance in an undesirable direction.

Getting the Locals' Attention

For ordinary mortals, it's (usually) easy enough to find someone local to speak to about where to go and what to do, often as simple as pulling into a gas station, ringing the bell at the front desk or ordering a drink at the bar. For supernatural creatures, however, things can be significantly more complicated. It's not as though one can pull up next to the officer at the crosswalk and ask, "So, where do the vampires gather in this town?" That in mind, how *do* those who walk in the shadows of the paranormal find their own when entering into unfamiliar territory?

While this book is primarily intended to discuss in broad generalities the various types of supernatural beings wandering the lonely roads of the World of Darkness, a more specific treatment of the different creatures' needs and motivations is warranted at this point:

- **Vampires:** Despite the perils inherent in Predator's Taint, vampire nomads the world over have, ironically, come to appreciate this strange phenomenon as a useful means for finding a local representative of the Damned who might direct the nomads to an authority figure. In brief, this effect, which occurs whenever two vampires meet for the first time, impels the weaker of the two to flee and the stronger to attack. The Taint isn't strong enough to send them into frenzy — usually. Of course, going berserk on a member of the court who happens to be about the business of scouting out his evening's repast isn't a great way to ingratiate oneself with the powers-that-be, and so Kindred have sought to develop other methods of contacting their kind when entering a new city. Some covenants, for instance, make use of old-fashioned correspondence. Certain elders even go to the trouble of making known means of contacting them within very limited circles, so



as to mitigate the potential for unexpected visitors. Other Kindred make use of the ties of blood (whether in the form of clan, bloodline or even lineage) as a means for securing a welcome within an unfamiliar domain.

- **Werewolves:** In many places, it's simply impractical to stop at the edge of another's territory and howl a greeting. While a pack based out of a ski lodge in the mountains or a logging town in the wilderness won't necessarily mind that sort of calling card, one operating in the heart of a violent slum is apt to view such an introduction as a threat to the secrecy of their race, and rightly so. The subtle cues of scent can sometimes be used to indicate a desire for audience, though this can take a great deal of creativity on the part of the nomad (given that wolves' olfactory cues don't naturally include anything in the way of a request to stop and chat). Unfortunately, as some nomadic packs come to discover, local Forsaken are occasionally inclined to act friendlier than they are, in the hopes of luring the pack in to steal their fetishes and other resources. Further, some Pure can convince wandering Forsaken that they hold the same allegiance, eager to meet prospective guests — often for reasons far less wholesome than mere theft.

- **Mages:** The Awakened have perhaps the best-defined protocols for interactions with outsiders. The office of the Herald, common to many Consilii is, among other things, specifically intended to serve as a leader's messenger to Awakened in other cities. Just because mages have a system in place for interacting with foreign Awakened, however, does not mean that wanderers are invariably (or even often) well received, or that Consilii make it easy for would-be visitors to find someone to talk to. Sometimes, spells of greeting or mystic requests for audience (such as a glowing sigil, apparent only to mystic sight, or a messenger ghost) can be used to find a local mage. Other times, a request might be lodged through the Herald of one city to arrange for a meeting with the Herald of the next town over.

- **Changelings:** The Lost are a scattered breed, united by a terrifying common experience and an implacable foe. Changelings take well to the wanderer's life. Indeed, there are many tales of faerie beings haunting the roads and lurking in the wilderness, moving from place to place. Arcane customs of hospitality can exist within freeholds, though one never knows for certain whether the group is walking into a place governed by an honorable lord or a ferocious beast until that long last step is taken. The tentative ties forged between some of the





Lost within just the past decade are gradually ameliorating some of the perils inherent in the nomadic lifestyle, but the constant fear of reprisal on the part of the Others keeps many freeholds intensely suspicious of outsiders fresh from the road.

• **Prometheans:** The Created are, in some ways, the perfect nomads. With a powerful incentive never to settle in any one place for more than a few days at a time — a few weeks, at most — they tend to spend the majority of their lonely half-lives on the road. Lacking as they do anything resembling a cohesive society, Prometheans don't generally need to give thought to disturbing any kind of "local power structure" among the Created, though Prometheans actually have the easiest way of finding each other — when they get within a certain distance, they just know it. Of course, wandering from place to place certainly encompasses perils for the Created, just as surely as for any other kind of nomad. While their enemies and predators are certainly not common, they often have a way of crossing Prometheans' paths, and wise Created take what precautions they can to discern the presence of such monstrosities in any new city they enter. Conversely, any local Promethean who's managed to stake out a semi-stable homestead will probably hold onto her little island of sanity with frightening resolve, and may well view outsiders with suspicion.

Naturally, normal humans don't have these sorts of problems when they travel, since they can be certain (under all save the most terrifyingly extraordinary circumstances) that almost everyone they run into in a given port of call is "their kind." Members of esoteric fellowships and the like may experience

a lesser degree of the consternation inherent in finding locals who share their particular allegiance, but this inconvenience is minute next to the perils supernatural beings face when they fail to get in touch with the proper local authorities. Indeed, the far greater danger for mundane (or even mostly mundane) nomads is to be found in the handful of places they roll into in which being human puts you in the *minority*.

"Gassing Up"

A central facet of the design of the World of Darkness is the existence of supernatural "fuel" that sustains paranormal beings and/or facilitates the use of their exceptional abilities. Sedentary beings tend to find a source of whatever "fuel" they require and stake a claim. Wanderers usually have no such recourse and must, therefore, resort to one of a few methods of acquiring whatever it is that they need.

• **Unclaimed resources:** For the most part, unclaimed sources of supernatural "fuel" can be hard to come by. Mages don't just leave Hallows lying around, and rare indeed is the locus that isn't claimed by spirits or other Uratha. When a source of power isn't claimed, the characters should probably question *why* it isn't. Maybe all of the Mana that comes from a given Hallow is somehow tainted, or all of the local mortals possess some elusive quality to their blood that somehow causes Kindred to sicken. Save in the rarest of circumstances, there is no such thing as a free ride.

• **Barter:** When characters encounter others of their kind, those others may well have a surplus of whatever it is that the characters need, and *might* be willing to part with some of that surplus, for a price. The local Kindred might

A Place to Hang Your Hat

One of the critical advantages of many kinds of supernatural beings is to be found in a residence of some sort (Haven for vampires, Sanctum for mages, Lair for Prometheans and Hollow for changelings). These Merits are designed to be shared amongst members of a group, thus allowing for them to become quite large and secure, as well as sometimes bestowing other benefits. How, then, does one incorporate such places into a chronicle that takes place on the road?

In general, the following considerations should be taken into account in creating a mobile residence:

- It's virtually impossible to make such a mobile residence any larger than what would be encompassed by a single large room, unless the characters have access to abilities that can twist and expand the axes of space.
- Enhanced security can take a number of forms. Vehicles can be armored, for instance (there are a number of firms that will perform this service for a considerable fee, if the characters lack the means to do so for themselves). Likewise, an advanced alarm system can do much to dissuade would-be car thieves or those looking to break in and ransack the place. If the characters don't object to the company (and aren't a type of creature that inherently engenders negative reactions in such, or at least possesses powers that can mitigate an animal's aversion), a guard dog can be kept in the vehicle in many cases. Perhaps those with access to mortal, semi-mortal or even fully inhuman servitors can leave such a defender behind with the RV when they go out on the town.
- Such wandering residences can be modified in a wide variety of ways (see the appropriate systems on pp. 50).

have ample feeding stock, for instance, or a pack of settled Uratha may allow the nomadic pack access to the local pack's own locus, in return for a "small favor." Naturally, these services, errands, exchanges or what-have-you almost never favor the wanderers, since they're the ones trading for necessities. Characters who are desperate (or just not careful) could easily end up losing the shirts off their backs — or end up as scapegoats, whether rightly or wrongly, for offenses against the powers-that-be. Naturally, those

who are willing to give a bunch of nomads some "juice" in exchange for favors are well advised to demand those favors upfront. Otherwise, the nomads are apt to hit the road right after gassing up, leaving their "business partners" high and dry.


• **Theft:** Whenever and wherever there exists a commodity that someone needs or desires, and no ready means of acquiring such legitimately, there is bound to be theft. Among supernatural beings, however, the law is often a bit harsher regarding the pillage of necessary resources: less "burden of proof" and more "an eye for an eye." Certainly, some groups of wanderers have become quite proficient — sometimes to the point of infamy — at pirating needed goods and escaping to tell the tale, but far more often, offenders eventually get caught and, if they're lucky, they walk away to shudder in memory of the punishments levied upon them. The more successful thieves (when and if they deign to share their secrets at all, that is) tend to advise picking off the fringes of society, taking just enough to get to the next stop, rather than going for the "big score." If one is careful, they say, no one misses what's been taken before the group is long since back on the road.

• **Stocking up:** In certain cases, it's possible for characters to carry a small supply of the resource in question. Kindred might keep a small herd of animals or even humans on their RV, while a traveling cabal of mages can, with the proper skills, distill the raw magical energy they need into a material form for transport. Thus, even in the middle of nowhere, with no source of "fuel" for miles in every direction, the characters still have a little bit of a safety net to fall back on. The problem with this solution, however, is that stockpiles don't create and maintain themselves — they need to be established, sustained and protected by the characters. Mortal feeding stock need their own food, water and other basic needs, for example.

• **Charity:** Any wanderer with even a modicum of experience under her belt will freely admit that attempting to get by on the altruism of others is a sure way to end up flat broke, half-naked and starving, or else dead in a ditch. While it is true that certain sub-factions within supernatural cultures practice a limited policy of charity (such as the some vampires' tradition of hospitality toward other members of their own clan, for instance), staking one's survival upon these beliefs is an exercise in folly. Certainly, only the most well-off and/or stupidly generous supernatural beings offer free access to the resource that feeds their kind and fuels its occult powers. Whenever seemingly genuine charity is extended, the experienced wanderer looks for the hidden cost, for there almost certainly is one. Better by far, most reason, to pass up what looks like a free meal than to figure out what was wrong with it after one has cleaned one's plate.

Adaptability is perhaps the most valuable survival strategy for wanderers, and so the most successful denizens of the long road tend to resort to an approach that encompasses many or all of the above methods: begging, borrowing, trading





or stealing as opportunity allows and the situation demands. While this means that characters need to keep careful track of what they did and where ("Did we steal that tass from Denver's Hierarchy, or did we trade her for it?"), flexibility in the pursuit of one's supernatural sustenance is almost always a better policy than rigid insistence upon a single method.

...The Beginning of Another

Just as one observes certain protocols when first taking to the road, successful nomads also adhere to certain customs when departing one urban center, whether moving directly to another or else wandering without any clear direction. Some of these traditions are just common sense, while others are hard lessons, earned through trial and error. Not all apply equally well to all bands of nomads, and each such group must learn which practices best serve its interests. As the majority of the most seasoned wanderers counsel, understanding how to properly get underway after a stopover of whatever length is definitely a valuable survival skill.

In addition to the most basic and absolutely necessary measures (such as making sure that everyone is present and accounted for or that one's vehicle is gassed up and in good working order), most experienced nomads have a few items on their checklists that they consider to be requisite to an auspicious departure. While it's certainly possible to get underway without taking these precautions, those who don't will eventually find that their lack of foresight comes back to bite them, often far sooner than later.

Provisioning

In addition to the various mystic commodities that sustain supernatural creatures (some of which can be carried out of a town, in one form or another, and some of which can't), there are more mundane concerns to keep in mind. Any creature that needs to eat food and drink water will want to have some of both, unless moving directly from one urban center to another. The types and amounts of consumables that one can bring, however, depend entirely upon three factors: storage size, storage medium and how perishable the consumables are. One can't keep all of the same sorts of foods in a saddlebag on the side of a motorcycle that one can in the mini-fridge in a conversion van. Veterans of the road advise learning to love foods that store easily and keep for a long time — jerky, for instance, is a staple food for many such wanderers.

Most experienced nomads admonish others to be ready to leave almost anything else behind, given the choice between the object in question and having enough drinkable water to get to the next city. Dehydration can set in surprisingly quickly and can turn an inconvenient situation into a life-threatening one in the blink of an eye. Found water isn't always safe. Some sources are brackish, fouled or poisonous, or else carry bacteria that can cause serious illness and even death. Even a crystal-clear mountain stream can contain microbes that will lay a person up for days

with any number of highly unpleasant conditions. Away from civilization, and medical attention, such debilitating sickness can easily kill.

Those who use vehicles to get from place to place should carry equipment for servicing their conveyances in the event of the normal sorts of small troubles that can occur. Naturally, a person can't plan for everything — a broken axle is what it is, and there's not much to be done for it without access to a garage — but she can account for at least *some* of the hazards that befall the average vehicle. Those with larger vehicles have more options in what sorts of repair supplies they can carry, of course, but there's no excuse for taking to the road without a spare can of motor oil, even in the smallest compact car. Whenever a needed item runs low, runs out, breaks or is otherwise useless or in imminent danger of becoming so, nomads should think seriously about replacing the item at the first available opportunity.

Survival supplies are also something to consider. If someone's sleeping bag has gotten threadbare, then maybe the group should pick one up on the way out of town. The most skilled nomads advise never to hesitate to own the best equipment that one can reasonably afford. No one ever regrets how well made and warm his tent is when the winds are howling outside and the snow is piling up. On the other hand, many have doubtless lamented the decision to cut a few corners and save a few bucks when the seams are threatening to rip under the forces of the gale and the moisture condensing overhead is turning to ice. Whenever departing any place that has a store devoted, in whole or in part, to outdoor pursuits, wise nomads stop in, open their wallets (or check the security) and repair, replace, update or otherwise upgrade their equipment. A word to the wise, though — function *always* takes precedence over form, and it's best to keep an eye out for genuine quality, rather than merely a brand name and a big price tag. Also, experienced wanderers tend to make use of multitasking tools. The more functions one can successfully cram into a single device, the less weight one has to carry, and the fewer things one needs to sift through to find the right tool for the job at hand.

Bare Necessities

While different survival experts have their own opinions on what constitutes an absolutely bare minimum of needed equipment, virtually all agree on a few essentials. These are the sorts of things that a would-be nomad should *never* be caught without.

- **A well-made folding knife.** The potential number of situations that call for a sharp, sturdy, three-to-four-inch blade is staggering. Some particularly experienced outdoorsmen could, with such a tool in their possession and nothing else, manage to create or acquire all of the other necessities for survival.

- **A quality multitool.** The ideal multitool is heavy-duty, performs a wide variety of functions, has a safe, sure grip and is easily and securely stored somewhere accessible on one's person.

• **A small, powerful flashlight.** Light is one of those things that people take for granted, right up until they don't have it. Sturdy flashlights that don't require batteries are now readily available in a variety of stores, freeing the nomad from the necessity for a disposable (and easily lost) resource.

• **A few pieces of sturdy cloth.** Some prefer bandanas, while others just pick up clean rags at an auto parts store, but most of those who know the road also know that many situations can crop up that are made a little better, or even fixed outright, by a one-foot by one-foot scrap of fabric.

• **Something for starting a fire.** Fire cooks food, provides warmth, wards off certain dangerous animals and provides a host of other potential benefits. While not every environment offers suitable kindling for starting a fire, many do, and a wise wanderer keeps a pack of waterproof matches, a lighter or even a dedicated fire-starting tool around for the occasions that call for such.

• **A cellular or satellite phone and vehicle-adapted charger.** When all else fails, try calling for help. Some circumstances just can't be negotiated without the ability to call in someone else. While many supernatural wanderers are loath to do so, few can deny that the power to call a tow truck, an ambulance, the state police or even just a distant friend can prove to be a lifesaver.

Other pieces of equipment are open to debate. Some prefer to carry a blanket or portable shelter, while others favor a compass or GPS. Still others have their own opinions on what constitutes needed gear. The truth of the matter is that each nomad eventually settles on the equipment that best suits her personality, her skills, her needs and her environment, but the items above have a place in almost any wanderer's rucksack.

Departing on Good Terms

When departing a given city, wise nomads do their best to leave a good impression on not just the people in charge but also the people who *might* be in charge the next time the nomads happen to be passing through. After all, times change, and the guy who's riding high today is dead and dust tomorrow. Sometimes, nomads with recourse to such things take steps to stay in touch with one or more locals, in the hopes of making sure that someone leaves a candle burning in the window on some dark and forlorn night, when a small group of wanderers might just need some safe port in a storm.

Good relations can be fostered in a number of ways, some of which are more readily available to nomads than others. Offering services free of charge, for example, is well and good, right up until one considers the fact that most wanderers simply don't have sufficient resources on hand to be expending their efforts *pro bono*. On the other hand, giving assistance to the locals *cheaply* is another matter entirely, and an especially useful one. Consider that most nomadic groups have little use for, say, their own parcel of land within a given city (quite a prize by the reckoning of most supernatural beings), but would be more than happy to accept \$25,000 in compensation for a deed for which a

settled local could easily demand such a land grant. The local powers-that-be make out well in the deal, and the wanderers receive useful recompense — everyone wins.

Naturally, showing respect to the local authorities is a good way to create a favorable impression. Well-connected nomads sometimes go out of their way to send word ahead, but few wanderers have this option. Instead, most content themselves with lying low and not causing any problems, aware that the constabulary (or whatever) will find them and bring them before the local leadership soon enough. While it can certainly gall one's sense of pride, most veterans of the road counsel a humble — though not submissive — demeanor before city authorities. People in charge often like to feel that others acknowledge their importance, but acting the part of the whipped dog is almost certain to get a person treated like one. Instead, a show of deference to the station of local leaders creates a favorable impression that can last long after the nomads have returned to the road.

