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"Howdy" from 12 to Midnight

In case you are not familiar with us, 12 to Midnight is a Texas-based RPG publisher specializing in modern horror. You might not normally think "Texas" and "horror" go together, but we are pretty sure you will change your mind after spending some time in Pinebox.

Pinebox, Texas, that is—a nice little rural community smack-dab in East Texas. There is a university nearby, a pine forest called the Big Thicket, and a mess of beautiful wildflowers every spring. Unfortunately, it is also the epicenter of a whole lot of bad mojo. We're talking dark magic, serial killers, haunted buildings—the whole ball of wax.

If you want to learn more about Pinebox, just visit our Web site at 12tomidnight.com. You can start using the free campaign setting on our site right now, then watch it continue to grow right here in the pages of *Modern Dispatch*. Of course, Pinebox is *our* setting, but all the material in these pages can just as easily be dropped into *yours*.

If you have any ideas for future issues, or if you want to comment on what you read here, please drop by the forums on our website.



Pinebox Tales

Soul Gazer



Blackburn. The armpit of Texas. In seventy some-odd years, nothing had changed. The same old wood-framed houses stood near the shores of Lake Greystone. Although the homes had aged poorly, with more than a little flaking paint and rotten wood, the sullen setting was still powerfully reminiscent of his childhood. Memories rolled and lapped at him at him like a noxious wave.

He remembered his mother, lying in a pool of slowly spreading blood. The face of her killer loomed over him. The ghost of Leanne Jones beckoned him to hide under Blackburn Dock. The alligators, the Indian, the horror that never left him. Now, he had returned. He sighed, and took a long drag on his cigarette.

The yards of the homes looked as if they were garbage dumps. Broken toys, tools, and pieces of cars littered the landscape. A toddler, diaper drooping, bare-chested, and listing from his right to his left, moved to play with a shiny piece of an old chrome bumper. His mother ran out of the home, allowing the screen-door to slam behind her, calling to the boy, "Randy, stop. Come here!" As she reached the boy, her eyes met the stranger's.

He wore faded jeans, boots, a sweat-stained white crew-cut t-shirt, and a black cowboy hat, its frontal brim bent low to shade his face. He knew what she was seeing. He looked tough, with a few days growth of bristles over his face. A cigarette lay clamped between his lips. He was not bad-looking, and she probably took him to be in his early forties. Seeing an opportunity, she smiled.

"Hello, there."

He reached up and tipped his hat to her. "Ma'am."

"Haven't seen you around here before." She picked up her son and sat him on her cocked hip in the practiced way of all mothers. She was cute—a true redneck woman from the looks of her. She wore cut-

off blue jean shorts and a dark t-shirt with the name of some rock band emblazoned across it. Her blond hair was pulled back in a tail some six inches down her back. She had pretty blue eyes. "There was a time..." he thought, and took another long drag from his smoke.

He shook his head, "I ain't been here in a long time." He glanced towards her home. In the driveway sat an old, red Silverado pickup with several bumper stickers on the back windshield. One read, "Yankees 1, Rebels 0. Halftime." Another read, "Women, Use 'em or lose 'em!" So, she had a man. She was just looking for something better. He sighed. He had not come here for this. Truth was, he was not sure why he had returned home after all these years.

"Well, I'm Amy. Amy Lopez." She approached him, holding Randy with her right arm and offering him her



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left hand. He took it into his and with the contact and the shake he knew everything there was to know about her.

She had attended Pinebox High, where she'd had dreams of going to college and escaping East Texas, but instead had gotten pregnant at sixteen. The boy was older and a football player. He abandoned her and the baby and went on to play at the college level. She dropped out of school, had the baby, and eventually ran away from home with her child. Her father, an abusive alcoholic, had made it clear to her that he was not raising a "bastard kid".

Amy had met Augustine Lopez at a bar, and had married him a few months later. She had simply traded one alcoholic abuser for another. Every Friday and Saturday night, Augustine would come home late from some bar with a dull, sullen look in his bloodshot eyes. Any excuse, and sometimes none at all, was enough to spark a beating. Her greatest fear was for Randy. How long until he received a beating of his own? She dreamed and prayed every night for something better. Someone better. Well, he was not it. If she knew him, she would run.

He could walk away, but that would not be right. It was his duty to seek out those who deserved punishment and to see that vengeance was done. Vengeance is mine, sayith the Lord. He was the Hand of God. He was the Soul Gazer—judge, jury and executioner. He needed to meet Augustine.

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He smiled. "Hello Amy. I'm Isaiah. I was raised here in Blackburn, but this is the first time I've been back in years."

She cocked an eyebrow considering him. "Well, welcome home then."

He nodded towards her home. "Nice place."

She adjusted Randy on her hip once more. "Thanks, it needs some work, but it's home."