Making friends all over a given city is a time-honored tactic for receiving a sincere welcome back at a later date. Even if the guy in charge is bound and determined to hate the nomads, other people in the city, some of whom he cannot simply ignore, might stand up for the characters and offer their own hospitality. This approach is less useful in a place where the ruler is an absolute and iron-fisted tyrant, but those sorts of totalitarian arrangements are relatively few and far between.

A Plan

While, sometimes, it's no more complex than, "Let's just get the fuck out of here, *right now*," seasoned nomads know that it's always better to have a sound plan when leaving a city. For some groups, this plan involves the next city on the circuit, meaning that the characters can estimate travel times, rest periods and the like. Other wandering bands go for something a bit vaguer — "Let's head north for a day or two and see what's going on from there." In whatever case, though, moving utterly without direction or a sense of purpose is bad for most nomads, as it can easily result in the sort of meandering blur of passing days that leads to boredom, ennui and sloppiness.

The plan at hand need not involve a destination, either. Acquiring a new motorcycle for one of the members of the group is a worthwhile objective, as is replacing the ammunition that got used up in a "hurried" departure from the last city. While there's no particular town at the end of such goals, they also create a structure for the wanderers and give them the sense that their lives aren't just an endless and meaningless act of migration. That said, however, certain groups *do* favor the "better lucky than good" school of travel and prefer to go wherever the wind takes them. Some even end up being quite successful in their wanderings, though they constitute a clear minority of nomads.

Sometimes, despite their best intentions, nomads occasionally find themselves run out of town or else sneaking off in the small hours of the morning. In some cases, this is because of something that the nomads have done to anger



the local powers, but, just as often, it has a lot more to do with the convenience of a transient patsy upon whom to pin the blame for a heinous crime. In whatever case, those who dwell on the road need to accept the reality that they're not going to leave every town with an open invite to return.

Having an escape strategy, adapted as necessary for the particulars of a given area, is critical for nomadic bands. A ruling council of willworkers might not be able to mobilize the local Awakened law enforcement as quickly as a single authority figure, for instance, and the group might be able to spare the time needed to acquire more supplies (or make off with more swag) before the wanderers have got to put some miles behind them. Only rarely does the tactic of "stand and fight" work out to the benefit of the wanderers, so such individuals have to always be ready to run for the hills and cross another town off the map—at least until they return with leverage, or else the power changes hands to a more potentially sympathetic party.

An Empty House

So, what happens when characters pull into Anytown and discover that it hosts *none* of their kind? Maybe there's a booming nightlife and tourist industry, just the sort of place that Kindred would love to set up shop. Why, then, aren't there any? Or, perhaps, a potent Hollow rests atop the tall hill overlooking the town and, yet, no mages seem to reside there. Surely, the place hasn't

gone this long without *someone* taking notice of that resource. Why is no one making use of it?

The fact of the matter is that it can be damned scary to walk into a perfectly functional location, only to discover that, for no discernable reason, no one is working, playing or residing there. A number of horror and/or suspense stories make use of the inexplicably abandoned site. For supernatural creatures, this sort of thing can potentially take on an entirely different sort of meaning. A city need not be a literal ghost town when the vampires drive in. Instead, it might just be that there exists no evidence that any Kindred power structure currently exists there, despite ample feeding and other incentives to be had. Worse still, perhaps a handful of clues points to that fact that the Damned *were* there, even up until very recently.

The Human Factor

It's hard to figure which is more disconcerting and dangerous for supernatural beings: finding a great location that no one is living in or using or finding one that's occupied by normal people and in which none of *their kind* are dwelling. The former sort of situation would seem to indicate that something is deeply wrong with the place in question, and that it's probably to be avoided. The latter circumstance, however, offers a dangerous invitation to the characters. What if this site has simply avoided the notice of Kindred, Forsaken or whatever? (Unlikely, but



possible.) If not, then why is no one else making use of the resources to be found?

The hard truth is that this sort of scenario drives home the distance that exists between ordinary human beings and the denizens of the supernatural. Such beings are always a step apart and in the minority, but being in such a situation serves to remind them how disconnected they *truly* are. If a catastrophe wiped out all of the local Lost and no one really noticed, then who'd know or care if the nomads themselves just up and disappeared one day? It's not exactly a concern that they can bring to anyone, either. ("Excuse me, but did something happen recently to make a bunch of weird people vanish?") Alienated by an unknown threat, the burden of which they can't share with anyone else, the characters feel acutely the sting of the separation from normalcy.

Maybe the locals are completely ignorant of whatever happened to the Awakened in the area, and one day, the population was a handful of people smaller, with no one the wiser. Or, perhaps, the people *did* know that something was up, and some (or many or even all) are secretly relieved about whatever made those "unnatural" people go away. Then again, it might just be that some fraction of the populace — maybe even a majority of it — knew just a little bit too much about their unusual neighbors and took steps to *make* such a thing happen. If the nomads stay for too long, it may come to pass that the locals take an interest in making the nomads disappear, too.

Ghost Towns

The world is littered with thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands, of ghost towns. Some are still in the process of losing their last few stragglers, while others have been derelict for millennia. *All* potentially encompass stories, as has been mentioned in previous chapters of this book.

Ghost towns crop up for a variety of reasons. Some sites are left derelict when needed resources vanish — a well might have dried up, for example, or blight wiped out several seasons of the local staple crop. In other cases, the basis of the local economy collapsed or otherwise disappeared, as happened with a number of boomtowns during the Gold Rush. A serious illness might have taken the population, and everyone who had the ability to escape did so, leaving only the dead and the dying behind them. Still other ghost towns happen for stranger reasons: the supposed "curse" of Dudleytown, Connecticut, for instance, or the pueblo settlement of Chaco Canyon, abandoned for reasons unknown.

There are a few difficulties to keep in mind when running characters through a story set in a ghost town. For instance, if the characters are vampires, you need to keep in mind that mortal human blood is difficult or impossible to come by in such places. Likewise, the delicate interplay of Kindred social interaction that is, in large part, a core theme of **Vampire: The Requiem** is simply absent. In a ghost town, there is no Prince to impress, no Primogen who might offer work and no Scourge to avoid. Similar difficulties can occur in almost any other World of Darkness genre.

Werewolves, for example, don't end up having to deal with the issues of territory that are normally part-and-parcel with wandering into a new place, or with the difficulty of concealing themselves from the herd. Likewise, mages don't need to worry quite so much about the secrecy of the Mysteries in a place utterly devoid of human presence. While there are certainly great stories that can be told in such desolate locales, just remember that some of the core precepts of the game are apt to be lessened in importance — or completely absent — when you remove the mass of humanity from the equation. About the only characters who can get by in a ghost town, while still staying true to the core themes of their "type" are Prometheans, and even they will eventually destroy whatever kind of home they attempt to create there.

The ghost town presents different challenges from those offered by more conventional sorts of games but also distinct Storytelling benefits. Beyond the kinds of weird tales that can be told in a place where there are no mundane eyes to behold untold wonders or horrors, the ghost town can allow for explorations into the very reasons for the secrecy of the supernatural. Werewolves, changelings or mages might be tempted to cut loose, unafraid of the threat of witnesses to their abilities, while vampires feed freely on local wildlife, seeking a respite from the desire to feast on human life. It's easy to grow lazy or careless in a place where actions are seemingly without consequence. And then what happens when a tour arrives to take pictures of the old town? Can the characters remember the importance of restraint?

Village of the Damned

Sometimes, it's not just a bit of weirdness clinging to the outmost edges of a lonely and forlorn hamlet in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes, the corruption goes *everywhere*, bubbling up out of the earth, clinging to the walls and pumping through the locals' veins as surely as blood. When one wanders into town after town, on a road as endless as it is strange, one occasionally finds a place in which the paranormal doesn't just manage to coexist with the ordinary but has instead managed to devour it utterly, and almost never for the better.

These sorts of "villages of the damned" are rare, naturally, and tend to exist in the sorts of places that are out of the way and easily overlooked. Perhaps it's just that the town isn't accessible and the Census Bureau hasn't been there in decades, or maybe it's a small collection of tin-roofed shacks far off the road and along the banks of a dingy little river, invisible to the eyes of the modern world. Whatever the case, these settlements are almost invariably small — with populations no larger than a few hundred, and often fewer than that — since anything larger tends to attract attention of one sort or another before too long.

Remember, though, that any locale that separates a community from the rest of the world can become a "village of the damned." An exclusive gated community in the suburbs, for example, might host bizarre goings-on, as



might a rural boarding school, year-round campground or an isolated religious retreat. While characters may not have a compelling reason to visit a centuries-old Catholic mission in the mountains, that might just be the only place that they can walk to in a blizzard when the car breaks an axle. In a situation like that, the warm glow of lights can seem quite welcoming. It's only after the characters enter the mission and deal with the inhabitants that the characters begin to realize that there's something more at work, just beneath the surface. Gradually, the dangers of the snowstorm start to seem a lot safer than the "tranquility" to be found within the mission's walls.

A Matter of Scale

The "village of the damned" scenario is one that needs to be carefully monitored within the context of most chronicles, lest such a scenario rapidly grow wildly out of control. Perhaps the most important thing to consider when creating such a place for your game is to ask what safeguards are inherently in place, keeping the strangeness from creeping down the road, to the next town in line, and then the next and so on. Supernatural beings and phenomena tend to contain themselves, whether out of respect for a code of secrecy, or on account of being easily overlooked or misinterpreted by mundane humanity. Unless you're looking to tell a story about the fall of the thin veil of normalcy that protects people behind their ignorance (something that must, necessarily, be beyond the scope of this book), it's definitely a factor worthy of consideration.

For instance, perhaps the hamlet in question is hemmed in on all sides by an intersection of rivers that the phenomenon in question can't cross, or maybe all of the copper in the hills prevents the entities possessing the citizens from leaving the area. Conversely, maybe the effect in question is limited in scope, whether by desire or inherent design: ghosts invading the bodies of the locals might have no desire (or ability) to move beyond a certain distance from the mass grave where their remains are interred, for example.

Shades of Wrong

A settlement can go wrong in many ways in the "village of the damned" scenario, and you need to decide what manner of strangeness, exactly, has taken hold of the locals. Characters may or may not try to cure whatever's ailing the townsfolk, but it's worth knowing whether or not they should even bother making the attempt. A hive-mind created by the spores of a semi-sentient 100-cubic-mile subterranean fungus probably calls for a very different treatment than one made by an alien intelligence that reaches through every point where shadows cross atop one another.

It also pays to remember that banking on characters to stick around and try to fix the problem isn't always the wisest approach. Most nomads survive by saving their own skins first, those of their companions second and others not at all. It may well be that the group will only take a shot at clearing up whatever's gotten into the normal human population if there's the potential for a payoff, or if *not* doing so will clearly be disastrous for them. And that's fine — nothing says that the characters

have to try and save the world. Maybe the best they can hope for is escape.

On the other hand, all characters in the World of Darkness have some kind of Morality trait (although they vary greatly in focus: a werewolf's Harmony is much different, in theme and effect, from a vampire's Humanity). Leaving a town in which the residents are infected with a spiritual disease without attempting to help might well call for degeneration. But using Morality as a stick to motivate players is clumsy and somewhat heavy-handed. A better use of the Trait might be to help you put the situation in some kind of context for the players. A high-Harmony werewolf might see the aforementioned spiritual disease as repugnant, and might not want to leave if *that's* what she's leaving behind. A vampire with even a bit of his Humanity remaining might not want to consign a whole town to a life of supernatural taint — that's his lot, after all.

From a practical standpoint, the “village” needs to be challenging. If you want to menace the characters with such a place, then you need to know the capabilities of the characters specifically and of their supernatural type in general. A town where all the inhabitants are actually dead and revert to near-mindless, carnivorous, plague-ridden zombies by night doesn't usually pose anywhere near the same danger to vampires or the Created that such a town does to werewolves, and Uratha are better off in that respect than, say, most mages or changelings. A small colony of beings that possess human hosts and feed off blood — and finds Kindred to be a rare and unexpected treat — can, however, certainly make such characters fear for their continued existence. Likewise, a hamlet of cannibals who feed on the dead might find Prometheans, with their living-yet-lifeless flesh, to be a delicacy too good to pass up.

Scenarios

Below are some ideas for stories that can be told on the long road. They're meant to be tucked in just about anywhere, when nomads turn an unexpected bend in the road, only to find something awe-inspiring or horrific. These scenarios conform to the following format:

Name

The scenario's title and a brief summary of what it's about, as well as what sorts of characters may be better suited to the scenario's challenges and events.

Beginning

A bit of back history regarding the scenario and a place for the characters to enter into it. This section sets the stage for the story that's about to unfold.

Middle

This section moves along the plot of the scenario, enabling the characters to drive at the heart of the situation and explore its mysteries more deeply.

End

This section draws the scenario to its conclusion — perhaps permanently, and perhaps not. Commonly, this means that the characters learn, accomplish or otherwise obtain what they must, though they may well have to content themselves with a partial victory, or even just a narrow escape.

Systems and Characters

Just as it sounds, this section covers any special mechanics required by the scenario, as well as the Storyteller characters necessary to the plot.

The Town That Wasn't There

Even with the proliferation of technologies designed to neatly define and categorize every corner of the globe, a few isolated pockets of strangeness still manage to slip quietly off the edges of the map. These lonely villages and sleepy little hamlets often go unnoticed by the world at large, with some going for years, decades or even centuries being virtually unaffected by the goings-on without. Whispering Falls is just such a place, located far off the beaten path — the sort of place that no one looks for and only the unfortunate find. Characters best suited to unravel the town's mysteries are perceptive and have some experience with the

Empathy, Investigation, Occult, Persuasion and Survival Skills. Some proficiency with more aggressive Skills (Brawl, Firearms, Intimidation and Weaponry) may also turn out to be useful, depending upon how the characters choose to deal with the locals.

Beginning

The easiest way to introduce Whispering Falls to the characters is to have them come driving into it. Almost invariably, their arrival will be unplanned, as few, if any,



sources still record the town's existence. Still, it is possible that those working from older maps and other records have learned of Whispering Falls and desire, for whatever reason, to go there. Characters who aren't nomadic by nature are somewhat harder to hook into the story, as Whispering Falls is very much an out-of-the-way location, distant from the relative safety and surety of the modern world. Still, maybe old rumors send normally sedentary characters out, looking for the "lost" town — whether to find something alleged to be there, or perhaps to research the location itself.

Immediately upon entering Whispering Falls, the characters can sense that something is amiss. A quick study of the area shows that no telephone poles dot the sides of the dirt roads and no streetlights or traffic signals are to be found. The place looks as though the world forgot it sometime around the Great Depression, as if the years have stopped utterly in their march here.

In fact, that's largely what happened in Whispering Falls, which was hit particularly hard by America's economic collapse nearly a century ago. It was right around that time that Judah Pickett, the wealthiest man in town, gathered folks together in the dusty town square and informed them that the nightmare was over; that they were as good as saved and that the "decadent outside world" would no longer threaten their beloved town. Old Judah had always been a bit of an eccentric, so the people smiled and nodded, some clapped and a few even shook Judah's hand or gave him a friendly pat on the back, and everyone then promptly returned to his destitute, dirt-farming routine. The old man's rousing speech was forgotten in a matter of days, and life returned to normal in Whispering Falls.

No one is quite sure who first noticed that things were becoming . . . *peculiar*. Judah Pickett had died not long after his little pep talk, but it happened that folks in the area stopped visiting other places, and in turn, folks from other places stopped visiting Whispering Falls. For a long time, no one thought anything of it, until someone brought it up, and then *everyone* began to wonder how odd that was. Despite their wondering, however, no one actually thought to go somewhere else, just to get news of what was going on elsewhere, and when someone actually considered *that*, people started to worry.

For whatever reason, it proved quite difficult to work up the courage to actually attempt to depart Whispering Falls, but three men did it: John Applegate, Bill Grover and Red Chandler. Only Red returned, looking like he'd gone 20 rounds with a bobcat, and he was in such a state that he had to be dragged away from the women and children, who were plainly terrified by his tales of "nightmares walking in the woods and through the tall grasses." Beyond a certain point, he could only mutter, "No way out . . . no way out . . . *no way back home.*"

Ever since that awful day, the people came to understand a hideous truth: in seeking to protect them, Judah Pickett somehow condemned the locals to a nightmarish existence outside of the weave of the world as they knew it. Whispering

Falls knew its own and, like an abusively overprotective parent, clutched them close to its bosom and refused to allow them to stray from its apron strings. Those who tried were punished. Those who refused to accept the lesson — who kept pushing against the boundaries that the town inscribed upon the alien, Other place in which Whispering Falls now existed — were never seen again, though some heard their voices thereafter, screaming in terror or cackling with mad laughter, when the wind blew just so from out of the woods.

So it was, until some years ago (the locals no longer bother to reckon time like normal folks, since it seems to be a somewhat more fluid concept in Whispering Falls), when Pete Haversham returned from the last of his seven attempts to leave the town. He claimed to have stumbled upon old Judah's hunting cabin in the woods, through a forest floor strewn with a great patch of moaning crimson thistles, under the thin light of an autumn dusk. And, within, Pete found a sheaf of papers hinting, in the most sideways and ambiguous of terms, at whatever was done to the town. He produced those pages, and the elders of Whispering Falls took to studying them, searching for any clue as to how to end their imprisonment. Invariably, they came back to a single sentence, scribbled in the bottom right corner of the third page in the stack: "A soul for a soul."

It was shortly thereafter that the first outsider in unknown years came wandering into Whispering Falls: a young woman dressed strangely, in tight denims with hugely flared cuffs, wooden-soled sandals and a simple tube of shimmering fabric covering her breasts. She spoke in a manner largely unfamiliar to the locals, and was painted up like a hussy. She claimed to have been "thumbing to LA." On a hunch, Pete Haversham took her hostage and locked her up in his fruit cellar, torturing her daily, until she agreed to take his place in Whispering Falls. One week later, Pete walked out of Whispering Falls, never to return. A week or so after that, the locals followed the smell to the cellar, only to find the girl dead of a savage beating, with the words "A soul for a soul" written in her blood on the earthen floor.

Since that time, eight more outsiders have entered Whispering Falls, and of them, six have eventually agreed — under great duress — to take the places of locals. All eight now lie in plots hidden in the trees surrounding cemetery hill, each marked by a small wooden cross, covered in flaking and peeling whitewash. Always, the outsiders have entered alone, and always, the townsfolk have attempted to get the outsiders to accept, by hook or by crook, a place in Whispering Falls far more permanent than the visitors might have understood. Now, the characters have entered the town, and the locals see an perfect opportunity for several of them to depart this accursed place.

It's vitally important to this point to keep in mind the ambiguity that surrounds Whispering Falls. The folks in town, for instance, are unfamiliar with modern technology, but in a way that makes it unclear as to whether such is on account of existing out of synch with the normal flow

Isolation

Despite being surrounded by people, the characters are essentially alone in Whispering Falls. Their phones don't work. They can't gas up their vehicle. They find the locals muttering in hushed tones at their backs. Further, the town *itself* is cut off from the outside world, with nothing more than a handful of dirt roads leading out, into tall grass and a thick tangle of the gnarled trees that hem the community in on every side. It's the sort of separation that drives people mad. It's certainly had that sort of impact on the locals.

Everything that makes the modern world function isn't present, and people have to make do with whatever's there: wells and outhouses, fields of crops, chickens, pigs and cows. Everything that people need to survive is there, but everything that they need to feel *connected* to the rest of humanity is decidedly absent. As outsiders who've stumbled upon Whispering Falls, the burden upon the characters is doubly heavy, as they lack even the basic support network from which the townsfolk benefit, the product of a common upbringing and a shared misery.

of time or merely an isolated and rural frame of reference. They tend to use figures of speech more common to the early 20th century than the early 21st, but again, that may simply be the result of a secluded upbringing in a hidden and backward corner of America.

Everything tends to be handmade, or else an antique churned out of a factory over a century ago, but the locals don't react in any particularly overt way to more modern innovations, neither with wonderment nor especial disdain. They may call attention to the "unusual" contemporary fashions that the characters wear, but far more from a sense of differing aesthetics than of awe for their "futuristic" mode of dress — something like the reaction that the hill folk from *Deliverance* would have had toward modern styles and fancy foreign cars.

The characters should constantly be left wondering if the people of Whispering Falls are just rubes, or if they are, indeed, truly trapped in a time out of time. (Good Empathy and Persuasion rolls can turn up some unpleasant possibilities, as the locals do their best to dodge simple questions with sideways answers.) It can be great fun to drop hints that cause their opinions to lean one way or the other over the course of the story, so long as you don't do anything that confirms the truth of the matter until the dread realization of what's *truly* going on there.



Middle

Accounts differ as to what Judah Pickett did to pull Whispering Falls off the face of the map. Some say that he cut a deal with Old Scratch on the night of the new moon, while standing before the great dead oak atop Cemetery Hill. Others believe that he called upon old magic, the last little measure of it clinging to the outmost corners of the town, to drive out the crushing weight of reason threatening his dominion over the little fief. Still others maintain that he turned to unholy sciences, fueled by equal measures of madness and the subtle energies of the Earth. In the end, it really doesn't matter — what he thought would be a great way of saving Whispering Falls from what he believed to be the world's inevitable degeneration into a new Dark Age has, in many ways, damned the town and its people.

Now, the folks in Whispering Falls want out, and they've discovered a method — perhaps a loophole intentionally left in Judah's design — that allows them to do just that. The problem, of course, is that doing so necessarily entails feeding someone else to the town's ravenous, all-consuming need to possess. It's not that the townsfolk, long since broken by their exile, have difficulties with that, of course, but rather that it takes a bit of finesse to set up the circumstances wherein a local can pass along whatever "mark" the town placed upon her to an unwitting outsider, and so escape Whispering Falls' terrible metaphysical gravity. Either finesse, or else stunningly inhuman brutality. Both methods have worked, but never before has a whole *group* of outsiders wandered into the transformed Whispering Falls. Clearly, kidnapping and torture promise too many difficulties to make for a worthwhile strategy in this instance. Maybe one or two could be broken in such a manner, but the rest are bound to realize their inevitable fate and to hold out from spite alone, until they expire from their torments.

The townsfolk, therefore, try to get the characters to agree to stay in the locals' stead, but must do so carefully, lest the whole thing fall apart on them. One might be promised a great treasure of Judah's (which may or may not be real) to get her friend to agree to stay, while another may be offered his pick of the local girls — one of his choice, or as many as he likes. The only constant is that the character in question must agree in unambiguous terms and of *his own free will* (though not necessarily without duress) to take the place of one of Whispering Falls' locals. The unspoken tradition stands that outsiders are on a "first come, first served" basis, so whoever talks the newcomer into taking her place is free to go.

The townsfolk will offer to put the characters up, and will cook for them and put on whatever kind charm they can. Some come off as sincere, but most seem unctuous and at least a bit unhinged, the longer the characters interact with them. The decades of isolation have turned the locals *wrong*, and the frayed edges of their sanity sometimes poke out, where outsiders can glimpse them. Out of fear of Whispering Falls' potential retaliation, none of the townsfolk will kill another local, but they *will* scheme against one another, each hoping to secure a ticket to freedom at an outsider's expense.

The locals lie as much and as badly as they think they can get away with, once the characters have picked up on the unnatural exile of Whispering Falls. Townsfolk may, for instance, tell characters who've tried to get back out and failed that the only way to escape is to accept a place in the town for 20 years, and that any other attempt to escape can only lead to madness and death (in fact, they've got a couple of mauled lunatics squirreled away in basements to lend weight to that claim). Others might play against the characters' compassion, or other vulnerabilities that they sense. In the end, *no* method is too underhanded for the locals, so long as the end result is that the outsider willingly utters the words, "I accept your place in Whispering Falls," or something to that precise effect.

Further complicating this entire affair is the possibility that the characters are in some way supernatural beings. The townsfolk have never, to their knowledge, dealt with such a creature in human form. The characters might mean to discern the truth of Whispering Falls in short order, with or without the aid of the locals. Even if that's the case, however, the characters still aren't guaranteed an easier time of getting free of the place than any other outsider — while escape is *possible* for them, unlike for someone bound to the place, it's still not a simple thing. Whispering Falls hungers, and breaking its grasp takes will and cunning, above any sort of paranormal capabilities.

End

Offering to help the people escape their banishment from the world is futile: they believe such a thing to be impossible and, even if shown evidence of such in Judah Pickett's own hand, are apt to disregard it. Eventually, those who spend too long in a prison of whatever sort come to believe its walls to be impregnable. Instead, the characters must almost certainly attempt to leave on their own, abandoning the townsfolk to their unenviable fate and wandering into the twisted lands that stand between the town and freedom. (Should the characters manage to break old Judah's spell, there's no telling how the locals will react, though the result is apt to be at least somewhat unpleasant, ranging from a fear of freedom to outright disbelief to psychotic breaks.)

The wilds beyond the boundaries of Whispering Falls become maddeningly unnatural, however, the further one gets from town. The first two or three miles are normal light woods, fields and low, rolling hills, but things become ever stranger from there. Terrible entities stalk the woods and the place desires to keep the characters in, so that it can possess more lives within itself. Obviously, the characters note that the landscape looks nothing like what they passed through on their way into town, seeming halfway between an evil fairy tale and a fluid nightmare. Baleful red eyes stare from between thorny trees that sway against the wind, reaching toward living flesh. Half-seen forms, perhaps human and perhaps not, utter maledictions in no earthly tongue, before vanishing back into the fog.

The townsfolk attempt to stop the outsiders from leaving, though only the bravest follow the characters into the deep wilds. While such places are perilous for outsiders, they are invariably fatal to the locals, should they not eventually turn back. Whispering Falls is far too jealous a master to allow its children to freely stray into its outmost borders, even in the pursuit of new acquisitions. Still, the occasional potshot with a rifle or shotgun will dog the characters' steps at many points, even as the locals call out to the characters, begging to "reason" with them. If anyone is injured, whether by gunshots or by the things among the trees, the townsfolk offer medical attention in exchange for someone agreeing to stay in Whispering Falls. Wise characters, of course, will disregard such offers.

The journey is harrowing, and may take hours, days or even weeks, depending upon the characters' choices (and how generous the Storyteller feels). Some situations in the wilds are just bizarre beyond reckoning, while others are a threat to the characters' lives, and the two are not always readily distinguishable from one another. Food and water are hard to come by, and finding safe sources of either should involve heavily penalized Survival rolls. Likewise, locating safe places to bed down is a daunting proposition. If characters are truly unfortunate, they may end up spending days on end awake and wary, or having to choose starving, eating something clearly never born to any normal animal or consuming the flesh of a slain local.

Some examples of the wilds outside of Whispering Falls:

- The characters emerge from dense woods, only to find the sun setting on a copse of extremely tall and slender twisted trees upon a barren hill, bare branches spiraling upward and swaying to an unfelt breeze, as the thin light of a dead yellow sunset begins to fade on all sides.
- A patch of faintly radiant and unearthly beautiful crystalline blue-white flowers is surrounded by the bones of hundreds of small animals, shining under the moon.
- What looks as though it might be a wildcat pauses to regard the characters from between a tangle of foul-smelling thorn bushes, and then opens its mouth impossibly wide and issues a noise that sounds halfway between a feline yowl and a screaming human voice that one character recognizes as belonging to his mother.
- Things with the heads of bucks, but with dead, milk-white eyes and bodies that look as if they might belong to emaciated bears, chase the characters through a thick, rolling gray fog, their heads lolling and tossing as they run, as though their necks were broken.
- The characters find pools of what look to be fresh-water, only to find what appears to be the corpse of a child at the bottom of each. These dead children open their eyes at the characters' approach and stare at them. Disturbing the surface of the water causes a child's image to ripple and waver like a reflection, and no body can be found or felt at the bottom of any of the shallow pools.

With some luck and ingenuity, however, the characters will likely prove able to escape from the unnatural pull of Whispering Falls, and insane landscape gradually gives way to more familiar

surroundings. The characters may have acquired some new scars and perhaps some terrible lore, to go with the harrowing tale of a town that wasn't there. Likely, they'll never be able to find Whispering Falls again, even if they actively search for it. Then again, perhaps Whispering Falls somehow finds *them*, no matter how hard they attempt to evade its notice. One can never be sure of these things on the Road.

Suckered In

What happens if one or more of the characters actually fall for a ploy intended to make them all stay in Whispering Falls? Unfortunately, any character who accepts such a bargain now "belongs" to the town and cannot depart by any means known to the townsfolk. That, however, is not the same thing as "by *any* means." Old Judah Pickett was no fool, and he likely built an escape hatch into his design, just in case it went radically awry during his lifetime. Of course, the failsafe would have to be well hidden and protected, so that dissatisfied locals couldn't use it on a whim. But where would such a means of escape be concealed, and what sort of sentinel would Judah have set upon it?

Judah Pickett owned a great deal of the property in and around Whispering Falls, and he tended to think big. It's likelier than not that he scattered the knowledge of any method of egress across a number of his holdings, the more remote and perilous to access, the better. They'd be in places that Judah himself, being an old man, could've gotten to quite easily, but that others probably wouldn't have considered and wouldn't know how best to approach, even if they did: places such as the abandoned mineshaft a ways north of town (of which Judah was the last surviving worker) or the crumbling and burnt-out husk of the church south of Cemetery Hill (where Judah often liked to go for walks, but which others avoided as dangerous.) And, of course, more information may still be hidden in Judah's hunting cabin, lost in the mad wilds outside of Whispering Falls.

As to the guardian of the knowledge, if any, none can say, though the information may be under as many protections on the part of the town as by Judah's design. To a great degree, the warping effect of the area outside of Whispering Falls is an obstacle all its own, though other, more forceful defenses may also be in place. Those who seek such an escape, however, would be wise to fear the cost of their freedom as much as any being charged with protecting the way out, if not more so — it is likely to be far steeper and more abhorrent than merely "a soul for a soul."

Of course, even characters who don't "buy in" to Whispering Falls might have a reason to go looking for Judah's holdings and the information that they might contain. Perhaps they intend to destroy the terrible intelligence lurking behind the town, or maybe they want to seal Whispering Falls off from the world forever, damning the locals to an eternity without the possibility of respite. Then again, maybe the characters want to attempt this experiment again, somewhere bigger and better. Such characters would,



obviously, also need to deal with the hazards inherent to locating and absconding with Judah's writings.

Systems and Characters

The population of Whispering Falls hovers somewhere around 100 people, distributed through something like 30 households (some families are good-sized, while other houses host only a single inhabitant). The homes are somewhat closely spaced toward town square and a bit more widely dispersed on the outskirts of town. Regarding to the "time out of time" in which the locals dwell; some, still hale and hardy, recall listening to old Judah's speech, while others have been born and died in the years (decades? centuries?) since that time. The people don't understand it, and just as most of what they don't understand about the prison in which they're caught, they don't think about it much. (Incidentally, changelings who learn of this bizarre temporal distortion may believe that Judah cut a deal with the Others. Who knows? Maybe the changelings'd be right to think so.) In some instances, the flow of time and the lack of new blood have resulted in limited inbreeding (and the resultant defects) while, in others, it has resulted in pregnancies that have lingered for what feels like forever and a virtual halt to procreation. The locals' supply of crops and livestock seems to sustain itself at just the right levels, no matter the circumstances. Plants still grow after a dry summer, and animals don't take sick or die at anything other than a predictable, manageable rate.

Most of the locals can be best represented by tweaking around with the gangbanger and monster hunter templates (see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, pp. 205 and pp.

207–208, respectively), almost always dropping all but maybe a dot or so of Occult and Weaponry Skills, while adding a few dots in those Skills that would be common to hard-working rural folk. The Morality of many locals should also be significantly lower (and their encroaching inhumanity probably further augmented by some appropriate, but subtle, derangements). Also, although the Virtues and Vices of the people of Whispering Falls vary, the overwhelming majority are now ruled far more by Vice than by Virtue.

As to the monsters in the wild, you can throw variations on the various animal and ghost templates given on pp. 202–203 and pp. 214–215, respectively, of the **World of Darkness Rulebook** at the characters, or even nightmarish amalgams of both. Common Numina for the things in the woods are Animal Control, Magnetic Disruption (good for killing flashlights in the dead of night), Phantasm, Telekinesis and Terrify. The guardians, if any, of any knowledge pertaining to the nature of Whispering Falls or how to escape from it likely possess a large number of Numina and are apt to be very skilled in their most effective possible use. Of course, the things out there aren't ghosts, so the normal means of dealing with such beings don't work, even if the characters think to use them.

Navigating the wilds outside of Whispering Falls requires Wits or Resolve + Occult or Survival, depending upon the situation at hand. If a character has taken the place of a local, however, there is no way for the character to leave without finding a loophole or other escape clause contained within Judah Pickett's design. Likewise, any local who hasn't exchanged his place with that of an outsider will die if he attempts escape. While the town will try to keep others, it has no metaphysical claim on them, and they may, if they can overcome the hardships inherent in doing so, manage to get away. To date, those who have accepted places in Whispering Falls have been brutally slain by an unknown force within days of taking the bargain. The locals don't know what happens, and they don't care to find out.

Where the Road Ends

In some places, along lonesome stretches of highway, the fabric of the world draws thin and fragile. These are the places in which a sudden chill races down the spine for no apparent reason and an inexplicable sense of *wrongness* pervades. But what happens when the thread is drawn too taut, and the fabric tears? What seeps into the world through the ragged edge of a lost road's end? Characters with high Social and Mental Attributes will probably excel in this scenario. Similarly, such Skills as Empathy, Persuasion and Subterfuge are apt to serve characters well. Because of the bizarre alterations inflicted upon characters by this scenario, however, almost any Skill set can potentially be of use. In the end, though, this story is much more about an encounter with the unknown and unknowable — and with the characters' own darkest impulses — than any sorts of dice rolls.

Many stories of the Road involve individuals confronting aspects of their own personalities: their own inner demons, as it were. In many ways, this scenario brings those internal struggles to a literal semblance of life. At the end of the Road, the characters will learn about their more monstrous natures and, perhaps, a little something about what makes them (or *can* make them) into something better — in fact, their lives depend on it.

Beginning

No one knows how or when it was that a certain route got "lost" in the great, unseen weave of the world. In fact, no one really knows about its continued existence or, if they do, they're certainly not talking about it. Likely, this road was one

of those that just dried up and died when the superhighways were constructed and traffic was directed away from a forlorn little two-lane route that used to lead to somewhere. But that “somewhere” is gone now, victim of the same progress that killed the road itself. The town in question might be lingering on, with a few desperately poor families eking out a meager living on the far side of nowhere, but this isn’t the story of those people. This is the story of a severed artery in the circulatory system of a nation, one of countless many. And, as is often the case with an amputated part of the whole, there is a phantom pain, a sense that what was once there no longer is, but somehow *should* be.

Along the way, after the road died and its spirit withered, its flesh and bone began to decompose. Weeds sprouted up through cracks in the asphalt, and potholes grew until the patches of solid ground were outnumbered by those of broken gravel. Every major road that connected to this one moved away, the connection broken, until even the memory of life faded and was reduced to a dim and half-forgotten echo. Wild things reclaimed the land and took the road as their own: animals of every nature, from the lowest and meanest of crawling things, to coyote, wildcats, wolves and bears. The tiny route was forgotten, as every road leading to this dead route turned its back and meandered away — every earthly road, anyway.

Not all that dies fades quietly into oblivion, after all, and that which refuses to lie down and accept the end that has already come to pass is almost always possessed of jealousy and hunger, a reflexive hatred of that which lives. Characters can find themselves on this lost road in many ways, as nameless miles pass by and one’s progress is measured along winding lines on the map. Wrong turns happen all the time, and no system is perfect. Sometimes, things just turn out differently from what one expects, and even the most experienced driver gets lost. Maybe it looked like a shortcut. Maybe it looked like somewhere to do some sightseeing. Maybe a cluster of buildings appeared to be inhabited, until someone realized that those were coyotes picking at some dead animal and not someone’s dogs. And, just maybe, the road has its own ways of reaching out to those who, like itself, have been in some way cast aside or neglected, or who have died and refused to lie down.

Whatever the case, the road just ends, with the rubble of what used to be a state route scattered upon wild and overgrown earth, until even the last few pebbles of human-made stone can no longer be differentiated from the natural rocks hidden in the grass, slowly sifted down out of the close, looming hills by decades of rain and snow. One way or another, the characters have ended up here, upon the rotted remains, the corpse of a once-vital road. And, regardless of how recently they gassed up, it suddenly appears that there’s nowhere near enough fuel to make back to the last station.

Middle

The strangeness begins only after the characters have spent some time at the end of the road. Likely, they’re

trying to formulate plans for getting somewhere that they can gas up or otherwise move on. If you’re feeling particularly mean, perhaps one or more vehicles got damaged by debris or potholes. In any case, the characters soon begin to manifest abilities that they don’t otherwise possess (see “Systems and Characters” for a summary of how to implement this), and abilities that they *do* normally have — if any — simply don’t work. The characters have no sense of when or how their regular supernatural capabilities stopped working, merely that they have.

If the characters attempt to leave the area, they eventually find themselves back at the end of the road, with no explanation for how they got there. In fact, they may return with spotty memories of just how they got back, as though they wandered away in a dream and are waking up in the exact spot in which they fell asleep. When they turn their attention away from anything except one another, even just for a moment, those things gradually begin to take on a somewhat unhealthy, even decaying, appearance. Their vehicles look shabbier, as though they’ve been left derelict for some time, while trees start to seem as though they’re dead or dying. Animals might appear sickly or starved. Early into the night, a cold, low-lying mist makes for impeded visibility beyond about a quarter-mile. The moon rises, an unwholesome silver-gray, over the end of the road.

Whether the characters separate or remain together (though the latter is probably far likelier than the former), not-so-subtle clues begin to manifest, tipping them off to what’s become of them and what their likely fate will be if they can’t figure out some way to undo what’s been done. One character suddenly notices that she has no pulse and hasn’t been breathing, except to talk, for hours. Another finds the words DEAD LIKE ME keyed into his motorcycle’s gas tank, despite the decided absence of any other human being. Almost undoubtedly, the characters will eventually come to the unpleasant conclusion that they are, in fact, dead, with no understanding of how they came to be this way.

If there was an accident at the end of the road, it may be that one or more characters come to the conclusion that they died in the crash, or whatever it is that befell the characters and their vehicle. This is actually a pretty solid idea, and the characters will likely want to explore this option. The end of the road is mean-spirited by nature, and playing tricks with people satisfies in some small way its vicious desire to hurt and confuse others. Perhaps one of the characters is walking past the car, only to momentarily glimpse her own corpse, smashed into the windshield, while another sees the dead body of everyone *other* than himself, and the image is then gone in an eyeblink. If the characters can be divided against one another, the end of the road attempts to do so, as watching them turn on each other is much more gratifying than expending the effort required to directly antagonize them.

You can have this go on for as long as you need to, with the end of the road playing little tricks on the characters in an effort to get them to just give in and accept this as their new existence. Eventually, however, things are going to reach a crescendo of





anger and frustration, whether or not characters turn on one another. When tempers flare, and hate and confusion threaten to overwhelm hope and reason, that's when the doppelgängers first begin to manifest. The end of the road dimly and instinctually craves stimulation, a feeling of belonging and participation in something greater than itself: the very sensation that was denied the end of the road when the network of roads to which this road once belonged moved away and, to its thinking, left it to die. It desperately *needs* to feel as though it is a part of something, and so, with only a rudimentary understanding of how associate with beings so unlike itself, the end of the road generates duplicates of these others, in the hopes of getting them to accept being as the end of the road is, so that they can all be alike.

These doppelgängers are almost exact copies of the people they were created to imitate (with a few notable exceptions, listed below, under "Systems and Characters"), though they are flawed in several notable ways, due to the limitations of what passes for the end of the road's consciousness. For the most part, the doppelgängers initially refrain from interaction with their "other selves." It isn't that they have any fear of doing so but, rather, that the end of the road is dimly aware that tipping its hand so early on is unwise. Better by far to get people questioning who and what their "friends" are before forcing them to confront their own darker natures and, hopefully, helping everyone to find unity in misery, sorrow and defeat.

The duplicates can be used to greatest effect if sent to undermine characters' confidence and strength of will when they're at their most vulnerable. The end of the road does

what it has to in order to force the characters away from one another, making them susceptible, it believes, to suggestion. Characters who look away from one another for even just a moment may suddenly find themselves completely separated, quite possibly in entirely different locations than a moment ago. While they can find their way back to one another with some effort, the person whom they find may or may not actually be the companion who was spirited away. Efforts to try to remain together can be thwarted, with some effort and a bit of malicious creativity on the part of the end of the road, and by the time the characters formulate viable ideas to stay together, who can say whether or not they're actually in the company of allies?

End

The confrontations with the doppelgängers can go many different ways. Some characters might try to reason with their twisted reflections, while others will simply deny what's being said to them. Particularly insightful characters are apt to quickly pick up on the "wrongness" of the doppelgängers and may turn that knowledge to the characters' advantage. Of course, one or more characters might resort to violence, whether against a doppelgänger or even an actual friend. While the characters are, strictly speaking, not alive, they can still be destroyed by one another's actions at the end of the road. The doppelgängers, on the other hand, can always be reconstituted if "killed."

Seeing Double

If you and your players are collectively up for a potentially highly rewarding roleplaying challenge, consider having each player roleplay her own character *and* her character's doppelgänger at different points. The end of the road can easily separate the characters if it so desires, and may well do so for the purposes of sowing dissent and confusion. Encourage the players to make their portrayals of the doppelgängers as believable as possible. After all, when the stoic and somewhat pessimistic scholar says, "Guys, I think we just have to accept that this is what's happened to us, and there may not be any reversing it," who's to say whether it's the character speaking or his inhuman double? (In order to encourage players in this — effectively "selling" the others on just giving up and accepting that this is, in fact, the end — you can give away clues to the characters of players who do particularly well with this, enabling them to help the group make progress back toward life and reality.)

This approach certainly isn't for everyone, and there's nothing wrong with this sort of roleplay not being your group's cup of tea, but it's something a little bit different and, hopefully, interesting. Players often enjoy the opportunity to play out unfamiliar spins on their characters — twisted or "what if?" versions of the individuals that they're long accustomed to portraying. This scenario can give players a chance to do just that, if everyone's game for it.

In the end, fighting isn't going to solve much of anything. Giving in to rage only feeds the negative feelings that gave rise to the end of the road in the first place. Just as many of the ghosts of the dead, the end of the road needs to be instructed in better ways of coping with its own passing. The confrontations with doppelgängers draw the characters into opposition with their own frailties and failings, which are reflected in this place with no sense of peace, hope, mercy, goodness or love. Similar to a wounded child, the end of the road knows only that it hurts. But, also like a wounded child, the end of the road can be taught to be better than the pain that it has suffered. There is no tomorrow for this place, but it need not treat others with the cruelty and abhorrent neglect with which the end of the road believes itself to have been treated. In time, the end of the road will, through its interactions, (probably unintentionally) reveal something of the truth of its nature, enabling the characters to adapt their approach as needed, to deal with a lost and despairing *place*, rather than merely manifestations of their own darkest feelings.

Fortunately for the characters, the one thing that they've got working for them is that they've got nothing but time on their hands. While they may screw up some important rolls or otherwise make some bad moves that result in setbacks, the characters'll eventually be able to make real headway with the lifeless thing that's trying to make them be just like itself. After all, they've got the benefit of experience and interaction, while the end of the road, for all its rage, is ultimately naïve. If the end of the road can be educated in a sense of selflessness and acceptance, no matter how minute, the end of the road can be persuaded, just as any ghost, to let go and to cease lingering among the living. If the end of the road can be made to feel accepted, appreciated or even just remembered by *someone*, then it will inevitably discover within its stunted spirit the ability to surrender its envy and fade away, just as its "body" did, long ago.

When this happens, the sensory alterations that the characters experienced gradually abate. The decomposing appearance of things looks a little more normal, the more the characters look around. The clinging mist dissipates. The animals no longer seem sickly. The characters' ghostly abilities fade, to be replaced by their normal supernatural powers, if any. Things that the characters have done remain, but any changes affected by the end of the road are gone, as though they never were. Soon, all that's left are the crumbling remnants of the road that died, along with all those that survived the conflict with their collective inner demons. If the characters are smart and maybe just a little bit lucky, they've learned things about themselves that can only benefit them on the roads yet unexplored.

The Underworld?

Someone may think to ask if the characters have, in fact, descended into the Underworld. It is, after all, possible that one or more of the characters possess abilities or knowledge that might allow them to make a decent guess, one way or the other. The best answer to that question, however, is, "Maybe?" The realm of the dead is an uncertain place, and there are many possibilities and unanswered questions as regards its precise nature. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the characters have stumbled upon *an* Underworld, rather than *the* Underworld.

Certainly, there appear to be no other souls of the dead here, or any of the features commonly associated with most mythical representations of the afterworld. While roads *do* factor into some cultures' beliefs about death and matters of the spirit, this is something decidedly different from the norm. Perhaps the Underworld as a whole had bled into the realm of flesh in this place, even if only just a little. Perhaps the end of the road has come to constitute its own Underworld in miniature, one with rules and an appearance entirely distinct from that commonly attributed to such a plane of existence. The characters will likely never know, which is probably for the best. Some mysteries are not meant to be solved, merely endured and left behind as a testament to the unknown wonders and terrors of the long road.

Systems and Characters

The characters smoothly (and without any warning signs) transition out of being creatures of flesh and blood shortly after arriving at the end of the road. At this point, they become, effectively, something similar to ghosts. Assign two or three ghostly Numina to each character (see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, pp. 210–212), according to her nature, and allow the character to use them based on what you determine to be an appropriate Attribute + Skill combination. Perhaps Telekinesis is best used with Strength + Athletics, while Terrify uses Presence + Intimidation. There's no "right" or "wrong" call to make with a given combination, so long as it makes sense for the Numen and for the character.

Likely, the characters will want to experiment with their powers, to figure out what happened to them and why they've suddenly manifested these new (or radically different) abilities. This is just fine. In the beginning, it's best to keep the characters guessing, so that they are unaware of their transformation into something less than corporeal. Because they *are* something similar to ghosts, the end of the road serves as the characters' only anchor, meaning that they are incapable of straying far from it. While they can range a bit further than normal ghosts, the characters eventually find that any attempt to move away from the area results in inexplicably "looping" back to the few miles surrounding the end of the road. Even the best Wits + Survival rolls can determine only that something is decidedly unnatural about this effect. Attempts to navigate by landmarks, to create trails to follow or to use other such staples of orienting oneself in the wilderness simply fail to produce the desired results.

The end of the road is, for all intents and purposes, also something similar to a ghost. The end of the road has no need of game Traits, however. The end of the road cannot be exorcised or abjured (see the **World of Darkness Rulebook**, pp. 213–214) and otherwise has no means of mechanically interacting with or being interacted with by the characters. Because it has no human intelligence, and instead only a rudimentary, lifeless and jealous consciousness, the end of the road can convey its selfish and nihilistic desires only through manifestations of power.

Needless to say, the end of the road can't be *directly* confronted by the characters. How does one attack a supernatural terminus for an abandoned roadway, a forgotten little bit of space with the power to turn the living into the dead? The end of the road *can*, however, be indirectly challenged. It has a mind, albeit a cruel and simple one. The end of the road is dead, and it wants other things to be dead, too. If the characters can trick the malevolent, almost childlike ghost of the place into letting them go, then they can certainly escape. But how do they accomplish this?

The doppelgängers created by the end of the road act as its primary vehicle of interaction with the characters, and can certainly be conned into releasing the characters. Particularly

persuasive speakers might even be able to persuade the end of the road to *willingly* let go and fade into oblivion. These doppelgängers are identical to the characters, save for in the following ways:

- The doppelgängers have no Morality scores, whatsoever (this also includes derangements that characters may have gained due to Morality loss, but not derangements gained from other sources.) The doppelgängers are wholly inhuman constructs, created by the crude consciousness of the end of the road, and any seemingly moral choices on their part are nothing more than reasonably successful guesses at replicating observed behavior.

- The doppelgängers have no Virtues, though they *do* still possess their respective doubles' Vices. These flawed copies can mostly comprehend jealousy, anger and other such emotions, but there initially exists in them no natural capacity for altruism, conscience or other such positive characteristics. Through roleplay, however, a Virtue (and not necessarily the character's own) can be *instilled* in a given duplicate. (See below for how this can be accomplished.)

- The doppelgängers don't quite replicate all of a character's subtle quirks correctly. If a given character always flicks his cigarette lighter a given way, the doppelgänger may fumble with the lighter once before getting the hang of it. Likewise, the doppelgänger of a character who nervously shuffles a pack of cards when deep in thought might accidentally drop a few cards when doing her one-handed bridge.

As these doubles are driven by all of the worst impulses of the characters, however, the doubles can be manipulated by someone who understands the nature of the individual a given doppelgänger replicates. By appealing to these facets of the individual in question (almost certainly involving some Wits, Presence or Manipulation + Empathy, Persuasion or Subterfuge rolls), a character can engage more enlightened instincts within a duplicate. The end of the road is certainly capable of learning (in this case, through proxies) and *can*, with some difficulty, be taught better lessons than the road's abandonment and subsequent dissolution have imparted. Compassionate characters might try to help the doppelgängers find peace and learn to let go, while more selfish types might just attempt to instill in their copies enough conscience to make them easier marks. Getting through to a doppelgänger (through roleplaying and, probably, extended rolls) eventually results in that replica gaining a Virtue, whereupon the doppelgänger is capable of understanding why what's going on is wrong and doing some small part to subconsciously convey to the end of the road itself why it should consider just letting go. There's no hard-and-fast system for when the characters have done enough to warrant ushering the end of the road onto whatever it is that awaits it, beyond the Storyteller's discretion.

Naturally, these developments are best handled through roleplaying, supplemented by dice rolls, as opposed to the other way around. Use your best judgment as to what constitutes interaction that moves a doppelgänger (and, thus, the end of the road itself) toward a state of being able to recognize more

positive emotional stimuli. Some characters may approach the situation from unexpected directions. One might confront his own inner demons through coercion (calling for Intimidation rolls), while another might fall back on clinical psychoanalysis (possibly making use of the Science or Academics Skill). Very nearly any way that the characters can get through to the end of the road and persuade it to release them is the right one, whether or not they ever discern the truth of the end of the

road's identity as a distinct entity and whether or not they actually teach the end of the road to accept its demise.

When all is said and done, the characters' transition from pseudo-ghosts back to their old selves is as swift and subtle a process as that which transformed them in the first place. Normalcy — however it is that the characters define such — is gradually reasserted, and they are once more free to go their way in peace.

The Augur Pit

The murder of an innocent man leads the characters into a World of Darkness. The Augur Pit takes characters from a hotel on the fringes of the city lights and into the gaping unknowns between. As they search for Tommy Fagen's killer, players have the opportunity to explore the World of Darkness while their characters gradually uncover one very strange secret.

Each of the sections in this scenario is designed to take the characters one step further in the story and give them a new destination. The mystery of Tommy Fagen's death provides a motive for characters to explore the other stories and places in this book. Thus, this scenario is a fairly straightforward case of double-dealing and murder that just happens to center on some very strange activity. Don't make it hard for the characters to find the clues, or for the players to understand them: the story is designed to take the characters on a journey across the country. They're not going to get started if they never get past the opening crime scene.

To get started, you'll need a few hooks already set up in your chronicle, or established in characters' backgrounds. At least one should know Tommy Fagen, or have a reason to be concerned about his death. Here are some possibilities:

- **Friends and Lovers:** Usually the best way to hook characters into the story, and one that leaves room for several of them to be connected. The characters might be friends already, or Tommy's death might be the event that brings them into contact with each other for the first time.

- **Dealer:** Tommy was a small-time weed dealer. He stopped making a real business out of it after college, but kept hooking friends of friends up as a way to get introduced to women. One of the characters might be his supplier.

- **Insurance Investigators:** Tommy had a substantial life insurance policy, with his brother listed as a beneficiary. One or more of the characters could be doing due diligence in locating Marshall Fagen, or they might be suspicious that Marshall committed the murder himself.

- **Law Enforcement:** Police officers always have a reason to be curious about murder, and the possibility of a connection between Tommy's murder and his drug deals may arouse the police's interest. Officers are less than ideal characters for this story, though, because they can't

easily drift on and off official business or take open-ended trips cross-country. Private investigators could be hired by Tommy's uncle, or by the lawyers of a suspect in the murder who's irrelevant to the main story.

- **Favors Owed:** The characters might be in debt to someone who cares about Tommy.

One good way to get players invested in the character is to have each one make up a single fact about Tommy, with the provision that they don't contradict what you've already told the players or each other. If they're playing his friends, these could be memories about their relationships ("dude could always find his way home, even when we were falling down drunk"); if they're investigators, the facts might be information they've uncovered already ("white male, recently hired by a large software company"). You don't need to be formal, either. Just go clockwise around the table, taking a suggestion from each character. This works especially well if he's appearing for the first time or this is the start of a new chronicle.


Methods of transportation are up to the characters, but the default assumption is that they drive between their destinations. While specifics vary based on the region of the world in which your chronicle takes place and what other stories you choose to set between installments, each section of the story should take place a little farther from home, a few stops beyond what they know.

Beginning

Your story begins where Tommy Fagen's ends. Tommy was a web designer and part-time marijuana dealer. He had a high-rise apartment downtown, the kind of place where the neighbors play guitar at odd hours and Ikea furniture looks right at home. If one of the characters is Tommy's lover, they were talking about moving in together soon, and the character has a key. Otherwise, the characters will have to break or bluff their way in.

The Murder

The scene of the crime was a business hotel in a suburb near the city. The hotel has about 200 guest rooms and 50



furnished suites, spread across a solid three-level building. At six o'clock this morning, Tommy was found dead in a suite he had rented that day. The apparent cause of death is strangulation. There's no sign of forced entry.

Clues: Police won't expose the crime scene unless the characters can come up with a very good excuse, but the police haven't closed off the parking lot. When the characters pass through the lot, one of the characters hears a long, low beep and discovers Tommy's cell phone, its battery almost dead. A list of missed calls shows three from "MARSHALL." Characters who know Tommy know immediately that Marshall is his older brother; characters outside his circle of friends can find out by asking police or consulting public records. Tommy dropped the phone on his way into the hotel. (If the characters conclude the opposite — that the phone was stolen, then dropped by Tommy's assailant — let them go with it. That won't affect the progression of the story. Similarly, if they con their way into the crime scene, feel free to place the phone there, instead.)

Searching Tommy's apartment won't turn up much, except that he obviously wasn't planning on leaving any time soon. Characters find piles of design magazines, dirty dishes and a barely concealed stash of pot. The address and name of the hotel are scrawled on the edge of a cable bill sitting next to his coffeemaker. His checkbook is nowhere to be found. Anyone who knew him recalls that Tommy lived off cash and his debit card, only writing checks when he needed to pay his rent or cover debts to private individuals. (Investigating his checking account won't reveal any significant activity.) Waiting for the results of the official investigation only reminds the characters that Tommy has a brother named Marshall, and that Marshall has a criminal record (see further on). Marshall is no longer living at his last known address. The only way to track him down is for someone to go looking.

Moving on: This is the critical moment in the story, when the characters will have to decide whether or not to pursue the investigation. Later on, giving up will still leave them out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by plot hooks and history. Here, though, they have a chance to stay where they are.

If the characters knew Tommy at all well, particularly through his illicit activities, they may be suspects in the investigation. As a Storyteller, you should decide ahead of time how much this does or doesn't flavor the story. In general, if you think the players are more likely to have their characters turn themselves in than try to find the real killer, then drop that thread like a hot potato. If, on the other hand, the characters are rebellious and eager to prove their innocence and superior smarts, feel free to have foolish police blame the characters for the crime . . . and perhaps even pursue them as outlaws through the rest of the story!

For interstitial stories, you can either show the players immediately how out of their element their characters are — for example, having them stranded far from home or have an encounter with one of the monsters of the wilderness — or start with a more subtle approach, layering on

eerie coincidences and strange, but inconclusive glimpses of the supernatural. One way or another, show the players that leaving the city is dangerous, but don't punish them by thwarting their characters too badly. Uncertainty is good; certainty that they're going to "lose" is bad.

Middle

Poking around places near Marshall and Tommy's hometown reveals that yes, Marshall's been lying low. Several people know where to find him anyway, though: the Calypso.

The Calypso

A little old strip bar in the middle of nowhere. Well, not *quite* nowhere: it's actually located between a couple of small towns and many cattle farms. The site is invisible in a practical sort of way, being unincorporated land just outside the reach of any of the nearby towns' zoning regulations. To shut the bar down would take county action, and the county's a big, empty place that doesn't give a damn.

Characters: Toby, the bartender, who always seems to be looking at the instructions when he mixes drinks but does a passable job anyway. Karina, a dancer who's perpetually bored but refuses to burn out.

Activity: A couple of regulars sitting quiet and tired along the bar and the stage. Karina's technically excellent dancing.

Trouble: The Calypso is a pretty tranquil place, the kind of spot where a man who's worked a hard day can go to see some naked breasts without having to bother his wife. To start a fight or attract the law (county law, remember), characters would have to violate one of the bar's simple rules: Don't bother the bouncer. Don't threaten the barman or the dancers. Tip reasonably.

The trouble's on the way out. If the characters are suspects in Tommy's murder (or are in trouble with the law from an earlier story in your chronicle), somebody may recognize them in the club and call the police, who pull into the parking lot just as the characters are leaving.

The Brother

Marshall Fagen is a wiry man of 33, but he looks a good deal older, thanks to the scattering of premature smile lines and crow's feet. He's on his second drink of the hour, trying to get to the point where all he cares about is doling out dollar bills to Karina's thong. He's been at it drink by drink, hour by hour, one day at a time for a long while now. He can't stop thinking about Tommy.

So when Marshall tells the characters he doesn't want to talk about his brother, Marshall's lying. This is the kind of lie that he may try to back up with some fists, but the whiskey has been working harder on his hand-eye coordination than his memory. After a cry for help and any ensuing cries of pain, he'll tell them why the murder was his fault.

When they were kids, they were kids. All that's got to be said about that is they were close. Tommy went to the city. Marshall started working as a vet tech with a practice that consults to the local farms. Marshall liked big animals, and he liked having access to a supply of really hard drugs. You know how much you can sell that shit for? Marshall did, and eventually he got arrested for taking the obvious next step. He only did six months for it, and even made a connection or two in minimum security. By the time Marshall Fagen got out of jail, he had a job cattle rustling. That's how he met Jeb Trusdale.

Jeb, according to Marshall, inherited one sweet deal: a meat-processing plant with ties to major distributors back east. Since becoming sole owner when he was in his early 40s, though, Jeb has apparently screwed the whole pooch. Output from his plant is pathetic, and he can't pay the rates most ranchers ask for meat cattle. Getting into his midlife crisis, he's started some kind of a cult or something, and started buying cattle cheap where he can. Such as from men like Marshall.

Bottom line is Marshall sold Jeb some sick cows, cows Marshall knew were sick, and then he refused to give back the money . . . which he'd spent. Tommy offered to cover Marshall's debt, and must have arranged to meet Jeb himself. They quarreled, and Jeb murdered Tommy. Marshall ditched the place he'd been living as fast as he could. Since then, Marshall's been bumming couch to couch. Karina's kicking him out tonight; he's busy trying to persuade Toby to put him up when the characters arrive.

Clues: Marshall can't tell the characters where to find Trusdale's home or plant. Marshall met the guy out by an artist's colony called Copper Creek.

Trying to further intimidate Marshall or use mind-affecting powers will reveal only that he's telling the truth and that he feels really awful about his brother's death. He feels a lot tougher in the company of others (who doesn't?) and can be persuaded to come along to avenge Tommy's murder.

Moving on: If the characters start sniffing around Copper Creek or otherwise discover Trusdale's address, they discover he isn't there much anymore. Trusdale spends most of his time at the old manager's cabin on the abattoir's grounds. Any of these possible destinations is another significant leg on the journey. The parking lot would be a great place to pick up a Vanishing Hitchhiker, a young woman who says she just got off working the bar or dancing, and needs a lift back home.

By this point, the characters have been on the road a while, and the players are probably ready for you to crank the weirdness up a little bit. The roads between the Calypso and the characters' next destination are long and lonely. They might stop off for the night at the Good Nite Inn (p. 74), grab some cotton candy at Sharpe Amusements (p. 121) or run across an accident scene infested by gremlins (p. 80). It all depends on what you as Storyteller want them to experience on the Road.

The Abattoir

The abattoir was shiny, new and state of the meat-chopping art when it was built in the 1950s. A fully integrated abattoir and butchering facility with a good deal of automation, the kind of place you might photograph for a brochure on America's blend of agriculture and industry. Clean conveyors, humane electric execution of the animals, rooms full of sharp, clean blades. The abattoir was constructed out in the woods, where the smells and traffic wouldn't bother anyone.

These days, it's more like *The Jungle* re-imagined for a vegan evangelism campaign. A skeleton staff executes small loads of cattle once a week, then renders them into strange cuts very different from those demanded by the mass market. The abattoir proper is rarely cleaned, and the stench of old blood and rotting tissue is everywhere on the grounds. Smears of old fat line down the conveyor belt, and tiny particles of shredded animals stick to everything inside. Even creatures such as vampires, fond of blood and inured to decay, are likely to find the abattoir disgusting. One of the remaining employees has a full-time job standing on the roof to shoot down scavenger birds.

Jeb Trusdale

Jeb Trusdale's father wasn't the original owner of the abattoir, but he was assistant foreman from day one. He was a college-degreed agricultural engineer with a big heart and a lovely wife. Everything his son could have been if he weren't such a selfish bastard. Oh, Jeb has a college degree, but mostly because he paid other people to do his work. (Even then, he wasn't much of a manager, and was ratted out to the school. He had to drop a semester's worth of grades.) He used to have a lovely wife, too . . . a woman who only married him because she was pregnant with their child, after a sexual encounter of dubious consent. They've long since divorced, and Jeb has been indifferent to contact with his offspring.


One thing Jeb's father did succeed in imposing on him was a deep religious faith. Jeb managed to loathe himself through every second of squandering his allowance and indulging himself at other people's expense. Now, at the age when most men with a little bit of money would start indulging themselves, Jeb's starting to find God. More accurately, he's worrying God will find him. That's why Jeb hasn't sold the plant. That's why he dug the pit at the far end of the grounds.

He's told his staff the pit's a disposal ground, and that they chuck most of the meat because of a scam he's running with farm subsidies.

The Augur Pit

A dirty, yellow tent conceals the pit at the end of the property. The Augur Pit was constructed as a large, concrete-lined disposal pit going a couple of hundred feet, with a lip to facilitate easy dumping and iron ladders built into either side. A basic exhaust system prevents buildup of gasses from the decay of remains.





Ultimately, Jeb's scheme is simple in every way except its scale. He's picked a demon ("Beelzebub") and started an industrial sacrifice mill. He buys fine, (allegedly) healthy beasts, butchers them in ritual patterns of his own design, then lays their remains in ribbons the bottom of the pit. He burns the remains, and looks for signs of his "master's" pleasure in the ashes. He hopes to draw the demon's attention and bargain with it for riches, immortality and other guarantees that he won't suffer for his life of selfish excess. When he fails to find anything, he covers over remains with a layer of sand and begins dumping again.

End

By day, the abattoir is operating, and the security guard has a clear view of the grounds. Jeb isn't around, either, although characters overhear that he's planning to review the foreman's log tonight. At night, getting onto the grounds is easy; the fence is only eight feet high, and the barbed wire has sagged or fallen in several places.

Jeb is planning to make a sacrifice tonight, and he's staying over in the manager's cabin. At any hint of intrusion (or eleven o'clock, if the characters simply choose to watch him), he goes running for the place he feels safest: the Augur Pit. If he can, Jeb tries to lose pursuers in the steel-and-rot maze of the abattoir. Although he's not equipped to fight in an actual confrontation, Jeb carries a pistol, which he can use to take potshots at the characters.

As soon as he's able, Jeb goes running off into the dark, charging across the grounds toward the pit. The grounds are pitch-black at night, and characters chasing after Jeb will take many little falls and maybe get scraped up. These nuisances aren't worth inflicting damage for, but they're worth mentioning, especially as the characters have to keep pushing themselves to choke down the air near the Augur Pit.

Once at the pit, Jeb strips, begins baptizing himself with blood (kept in a plastic jug nearby) and saying his nonsense prayers. That's how the characters find him: a dumpy, naked man covered in gore, saying prayers to a demon-god he probably made up. Even the stench is more threatening.

If interrogated by authorities or anyone sufficiently intimidating, Jeb confesses to Tommy's murder, but only between frantic prayers. The note of anti-climax here is deliberate. There's a little action in chasing Jeb (and possibly some catharsis in taking revenge or scaring him), but this conclusion works best as an epilogue to your chronicle. The characters find the killer, and they discover that he's ultimately much less significant than the journey they took to get to him.

(If you'd rather go for a guns-blazing approach, see "Greater Powers," below.)

Turning Jeb In

Once the characters have found him, they may turn Jeb over to the authorities (the characters might be the authorities, of

course). Even if fingerprints and other evidence don't tie him to the murder of Tommy Fagen, conditions at the abattoir land him in hot water with the state health and agriculture agencies.

Greater Powers

The Augur Pit is written to leave Jeb Trusdale a deluded, murderous fool, but he could have been on to something. Your chronicle may need a more action-packed conclusion, particularly if the characters have been particularly focused on the goal or the chronicle is only a few sessions long. If you're interested in making Jeb part of a supernatural conspiracy, there are several options:

- **Blood Money:** Jeb's sacrifices were the beginning of a wider program by a vampire cult. They summoned blood-hungry spirits from the beyond to ride the bodies of vampires. Capturing Jeb is only the beginning; the real monsters are still out there, somewhere down the road.

- **Grave Anatomy:** The bizarre designs Jeb used for his sacrifices are actually based on anatomical photographs from a book he purchased at auction. The book, from the very early days of photography, is one of a series depicting the vivisection of Prometheans. Other volumes may exist, and if the author is one of the Created himself (as suggested by the annotations), he may still be practicing his grisly work.

- **The Long Way Down:** Jeb's prayers get answered, and he descends bodily into Hell. The Augur Pit assumes the properties described in "The Hole to Hell" on p. 84.

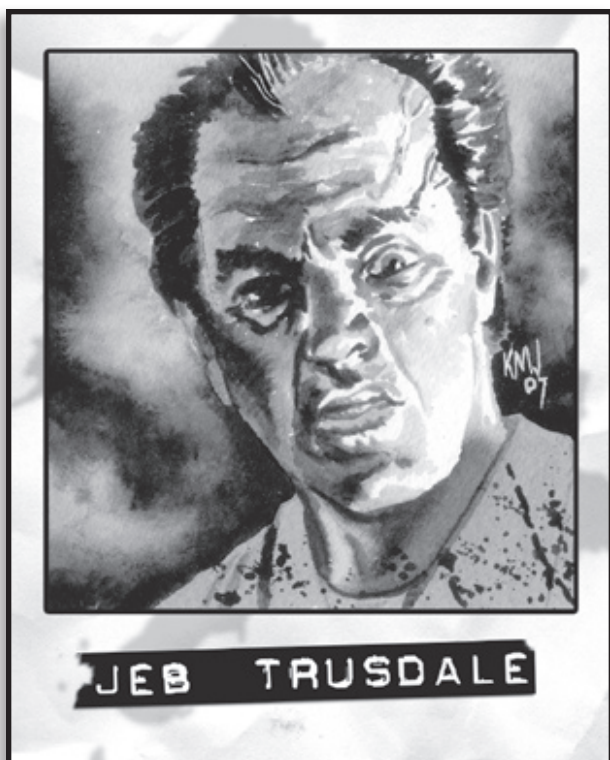
- **Lost and Fallen:** Perhaps Jeb really wasn't the son his father should have had. Perhaps Jeb was a fetch, somehow damaged and trying to reconnect with the Faerie who created him, whom he mistook for a demon. If that's so, then what happened to the *real* Jeb Trusdale? Is he serving in the grotesque kitchens of Arcadia, preparing the monstrous banquets of the real "Beelzebub"?

Any of the above could also serve as reasons for monstrous characters to spare or co-opt Jeb's project. Industrializing animal sacrifice isn't a bad start; it just needs refinement with actual occult lore.

If Jeb's really working with one or more supernatural creatures, they probably left guards, or at least watchers, at the Pit. Represent these with stock antagonists from the **World of Darkness Rulebook** or one of the other core rulebooks. Alternatively, he might have a supernatural power or two of his own.

Systems and Characters

The Augur Pit is really meant to provide a framework for a story on the Road, and thus doesn't need much in the way of mechanics. If you want the Pit itself to have some supernatural properties, you will need to add them, of course. The only supporting character who is likely to interact with the players' characters in a way to necessitate Traits is Jeb.



Jeb Trusdale

Quote: *How many more bodies will it take?*

Description: Now in his mid-40s, Jeb is balding and sports a noticeable paunch around his middle. He wears bloodstained coveralls at the Pit, and usually bears a look of desperation. He seldom sleeps and eats nothing but fast food, giving his skin a greasy sheen.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 2, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 2, Manipulation 3, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics 2, Occult (Demons) 1, Science 2

Physical Skills: Drive 2, Firearms 2, Larceny 2, Stealth 2, Survival 1

Social Skills: Animal Ken (Cattle) 1, Empathy 1, Expression 1, Intimidation (Creepy) 2, Persuasion 2, Streetwise (Shady Deals) 3, Subterfuge 2

Merits: Contacts (Agriculture, Black Market), Direction Sense, Iron Stamina 2, Resources 2

Willpower: 5

Morality: 4

Virtue: Faith

Vice: Sloth

Initiative: 5

Defense: 3

Speed: 9

Health: 8

Road Kill

Every area has at least one — those near-legendary spots where enough cars and drivers have met their doom to earn the place a mythic nickname. Dead Man's Curve. Haunted Hill. Graveyard Pass. Widowmaker Corner. The names act as warnings of the physical dangers of the area: sharp corners, steep hills and deadly intersections. But for some of the places, the legends allude to more than just natural dangers.

The supernatural legends tied to these types of places can be helpful or malevolent. In some cases, former victims appear as ghosts to caution drivers to slow down near the dangerous area. In others, ghost vehicles appear out of nowhere to force drivers off the road. And in some cases, the supernatural just shows up to take advantage of the after-effects the treacherous area brings.


Road Kill is designed for use with any mortal or supernatural character type. This scenario assumes no particular abilities on the part of the characters involved, with the opportunity to deal with the threat through many methods. Storytellers may want to add additional Abilities to the

antagonists or increase their Attributes when dealing with especially powerful protagonist characters.

Beginning

Local historians claim that Shadow Pass supposedly got its name when early settlers realized that the hills on both sides of the Pass prevented the low point from ever getting direct sunlight. Perhaps this is true. Those of more superstitious minds claim that the area was cursed by one of the first settlers to the area, a preacher whose young wife was "taken by the Pass" as they made their way from their home in metropolitan to their new assignment in what was at the time, mostly unexplored frontier.

In recent years, Shadow Pass earned a reputation as being haunted (for those who believe such things) or at the very least the kind of place you don't want to run out of gas or get a flat tire in. Something seems to channel fog, wind and storms into the Pass, and most years at least a dozen motorists are killed crossing the Pass, despite the highway department's



best efforts and most modern safety precautions. They blame the unique geological formations for the strange weather and treacherous conditions, but geology can't explain why in many of the accidents, the bodies are never found.

Still, it's the shortest route through the hills (and the only one in the area), so despite the danger, it's still a commonly used road.

The easiest way to introduce Shadow Pass (and the Road Kill scenario) to players is by placing it in their path — characters who are en route from one location to another can be routed through Shadow Pass and begin the adventure in this manner. The Shadow Pass can be easily located in any secondary route, although those with forests or other “cover” are probably preferable. Storytellers who wish to use this direct immersion method can bring characters in at the “Accident” stage, with the “Shadow Pass Legends” section being reserved in case they choose to remove themselves from the situation and investigate further before dealing with the Pass inhabitants.

Alternately, rumors about the supposedly haunted nature of the Pass may draw the attention of characters who make it their business to investigate purportedly paranormal situations. For those who dig before going out to investigate, the information in “Shadow Pass Legends” can be provided bit by bit as appropriate for the levels of successes. If a bit more “nudging” is required to encourage investigation, someone connected to the characters might be a recent victim of the Pass — the car was found smashed at the bottom of a ravine in the area, but no body was found. The characters may thus be motivated to attempt to solve the mystery surrounding the missing body, or even optimistically hope to find their friend still alive.

Shadow Pass Legends

Below are some rumors (some based in truth, others merely conjecture or superstition) that characters who investigate Shadow Pass may turn up:

- Ellen Lambert is the first noted victim of Shadow Pass. She was killed in the fall of 1809, when the wagon she was traveling in slipped off the trail through the Pass and tumbled into the ravine below.
- Jacob Lambert, an early Methodist preacher and husband of the late Ellen, is the individual who purportedly cursed the Pass.
- Ellen's body was never found, and her husband gave up the ministry not long after her death.
- Out of the 324 fatality crashes in the Pass in recorded history, only 19 bodies have ever been recovered. Authorities blame the terrain, which makes search and recovery difficult.
- A grassroots hunting group recently lobbied for bear, wildcat and wolf hunting to be legalized in the forest surrounding Shadow Pass. This lobby was successful, though hunters haven't brought many kills back.
- Recently, Michael Barnes, a survivor of a minor one-car accident on the Pass, claimed that a ghostly figure

stepped out onto the road in front of him, causing him to swerve into the guard rail. (Investigating Barnes's history unveils a history of DWI charges, including one from the night of his accident.)

- Search and Rescue teams that examined the most recent fatality accident reported seeing “bear tracks” in the area.

Accident

Shadow Pass's reputation as a dangerous stretch of road is well warranted. Hundreds of motorists have lost their lives there. The characters' involvement with Shadow Pass begins when they enter the area, either with intent to investigate it or on their way to another location.

Weather

As soon as the characters near the Pass, the weather takes a turn for the worse. The skies become gray and cloudy, and the temperature drops significantly. As the characters make their way up into the hills, the overcast skies turn to thunderstorms, and torrential rain (or if the season allows, a wintry mix of sleet and freezing rain) begins to buffet the area. With a successful Intelligence + Science roll at a –2 penalty, characters can tell that this weather manifestation is, although perhaps unseasonable, completely normal for this particular combination of geology and regional weather patterns. (Those with a Specialty in Geology or Meteorology can, at the Storyteller's discretion, negate the penalty on this roll.) There is nothing supernatural about the storm.

Shadow Pass is as treacherous as its reputation would indicate. Not only is the Pass steep and prone to fog, rain and, in the winter, black ice, but the road was poorly designed. Many of the numerous curves are set at a grade that encourages cars who enter them at too high a speed to leave the road rather than cling to it, and visibility is nonexistent in many areas. To make matters worse, the thick undergrowth and sharp drop-offs ensure that once a car has left the road, the car is difficult to see or reach.

The Pass itself is very steep, forcing those with manual transmissions to gear their vehicle into low gears to make the grade. The road is one lane in each direction, with narrow shoulders and no passing lanes. From one side to the other, the Pass takes about an hour and a half to travel, most of the time at speeds limited by the road conditions to between 25 and 45 miles per hour. Several short and relatively straight stretches, which unfortunately usually end in a sharp curve at a poor angle, make the going treacherous.

In the early miles of the Pass road, drivers notice a large amount of roadkill, everything from a yearling doe to numerous rabbits, squirrels, possums and raccoons. Crows feast on the remains boldly, barely hop-flying back out of the way of cars before returning to their meal. After a few miles, however, suddenly no roadkill is to be found, a condition that remains true up and through the Pass and for an approximately equal distance on the far side of the summit.

Traffic is light, with only the occasional vehicle passing by from the other direction. Visibility ahead (due to the winding road and the weather conditions) is low. Before the characters reach the peak (where the heaviest concentration of accidents have occurred), a small red sports car comes up behind them and begins tailgating their vehicle. After making a nuisance of itself for a time, the tailgater takes advantage of one of the short straight stretches to pass the characters' car at a breakneck pace. Unfortunately, the driver hits a patch of standing water (or ice) and fails to navigate the sharp turn at the end of the straightaway. The lip of the road tips the car out of balance, and the car flips over the rail and rolls side over side down the ravine.

Middle

Recovery

Storytellers might want to keep rough track of the time elapsing after the accident. The section of the story titled "Shadows" comes into play approximately 10 minutes after the accident, although "Shadows" can be hurried into play if necessary. Approximate times are included, although characters may well take longer if they are indecisive, or choose to add additional activities to those described.

This section of the story assumes that the characters stop to check on the accident (a dangerous proposition in and of itself, as the shoulder is narrow enough that stopping puts them at hazard for being rear-ended). The sports car has fallen 40-some feet down a 70-foot ravine, and has landed upside-down about halfway down the hillside. The engine is still running, but no sounds coming from the car indicate the condition of the driver.

Cell phones do not work in this area of the Pass. The signal is weak at best, and breaks up entirely before connecting. If characters leave the area to call for help and return, it takes about a half hour to safely drive to an area with reception, and another half hour to return. They return to find the situation described in "Gone," although the passenger has expired in the interim, and her body is also missing.

Getting down to the vehicle is tricky. The terrain is steep, and the weather has turned the hillside into a muddy, slick mess. The clouds and hills cast the ravine into shadow, making it difficult to see detail. Players need to roll Dexterity + Athletics at a -2 penalty for their characters to navigate to the overturned car without taking damage. Successfully reaching the car takes two to three minutes. Failure results in tumbling to the car's level, resulting in two points of bashing damage. This is considerably faster than climbing down, though.

Good Riddance?

The "Recovery" portion of the story assumes that the characters stop to investigate the accident they've

witnessed, but there's always the chance they won't. If for some reason they decide to continue driving, the Storyteller should feel free to take one of two courses. First, she may allow the characters to continue to their destination but bring them back into the story through news reports about the accident, which detail the identity of the driver and his passenger (detailed in "Recovery") and the fact that although experts believe it unlikely that anyone could have survived the crash, they are organizing a search, as neither of the bodies was recovered with the vehicle.

Alternatively, the Storyteller may introduce a series of increasingly difficult weather and road conditions until the characters lose control of their vehicle, and it ends up in the same condition as the sports car in "Recovery." Assume four bashing damage to each passenger and the driver, and the car is upside down (and totaled). From there, the story can essentially continue as with "Recovery."

Thomas Glynn — The Driver

When the characters reach the vehicle, they realize that the driver is dead. He was thrown from the vehicle and landed 20 feet from the car at the base of some tall trees. From the damage to his body, it looks as if the vehicle may have rolled over him at least once on the way down. His neck has been broken, and he's bleeding profusely from multiple lethal wounds. The ground beneath him is dark where the blood has mixed with the slick mud that covers the hillside. It doesn't take more than a minute to determine that Glynn is dead, but characters may choose to spend more time searching his body, examining his wallet, etc. If searched, his wallet reveals his identity as "Thomas Glynn," a 27-year-old resident of a nearby town. His wallet holds just under a hundred dollars in assorted bills, some condoms and a rather scandalous picture of Hattie, but little else of interest.

Hattie Keys — The Passenger

The passenger is still trapped within the vehicle. The rolling crash has crumpled the front passenger side of the car and driven a piece of the frame through her thigh, pinning her into the vehicle. She is wearing her seatbelt and is hanging upside down unconscious in the car. She's still breathing, although she's bleeding heavily from the leg and wakes screaming if she's released from her seatbelt or if the car is righted.

Freeing Hattie without causing mortal damage to her requires some effort. With a successful Intelligence + Medicine roll, it appears that freeing her would be easier with the car righted. A combined effort of nine or more dots of Strength is necessary to do so safely (see "Lifting/Moving Objects" on p. 47 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). A Strength rating of 5 to 8 can move the vehicle, but is not sufficient to do so in a controlled manner. Because of the steep terrain, the vehicle rolls over and continues to roll, coming to a stop upright at the bottom of the ravine 30 feet





further downhill. The additional injuries sustained in this secondary accident kill Hattie. Fewer than five dots of combined Strength is not sufficient to move the vehicle, and attempts have to be made to free Hattie while the car is upside down. This doubles the successes necessary to do so. Rolling the car over (successfully or sending it rolling to the bottom of the hill) takes three to four minutes, in addition to whatever time is required to examine Hattie and determine this is the best course of action.

With a successful Intelligence + Medicine roll, it is easy to determine that just ripping the metal from Hattie's thigh will likely send her into shock and kill her. However, removing her from the car without ripping the metal from her leg is difficult. Doing so is an extended Dexterity + Medicine action with a target of 15 (30 if the vehicle is still upside down) successes; each roll represents 10 minutes of effort. Additional characters may attempt to aid the individual who is attempting to free Hattie (by calming Hattie, supporting her weight as necessary, holding pieces of the car out of the way, etc.). Each additional character aiding the efforts contributes one additional die to the pool. In addition, since the ravine is in full shadow even in daylight hours, working without the use of a flashlight or other illumination imposes a one-die penalty to the pool.

Back Up

Climbing back up the hill is considerably more difficult than coming down was. Climbing up is an extended action with a target of 10 successes, and each roll (Dexterity + Athletics) represents five minutes of effort. Wound penalties apply, and attempting to haul Glynn's body or Hattie (injured or dead) adds a -3 penalty to each roll. Every roll with no success removes one success from those accumulated, as the character slides back down the hill a bit. Three rolls in a row with no successes (or a dramatic failure) results in tumbling back down to the car's level with an additional two points of bashing damage and the loss of all accumulated successes. The character must begin the entire process again.

Gone

Approximately 10 minutes after the accident, a single Shadow appears at the crash site. Characters whose players make a successful Wits + Investigation roll may notice the sound of something large moving through the underbrush in the area 30 to 40 yards away from the crash site, but nothing closer as the Shadow takes its shadow form to approach.

Feeding

If the characters have not moved Glynn's body and no one has remained near it, the Shadow feeds on it first. To do so, the Shadow simply covers the corpse with its shadow form and begin to consume it. To observers, it appears that the corpse has been engulfed by shadow, or covered with a thick, black cloth. It takes the Shadow approximately 20 turns (five minutes) to consume the body entirely. If the corpse's absence is discovered more than five minutes after the Shadow has begun to feed, there is no trace of the Shadow's feeding, just a puddle of bloody mud where the body once was. If the Shadow is interrupted while feeding, the Shadow flees 20 feet back into the shadows around the area, leaving behind the partially digested corpse. The Shadow does not go further, hoping to return to feed.

Tracking

Tracking a Shadow in shadow form requires a successful Wits + Investigation roll at a -2 penalty for every 10 feet of "trail." Trackers may well find the tables turned on them, however, as a Shadow takes full advantage of the situation if a wounded (or apparently wounded) character ventures away from the others.

Combat

As a general rule, a Shadow will not attack a non-wounded foe. If a character smells of fresh blood (as is likely if the characters have searched or moved Glynn's body, or if they have participated in the rescue of Hattie), though, the Shadow believes the blood to be an indication that the character is wounded and acts accordingly.

After feeding is completed, or if Glynn's corpse is moved closer to the car, preventing the Shadow from feeding from the body undisturbed, the Shadow seeks out other wounded (or bloody) victims. It targets anyone who strays from the others, or if the group is together, the most obviously wounded (likely Hattie). The Shadow manifests into its physical form as near as possible to the Shadow's intended target and attempts to attack with claws or bite.

If the Shadow takes more than four points of damage, the Shadow retreats from the fight, takes its shadow form and seeks out other (hopefully weaker) prey. The Shadow may stay in the area, hoping for an opportunity to prey on the wounded, dying or dead.

Several other Shadows lurk in the area, and Storytellers may feel free to increase the number of Shadows encountered if the characters are especially combat-oriented and physically or supernaturally powerful themselves. In a group, the Shadows may exhibit jackal-like pack tactics, but as with single Shadows, will not attack a foe that does not appear injured or otherwise at a disadvantage.

End

The Secret of Shadow Pass

The situation in Shadow Pass is an unfortunate one. The combination of poor road conditions and bad weather has created an ongoing danger that has existed for decades. Despite the superstitions, however, there is nothing supernatural about the Pass itself or the accidents that take place there. They are simply a result of a regrettable combination of natural and human-made factors.

The supernatural aspect of Shadow Pass does not lie in the accidents themselves, but in the things that have gathered because of the plentiful food supply the accidents create. As apex scavengers, the Shadows have found the area to be greatly to their liking, providing them with the shady environment they prefer, no true predators and a steady supply of food. The Shadows have settled into the scavenger niche in the secluded area, and, were it not for the large number of humans involved in accidents, would likely have never come to the attention of humanity at all.

Outcomes

Shadow Pass may end in several ways, depending on the characters' actions. Some of the possible outcomes (which are not mutually exclusive) include the following:

- Characters with a high Animal Ken or Survival may recognize that the Shadow is performing (albeit rather strangely) a very natural role in the area's ecosystem. Whether this changes their reaction to it or not, they may realize that the creatures are not "evil" per se, but instead are merely animalistic supernatural beings going about their existence as best they may.
- Characters who investigate the accidents including road conditions at the time of the accident, location of the accident and other extenuating circumstances (driving record of the drivers, potential distractions in the car, alcohol/drug use by the driver) may discover that the accidents were attributable to natural or human causes. This may alleviate any concerns the characters have about the area being "cursed" or the accidents being caused by some sort of malevolent supernatural being.
- The Shadow may be killed, in which case it fades into a shadow form, leaving the characters with no evidence with which to back up their claims. Unless all the Shadows in the region are killed, the disappearances continue, however, as new Shadows move into prime scavenging territory.

Systems and Characters

Shadows

Background: The Shadows' origins are left for the Storyteller to decide. They are not, as presented, spirits,





though they could be the result of some ancient mage's misguided experiments with spirits. Perhaps the Shadows are demons, or creatures escaped from some other plane of existence. Or perhaps the Shadows are the legendary Shadow Pass curse made manifest. If it suits the Storytellers' desires, she can assign a particular background (and the accompanying Abilities to deal with the Shadows in the manner appropriate for that history). If not, the Shadows may remain a mystery, strange anomalies that should not exist — but do.

Description: Shadows, when in solid form, look much like hyenas, but are the size of full-grown grizzly bears. Shadows have large, powerful jaws and short, non-retractable claws that are better suited to digging into wood or soil than as weapons. They are jet black all over. Their short, shaggy pelt is matte, but their eyes shine with a wet gleam that reflects back even the smallest amount of light with an oily glow. When in their shadow form, they are flat black in color, although their eyes still retain their oily gleam. Shadows are not limited to any particular shape or size, save that they are two-dimensional. To attack, they must take flesh form. They cannot interact physically with other beings in this form, except to feed.

Shadows feed by wrapping themselves around dead flesh and absorbing it. They can consume one-quarter of a

Size level of flesh per undisturbed turn; thus it would take them four turns (one minute) to absorb most small roadkill, 12 turns (three minutes) to consume a child or 20 turns (five minutes) for an adult. Shadows cannot use this ability on living flesh or non-organic material, and will not feed while being attacked or disturbed.

Storytelling Hints: Shadows are the epitome of supernatural scavenger. They do not hunt, save for wounded, lame or ailing prey. They subsist predominantly on roadkill, although they will also follow animals (or people) that have been struck by a vehicle but not killed, and deliver the coup de grace before consuming them. Shadows do not engage an apparently unwounded foe, or a wounded one which does significant (more than four points) damage to them. If wounded, Shadows either take shadow form and flee or, if their opponent is bleeding, stay close in hopes that their prey falters. They prefer to step in and swiftly dispatch wounded prey, but will track bleeding or wounded foes, waiting for the right moment to deliver what they hope is a death blow.

Shadows can shift back and forth between flesh and shadow forms as an instant action. Remaining in shadow form requires concentration and effort, however, and is most often used only when eating or retreating from an obviously overwhelming foe.

(X/X format represents Attribute dots in flesh/shadow forms.)

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 1, Wits 4, Resolve 2

Physical Attributes: Strength 4/0, Dexterity 3/7, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 3/1, Manipulation 1, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Investigation (Tracking) 3

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl (Bite) 4, Stealth 5, Survival 5

Social Skills: Animal Ken 3, Intimidation 3

Merits: Direction Sense, Fast Reflexes 2

Willpower: 4

Initiative: 7/11 (with Fast Reflexes)

Defense: 4/7 (Shadows, similar to mundane animals, use the higher of their Wits or Dexterity)

Speed: 13 (Species factor 6)

Size: 7/mutable

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Dice Pool
Bite	3(L)	12
Claw	1(L)	9

Health: 10 (regardless of form)

Sharpe Amusements

During the 19th century, before the advent of radio or television, a large portion of America's entertainment came in the form of traveling performers, from theater troupes and musical groups to the more earthy offerings of fairs and carnivals. Featuring a lurid mixture of thrills, chills, action and exoticism, early traveling carnivals often combined freak shows, animal acts, prestidigitation, fortune-tellers, thrill rides and games of chance with a seamy side of burlesque and "model" shows (featuring scantily clad or nude women) earning the carnivals much of their lascivious reputation. They represented a strange juxtaposition of freedom and danger that appealed broadly to the American public of the time, from youth to the rapidly growing "middle class." Few children (and no small number of adults) in the early 20th century didn't at least consider the possibility of running away to "join the carnival"; the lure of a life on the road filled with strange and exotic people and creatures struck a chord that was hard to resist.

Somewhere in the mid-20th century, however, the traveling carnival began to rapidly decline in popularity. Perhaps a maturing of social mores proscribed the "freak and geek" shows (which often featured individuals who were physically deformed or the victim of birth defects) as not politically correct. Maybe the illicit thrill of the less sophisticated burlesque and model shows was replaced as the content of television and movies became more widely "adult" in nature. Or perhaps, the regimentalized postwar society no longer had room for the idealistic escapism that carnivals offered. Regardless of the reasons, by the late 20th century, carnivals had, for the most part, either died out or sold out, trading much of their former exoticism for a watered-down, business-like version that catered predominantly to small fairs and festivals. These new "corporate" carnivals exist to this day, offering mediocre mechanical rides (which conform to insurance safety standards), bland games of chance that pay off in worthless trinkets and nothing of the former sex or danger that once made carnivals appealing to the masses. Carnies, once viewed with a combination of distrust and envy, are now seen with the same sort of pity and disdain as most of American society views the homeless, mentally ill or poverty-stricken. Carnivals are seen, at best, as a low-budget version of big-ticket amusement parks, a vaguely interesting distraction but nothing to write home about or worry over.

Here and there, however, small independent carnival troupes that harken back to the old ways still exist, picking out a nomadic living on the back roads and byways of America. Carnival troupes take advantage of the change in American society's views of traveling carnivals to hide, wolves among the sheepdogs, and prey upon the unsuspecting individuals who believe the carnivals to be just another milquetoast traveling amusement company. Many are headed by predatory human managers who seek to milk

every last cent from their unwary customers through shady or outright illegal means. From rigged games of chance to misleading or fraudulent sideshow exhibits to outright pick-pocketing, mugging and even kidnapping, these human scavengers specialize in staying one step ahead of the local law, and remaining just "small time" enough not to attract the attention of larger-scale authorities.

Even more dangerous, however, are those whose owners or operators are not bound by the mores of human society whatsoever. The same façade of unobtrusiveness can shield supernatural creatures from human attention, while the nomadic and often nocturnal focus of the carnivals can provide them with a bevy of opportunities to exist just on the peripherals of human society. Sharpe Amusements is one such establishment.

Booking Rides

Modern traveling carnivals are rarely cohesive permanent units. Most are headed by a carnival organizer who owns the majority of the rides and potentially a few special features, such as games or concession stands. Other carnies who own rides, food wagons or games, may "book" on with the organizer, contracting to run their feature as a part of his carnival either in a particular location or for a certain time period (often a season). These booking carnies pay a portion of their take to the organizer in exchange for him handling the carnival's arrangements, and few outsiders ever realize that one part of a carnival may be almost unknown to the rest.

This process not only gives less-than-ethical carnies the opportunity to stay ahead of the authorities by hopping from organizer to organizer whenever their activities may appear to be attracting too much attention, but it also affords ample opportunity for Storytellers who wish to incorporate Sharpe and his crew into a more "legitimate" local fair or festival without necessarily implying that the entire organization is supernatural or suspect. Alternately, Storytellers can establish Sharpe as the operator, and seed the rest of the carnival with unknowing carnies who have "booked" on with him, having no idea of the situation they've signed on for.

Beginning

Sharpe Amusements involves characters in a supernatural sideshow, a traveling carnival where the illusions of danger and excitement are often all together too real. The emphasis of this scenario is on discovering the true nature of the threat against the characters before they are captured or killed by Sharpe or his crew. A secondary challenge involves dealing with Sharpe before he and his troupe can escape, a technique they've near-to-perfected over their years of travel.

Setting the Stage

The arrival of a traveling carnival once might have virtually ensured the attendance of almost everyone in a given area; nowadays, traveling carnivals rarely elicit a great deal of attention. Sharpe Amusements arrives in the characters' location, and at first, the carnival attracts little more attention than any of its type. Some locals attend, but the rides rarely have more than a half-full load when they're running, and lines are never long at any of the attractions. Despite the lackluster attendance, however, Sharpe's group seems in no hurry to move on.

Astute characters, however, notice that there is more to this particular carnival than meets the eye. Those with the Unseen Sense Merit feel "something" when they pass the once-abandoned lot where the carnival has set up camp, or even upon catching sight of one of the gaudy carnival posters that spring up all over the area. Similarly, characters with other abilities to sense the supernatural may find their attention drawn to Sharpe's show. It draws them in like a bad wreck on the highway. They can't seem to look away.

If the characters are on the road themselves, rather than settling in their territory, Sharpe's troupe may seem to be dogging the characters' tracks. Even if they only pause long enough to sleep, the carnival sets up camp not too far from them, moving on as the characters do.

Characters who begin to investigate Sharpe's Amusements at this point get the jump on Sharpe's planned activities, and their Storyteller can skip the "Step Right Up" section, which includes a selection of alternate avenues to introduce characters to the story.

Step Right Up

If the supernatural feel of Sharpe's carnival is not enough to elicit the characters' attention, a plethora of other options exist for introducing the characters to this story.

- With a successful Wits + Investigation roll, characters may notice that they are being watched by a shrouded figure who retreats back to the carnival if obviously noticed in her spying (Francesca).

- A message appears tucked under the windshield wiper of one of the character's vehicles, or slipped under the door of their current dwelling. It simply reads, "Go now before Sharpe finds you." (If confronted later, Francesca will admit to having left the note.)

- Finally, if none of the previous actions spur the characters to visit the carnival on their own, after a time Sharpe's paranoia will grow to the point where he sends out members of his crew to deal with them on an up close and visceral level (see p. 125 for details on Sharpe's crew). While Diana's trained hounds or Marco's brute strength may not be able to eliminate the threat that Jacob believes the characters pose, Diana and Marco's attacks will likely encourage further investigation into the situation.

Investigation

Characters who choose to investigate Sharpe's Amusements may discover a variety of information about the carnival and its owner. Some rumors are available through remote research (books, newspaper articles or the Internet), some by observing the carnival from a distance, while others must be gleaned from specific locations, listed in parentheses after each rumor.

Rumors about Sharpe Amusements

- Jacob Sharpe claims to be a seventh generation "carnie," whose roots reach across the Atlantic to a troupe of traveling entertainers who once performed before the crowned heads of Europe. (Remote)

- Handbills advertising Sharpe's show dating back to at least the 1800s show an uncanny likeness between Sharpe and the early owner/operators of the show. (Remote and Observation)

- Sharpe's show harkens back to an earlier time, when showmanship, mystery and intrigue dominated the carnival environment, although certain modern affectations (such as the House of Mirrors) have been incorporated over time. (Remote or Observation)

- Unlike more modern traveling carnivals, Sharpe's shows eschew political correctness, still featuring a prevalent "freak show" of living and preserved specimens, as well as those with seemingly inhuman abilities to eat glass and fire, swallow swords, distort their bodies into strange shapes, subject themselves to horrible mutilations and the like. (Remote or Observation)

- A small core of Sharpe's performers and carnies (Sharpe's crew) stay together year after year, while other parts of the carnival change out after much shorter time periods. (Remote)

- Many of those who were formerly with Sharpe's show have given up the carnival life after a short time, or disappeared altogether, but considering the nomadic nature of the business, it hasn't raised too many concerns. (Any of Sharpe's crew)

- Sharpe's crew is tied together in an intricate web of social networking. Most do not appear to actually like Sharpe, but many seem to fear him. (Observation)

- Madame Fortuna, Sharpe's resident Tarot reader and psychic, claims to have read tea leaves for the Queen of England as a child, although the woman's advanced age begs the question as to exactly which queen. (Fortuna)

Middle

Behind the Curtain

Sharpe's attention has become focused upon the characters because of a prophecy made by Madame Fortuna to Francesca (and brought by Francesca to him). The prophecy frightened Francesca into believing that they must avoid the characters,

but Sharpe has not remained in business for almost 200 years without learning to take the bull by the proverbial horns and deal with those who appear to be a source of trouble for him. He's "dealt with" many problem crew members in the past, as well as other carnies or customers who caused problems for his troupe. He's out to ensure that the characters aren't given the chance to cause his "end" at a later date, by making a preemptive strike against them.

Ironically, it is likely Sharpe's attention that alerts the characters to his carnival's presence in the first place, binding the two groups in a knot of fate that is likely only to end with the destruction of one side or the other. Those who leave without destroying Sharpe find that he continues to follow them until the situation is resolved, one way or another. (See "Sharpe's Motivations" on p. 124 for examples of resolutions that would end the story.)

Carnival Grounds

Whether brought there by early suspicions or through one of the methods listed in "Step Right Up," once the characters decide to investigate the carnival in person, their situation is sure to quickly become complicated. Listed below are a number of the people and places the characters may encounter at the carnival grounds.

Madame Fortuna's Wagon

In a small travel trailer outfitted to resemble an antique gypsy wagon, Madame Fortuna offers "Readings — Tea Leaves, Palms, Crystal Ball" with "Satisfaction Guaranteed." More often than not, Fortuna uses manipulation, cold reading and careful assessment of her client's dress, mannerisms and personality traits to weave a "prophecy" for them, but occasionally she is struck with true oracular visions. Characters who seek a reading from her trigger such a vision, wherein she slips into a trance and prophesies the characters bringing "a Sharpe end." Afterwards, Fortuna remembers nothing of her vision.

It was during a similar session that Francesca was told about the characters, and wherein she came to believe that they must be prevented from interacting with her lover, Jacob Sharpe, else they bring him to harm.

House of Mirrors

The House of Mirrors appears to be a normal, slightly rundown amusement park feature. Constructed out of a flat-bed trailer, from the outside the House of Mirrors appears to be no more than 15 feet deep and 30 feet long. A series of steps lead up to the entrance on one side, which is decorated with brightly colored but chipping paint and a plethora of flashing light bulbs. Characters with the ability to sense the supernatural can tell that there is something unusual about the House of Mirrors — depending on the focus of the game, the Storyteller may leave this as a nebulous "supernatural aura"

or may define it as appropriate for the genre focus of the game (Space magic, a Verge, a gateway to the Hedge, etc.).

The interior of the House of Mirrors is, unsurprisingly, an intricate maze of mirrored hallways, many that end in dead-ends or double back upon one another. Most who travel through the passages risk little more than a few bruises from walking into mirrored walls that appeared to be hallways or a slight case of disorientation from being surrounded by so many reflective surfaces. For some, however, a different fate waits within the House of Mirrors' labyrinthine corridors.

Characters who use any sort of supernatural power within the House of Mirrors trigger a normally inert mirror that leads to the Oublette. Once the mirror is activated, any individual (supernatural or not) within the House of Mirrors at that time has a chance (1 in 10 rolled by each player each round) of stumbling into the Oublette. The exit closes either after one individual has passed through or after 10 minutes have passed, whichever comes first.

The Oublette

The Oublette is a mirror within the House of Mirrors, which acts as protection and passage, depending on whether the mirror has been activated or not. Originally created by as a means of hunting supernatural creatures, whenever a supernatural power requiring the expenditure of effort (in the form of Willpower, Vitae, Mana, etc.) is used within 20 feet of the Oublette, the normally impervious mirror becomes porous, and anyone passing through its shimmering surface finds himself trapped in the Oublette.

The interior of the Oublette is a small square cell, 10 feet on a side. Its walls appear to be carved from granite, and even the space that should have held a door seems to be seamless stone. The cell exists somewhere outside of the mundane world, making escape impossible. Those who attempt to dig through, rend or melt the cell's walls find they go on for a time before looping back into the cell — tunneling only leads the digger back to the Oublette, regardless of which direction he attempts to dig.

Only one individual per activation is admitted into the Oublette. The act of entering it deactivates the mirror-entrance. If it is activated again, another single individual may enter. There is no limit on the number of individuals the Oublette may hold (save for the limits of physical space within the cell), but even when the mirror is activated, no one within the Oublette may leave through that entrance — it is a one-way passage.

The Oublette has only one escape. Someone can reach through the mirror in Jacob Sharpe's trailer and (with a successful Strength + Athletics roll) pull an individual out of the Oublette, through the mirror and back into the "real" world. Only one individual at a time may be removed from the Oublette this way. Those who resist being removed thusly add a -2 penalty to the roll to remove them. An individual could be removed only partway from the Oublette, an experience that is uncomfortable and disconcerting,





making it an effective negotiation technique for dealing with those held captive in the Oubliette.

The Oubliette can be entered through Jacob's mirror, but once fully within the Oubliette, an individual must be pulled out by someone still in the "real" world or remain stuck within the cell.

The Menagerie

The Menagerie consists of an area of the carnival cordoned off for the carnival's animal acts and those who train and care for them. The performances take place in a long canvas tent (50 by 150 feet in dimension), with a number of horse-trailers arranged behind to provide housing for the animals.

At any given time, Diana (see below) is in charge of several horses and zebras, a pack of six hounds and a selection of hawks, owls and ravens (use the statistics for Raven on p. 203 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**).

Sharpe's Motivations

Jacob Sharpe has only one motivation: to continue his show. To that end, however, he seeks many smaller goals. He needs to keep his current crew under control, either through fear, addiction or emotional entanglement. He must constantly be on the look out for new additions,

to perform and to operate the carnival, and find ways to tie them to him as irrevocably as he has his current crew. He must stay on the move, to ensure that no one suspects the supernatural nature of his show, and finally, he must gather the resources required to keep the show functioning, fulfilling its financial needs and those of a more esoteric nature.

After being warned by Francesca about Fortuna's prophecy several months ago, Sharpe has been alert for individuals matching the characters' descriptions. Once they are spotted, Sharpe will not rest until he is certain they are no longer a potential threat to him.

If possible, Jacob takes advantage of the Oubliette's properties and traps the characters within the cell. He removes each one partially, one by one, holding them half-in and half-out of the Oubliette in an attempt to determine exactly why they purportedly present a threat to him. Unfortunately, for him and them, they probably don't have an answer to this question. Fortuna's prophecy was a self-fulfilling one. Once the carnival leader was tipped off to the possibility of the threat, his own involvement in

investigating and attempting to prevent the threat essentially assured that the fated situation (the characters bringing about his end) would come to pass.

Unable to get a satisfactory answer, and unwilling to trust that the characters do not provide a threat to him, Sharpe eventually puts Diana in the Oubliette with the characters (earning her displeasure), where he plans for her to remain until the night of the full moon, when her change becomes unavoidable. When it becomes obvious that Sharpe is using her in this fashion, Diana may be persuaded to side with the characters, revealing what she knows of the Oubliette and its properties. Armed with this information, the characters may be able to escape (with a successful Strength or Dexterity + Athletics roll that will allow them to leap free next time Sharpe holds them partially out of the Oubliette) or to pull Sharpe into the Oubliette (Strength + Brawl versus Sharpe's Strength + Athletics) when he tries to pull them partway out.

End

Depending on the hazards the characters encountered in the carnival, they may resolve the situation with Sharpe in one of several different ways.

- If either the Oubliette or Jacob's mirror is destroyed but Sharpe is not, he feels the prophecy was accurate. He vows revenge upon the characters for the destruction and seeks to

slaughter them outright, using his crew (Diana and Marco, specifically, but other generic carnie thugs may be added as needed using the Monster Hunter template on p. 207 of the **World of Darkness Rulebook**). The destruction of the Oubliette pushes Sharpe over the line between scheming mastermind and revenge-driven madman. This outcome probably ends in an all-out brawl, with the characters being forced to defend themselves and protect the public (assuming the fight breaks out during times when customers are still present at the carnival).

- If Sharpe is killed outright, his crew members (with the exception of Francesca, who vows revenge) cease fighting and attempt to escape as soon as they recognize he is gone. Those who are captured attempt to defend themselves, but do not actively press actions against the character group, save in self-defense. The crew members may (as noted below) seek the characters' aid in fulfilling the crew's own goals, now that Sharpe holds no sway over the crew members.

- If the characters attempt to avoid or escape Sharpe's attention, they may prove successful for a time, but eventually Sharpe tracks them down again and the story continues until he or they are destroyed. It's also possible that the characters convince him that the prophecy is untrue or that it doesn't refer to them.

Systems and Characters

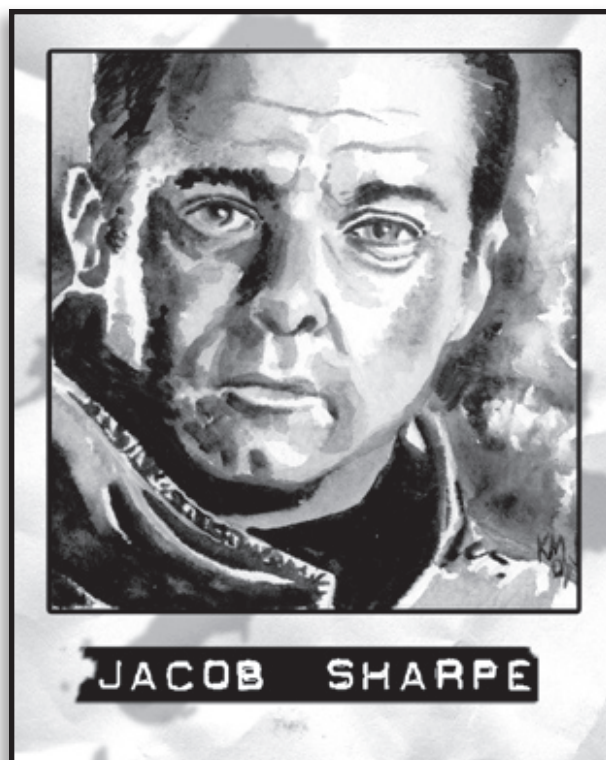
Jacob Sharpe — Carnival Operator

Quote: *I'm not about to let all of this go. I've given up too much for it.*

Supposedly, Jacob was abandoned at a crossroads and adopted by a traveling performing group that came across the squalling babe before the elements took their toll upon him. He was raised in the carnival and, as a young man, took over organizing the troupe when the former leader fell prey to an unfortunate "accident." Although he now looks to be in his 40s, Jacob has not aged since the early 1900s, when (according to rumor) he sold his soul to the Devil to get himself (and his crew) out of Ukraine where they were trapped between the Austrian and Russian armies at the onset of World War I. In exchange, he was also given the Oubliette, which he feels is a representation of the soul he no longer possesses, and the Devil's promise that Sharpe's show will continue indefinitely.

Description: Swarthy and fit, Jacob appears to be a middle-aged man of Eastern European descent. The truth of his origins is unknown, but he has led the carnival for more than 150 years, so it seems unlikely that he is wholly human, although he has manifested no supernatural powers other than his longevity.

Jacob possesses a freestanding mirror that reflects an image of the Oubliette, rather than a normal reflection. The



mirror is in Jacob's trailer, which doubles as the carnival's office. No one is invited into the room, but as an extra assurance, the mirror is normally covered with a heavy, wine-colored velvet drape.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 3, Wits 4, Resolve 4

Physical Attributes: Strength 2, Dexterity 3, Stamina 3

Social Attributes: Presence 4, Manipulation 4, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics (History) 3, Crafts 2, Investigation 1, Medicine 1, Occult 4

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Brawl 1, Drive 1, Firearms 3, Larceny (Pick-Pocket) 2, Stealth 3, Weaponry 2

Social Skills: Expression (Showmanship) 2, Intimidation 3, Persuasion 2, Socialize 3, Streetwise 3, Subterfuge 2

Merits: Fast Reflexes 2, Language (French, German, Polish, Russian), Resources 3, Retainers 5

Willpower: 7

Morality: 4

Virtue: Justice

Vice: Pride

Initiative: 8 (with Fast Reflexes)

Defense: 3

Speed: 10

Health: 8

Francesca — The Tattooed Woman

Quote: *He loves me. You couldn't possibly understand what that means.*

Francesca is the only member of Sharpe's crew who remains with him not out of fear or need but love (or so

she believes). She has traveled with the troupe since the late 1980s when, as a rebellious teenager, she followed them out of her small Midwestern town. Possessing neither wit nor beauty, she originally served in the concession stands and carnival games, but quickly grew tired of “work” and proposed a new role for herself after the troupe’s bearded lady disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Francesca received her first tattoos soon thereafter, and Sharpe has manipulated her to believe that her markings are beautiful to him and that he truly loves her. She is utterly dedicated to him and would die or kill to protect him from harm.

If Sharpe dies, Francesca dedicates herself to destroying those who have killed her “love.” While she has little in the way of combat or intellectual skills herself, life in the carnival has shown her that everyone has secrets. She does her best to discover all of the characters’ dark secrets and use them to bring the group down. (This can prove especially debilitating for those who are attempting to hide their supernatural nature or activities from the world at large.)

Description: Francesca is not a pretty woman. She has always been plain, and age and the travails of nomadic living have been unkind to her; despite Jacob’s protestations otherwise, her ink-artwork only plays up her unpleasant appearance rather than beautifying it. The reactions she gets from others, however, are not nearly as severe as the ones Jacob has built up for her to expect to get from them. The combination of his ministrations and her expectation of rejection from others has ensured that she has bonded wholly with Sharpe and will never give others the chance to get to know her.

Every square inch of Francesca’s body has been covered in tattoos (some places bear multiple layers as one pattern

ran over another). Incorporated into the artwork are sigils designed by Jacob to solidify her dedication to him and the carnival, although Francesca knows nothing about their nature.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 1, Wits 1, Resolve 4

Physical Attributes: Strength 3, Dexterity 3, Stamina 2

Social Attributes: Presence 2, Manipulation 1, Composure 4

Mental Skills: Crafts (Tattoos) 1, Investigation (Secrets) 3, Medicine 2, Occult 2

Physical Skills: Athletics 2, Drive 2, Larceny 1, Stealth (Blending In) 3, Survival 1

Social Skills: Animal Ken 2, Intimidation 2

Merits: Barfly, Danger Sense, Resources 2, Toxin Resistance

Willpower: 8

Morality: 6

Virtue: Faith

Vice: Envy

Initiative: 7

Defense: 1

Speed: 11

Health: 7

Madame Fortuna — Seer

Quote: *Sit down. Take the top card from the deck. Treat that card carefully — it represents you.*

(Fortuna has no control over her prophetic visions, and she is too old and frail to pose a threat to a character. Therefore, no Traits are provided for her.)

Fortuna has traveled with Sharpe longer than any of the rest of the crew, having been a part of the original troupe that rescued him as a babe when he was abandoned. Neither discuss their longevity with each other or anyone else, but it is likely that Sharpe’s hold over her has to do with her advanced age or her occasional psychic abilities.

Fortuna will not engage in physical combat save to protect herself. When necessary, however, she is capable of “dirty fighting” hand-to-hand and wielding a gun or melee weapon quite adroitly.

The true prophetic visions Fortuna is occasionally plagued with have nothing to do with her role as a midway seer. Unlike her quick-witted and manipulative carnival banter, her oracular visions strike her with a debilitating force, and after they have lifted, she is left with little-to-no memory of what she says or sees while in the throes of prophecy.

If Sharpe is dealt with, Fortuna may well find herself in dire straits. She has no mundane identification or paperwork, and has relied upon Sharpe to handle all the aspects of daily life for far longer than she can remember. Characters who encounter her later may well discover that her lack of daily living skills and occasional oracular fits have fated her for life as a bag lady or worse.





MADAME FORTUNA

Description: Old beyond words, Madame Fortuna is a diminutive woman whose skeletal form belies her surprising strength. Her silver hair falls almost to her waist and is held back from her face by a crimson scarf. The rest of her clothing is similarly garish, with stereotypical “gypsy” jewelry completing her ensemble.

Marco — The World’s Strongest Man

Quote: No, you’ve never seen me before. Not unless you’ve seen the show before, that is.

The man who appears on Sharpe’s stages as the World’s Strongest Man is barely recognizable as the strapping youth who once killed two NYC police officers in a barroom brawl. Still, the fear of being arrested for their murder (and of spending time in prison labeled a cop-killer) led Mark Sturgeon (now known only as Marco) to Sharpe’s troupe, and has kept Marco there for almost a decade. Sharpe has proved his ability to keep Marco out of the authorities’ sight on more than one occasion (although Sharpe regularly hints that such protection is only a phone call from being removed), and Marco has proved his own loyalty by using his brute strength to whatever end Sharpe sees fit.

If Sharpe is killed, Marco goes back into hiding, turning to a life of crime since he believes he cannot return to normal society without being arrested for his earlier actions. Characters who encounter him later will find him bitter and resentful of them for blowing his “deal” with Sharpe and (Marco believes) giving him no other choice but a life of even greater violence and illegitimacy than he had with the carnival.

Description: Marco is an immense man, standing nearly seven and a half feet tall. His facial features hint at

some Native American ancestry, but if that’s the case, he’s never mentioned it. He keeps his body shaved of all hair, but when he isn’t performing he dresses casually and slumps over to avoid notice. He has a tattoo of a black dog on his left leg, and he cannot remember for the life of him where he got it or what it means.

Note: Marco’s inhuman strength has to come from somewhere — so where? Is Marco, just as Francesca, a victim of Sharpe’s otherworldly meddling? Is Marco possessed by a spirit that makes him strong, and sometimes drives him to kill? Perhaps Marco was never born, but was created from dead flesh and after a long and involved Pilgrimage, attained his Mortality. If that’s the case, he hasn’t made much of his newfound life.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2, Wits 2, Resolve 4

Physical Attributes: Strength 6, Dexterity 4, Stamina 6

Social Attributes: Presence 4, Manipulation 2, Composure 2

Mental Skills: Medicine (Anatomy) 1, Occult 2, Science 1

Physical Skills: Athletics (Lifting) 4, Brawl 4, Survival 2, Weaponry 2

Social Skills: Intimidation (Brutal) 5, Streetwise 4

Merits: Brawling Dodge, Fighting Style: Boxing 5, Giant, Resources 1, Strong Back

Willpower: 6

Morality: 4

Virtue: Fortitude

Vice: Wrath

Initiative: 6

Defense: 2



MARCO

Speed: 15
Health: 12

Diana — Beauty and the Beasts

Quote: *I think one of the zebras is sick. Probably won't last the night.*

Billed as an animal trainer extraordinaire, Diana is, in truth, more bestial than those she trains. Her human façade is exactly that, a mask worn to protect her from the public. Three nights a month, around the full moon, she is cursed to take the form of a large hunting cat, losing her human intellect as well as control of her actions. For the moment, Diana is content with the bargain, trading security for serving Sharpe on and off the stage. Whether the big cat can tolerate her cage long-term, however, remains to be seen.

Sharpe stumbled across her secret recently, and bribed her into joining his show by offering her safety that her animalistic nature could not provide. During the nights she is fated to shape-change, he puts her in the Oubliette where not even her supernatural feline strength and cunning can aid her in escaping.

If Sharpe dies, Diana strikes out on her own again, unless it appears that the characters may have some way to aid her with controlling her involuntary changes.

Description: As a human being, Diana is a black woman with severe features. She appears to be in her late 30s, but her recollection of her early life is hazy. She might be much older. As a cat, Diana is a lion-sized, blue-black monster resembling a panther.

Note: X/X format indicates Diana's human/cat form.

Mental Attributes: Intelligence 2/1, Wits 3/5, Resolve 4

Physical Attributes: Strength 2/4, Dexterity 2/5, Stamina 2/4

Social Attributes: Presence 4, Manipulation 2, Composure 3

Mental Skills: Academics 1, Crafts 2, Occult (Shape-shifters) 1

Physical Skills: Athletics 2/4, Brawl 1/4, Stealth 4, Survival (Tracking) 3

Social Skills: Animal Ken (Cats) 4, Intimidation (Feral) 3, Streetwise 2

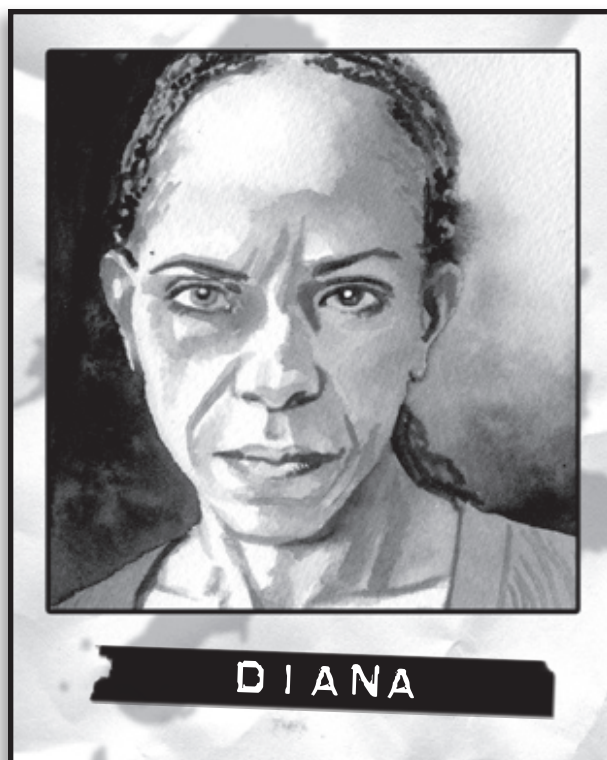
Merits: Danger Sense, Fast Reflexes (cat form only) 2, Fresh Start (cat form only), Iron Stomach, Quick Healer (cat form only), Resources 1

Willpower: 7

Morality: 5

Virtue: Fortitude

Vice: Gluttony



Initiative: 5/10 (with Fast Reflexes)

Defense: 2/5

Speed: 9/16 (Species factor 7)

Health: 7/9

Weapons/Attacks:

Type	Damage	Dice Pool
Bite	3(L)	11
Claw	2(L)	10

Supernatural Powers: Animal Control — Diana has the ability to communicate with and intimidate animals into doing her will. On a successful Wits + Intimidation – the animal's Resolve, any non-supernatural animal that she can make eye contact with becomes cowed by the cat-shifter's innate animalistic nature and, recognizing her as dominant, performs her will to the best of its ability for the next 10 minutes.

Shapeshifter — Diana can take the giant cat form intentionally, but she cannot shift back to human form (and thus regain her human personality and intellect) until the next dawn, making it a risky maneuver and one she rarely indulges. At sundown on the three nights of the full moon, she assumes her cat-form automatically and remains in that form until sunup. Changing shape is an instant action and requires no roll.

A YEAR AFTER THE HIGHWAY DIED,
POPS DIED, TOO.

THE BLOOD OF THE ROAD

DONT PISS
IN MY WOODS,
LITTLE MAN

THE THING
THAT WAS

SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

ONCE JAKE
JUST NODDED

WE FOUND A MUCH BETTER PLACE TO HIDE THINGS NOW

Don't call me homeless.

The Road is my home.

Don't call me rootless.

I come from noble roots.

I COME FROM THE ROAD,

from the Journey and the Wanderlust.

Don't call me a vagrant.

Call me a traveler.

But please, give me a lift.

I have miles to go tonight.

I cannot afford to rest.

And now you've spoken to me,
and my scent is on you.

That means
you're traveling with me,
like it or not.

Let's get on the road.

THEY'LL BE COMING SOON.

This book includes:

- A host of story hooks, sample locations and supporting characters suitable for chronicles on the go
- New systems for car repair, hotwiring and vehicle modifications
- Information about how to survive on the road, useful for any World of Darkness chronicle.

For use with the
World of Darkness Rulebook



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