"I hate to ask, but could you spare something to drink. My throat is awful parched." He smiled at her. Would she take the bait? Of course. She needed a friend.

"Hey, no problem. Just a sec." She turned and moved to her front door and quickly entered the house, the screen door screeching and slamming shut behind her. He moved closer to the front porch. He noted the slight movement of the curtain behind the window, and knew that Augustine was sizing him up. A moment later he appeared behind the screen door.

Augustine stood over six feet tall and easily weighed three-hundred pounds. Big for a Hispanic male. He wore some shiny silver shorts, and his chest and belly were bare. Much like Randy had been. A big fat baby in a man's skin. Isaiah smiled. "Howdy."

Sensing something was wrong, Augustine sneered and scratched his ass. He elbowed the door open and moved towards Isaiah.

Isaiah offered his hand for a shake, and Augustine took it. At once, Isaiah knew all he needed to know.

Augustine had done many bad things. Rape, beatings, and robbery capped by a single murder two years ago, when he stabbed a man in the back outside a club in Nacogdoches. Enough. Isaiah knew all he needed to. Vengeance is mine.

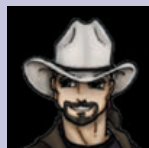
The air was flush with static electricity, and every hair of Augustine's body stood on end. His eyes widened crazily and he attempted to yank his hand away from Isaiah's. He failed, the bones of his hand crushed in the mighty grip of his assailant. Isaiah's left hand shot into Augustine's chest, just below his ribs, and emerged a second later holding Augustine's still beating heart.

"Vengeance is mine," Isaiah whispered, his eyes locked onto Augustine's. The windows to the soul. Augustine had glimpsed his fated eternity. Hell claimed its own. He collapsed.

Amy stood at the door, a glass of water slipping from her hand and crashing down, sending glass and water in every direction. A pregnant pause of anticipation, then she screamed.

Isaiah dropped the heart and turned. So much for his visit home. He walked toward the lake to clean up. Then he would return to his wanderings. Others awaited the vengeance only he could give.

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Sure, Modern Dispatch is great and all, but you have to wait a WHOLE WEEK between issues. If you just can't get your fix of modern gaming goodness, then head on over to the new Modern d20 Yahoo Group. It is sponsored by the same four companies who publish Modern Dispatch, so you can ask questions about what you read in these pages or any of our other products. Swap ideas with your fellow gamers. Get top secret, advance information on our upcoming products, and get coupons for titles that are already out. And it's free!

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Soul Gazer Template

Soul Gazers are said to be “touched” by the divine, but the few who know of their existence have differing interpretations over whether the divine power at work is good or evil. However, most soul gazers believe they are doing God’s work. Usually they, or someone close to them, have suffered an injustice, prompting the soul gazer to swear true vengeance upon his enemies.

This intervention in a moment of crises invokes a spiritual change. These instruments of “justice” receive certain powers, enabling them to overcome adversity and complete their quests. They are forever linked to their vow of justice and spend the rest of their time on earth seeking out others who deserve punishment.

Although some soul gazers believe that punishment must be administered by their own bare hands, in fact they are not limited to unarmed attacks. As long as justice is meted out, the means is not important.

The Soul Gazer is a template that can be added to any humanoid type.

Challenge Rating: Character Class Level +1.

Hit Dice: According to Character Class.

Attacks: Soul Gazer can make lethal unarmed attacks with a base damage of 1d6.

Special Qualities: All of the soul gazer’s abilities are considered extraordinary. These are:

Damage Reduction: 5/-

Dark Vision: 60’

Drain Evil: The soul gazer may grapple an opponent and if successful, he may transfer up to half their total hit points into himself. Hit points transferred in excess of his maximum hit points are not added and may not be received later.

Limited Immortality: As long as the soul gazer punishes deserving souls, he does not age. The soul gazer must punish at least one evil person per month, to forestall aging. The process is not reversible, so once a soul gazer ages, he remains at that age.

Soul Touch: Through a successful skin on skin contact, the soul gazer seemingly knows all the sins and evils a person has ever committed and whether certain actions deserve punishment.

Track Evil: Once a target is marked for justice by a soul gazer, he can track the person by smell, as a hound might.

Sanctity of the Holy: Soul gazers cannot soul gaze upon anyone of true faith, such as clergy. If an innocent is killed, even accidentally, by a soul gazer, he suffers an immediate level drain of 1d6 levels. If this reduces the soul gazer to zero levels then he dies. After the passing of seven nights, the former soul gazer rises as a Revenant of Justice.

Allegiances: A soul gazer is bound to fight evil. In achieving this goal, he may join forces with a group that fights evil or serves good.

Skills: A soul gazer receives bonuses to his skills. These are *Hide* +5, and *Move Silently*, +5

Abilities: The physical health of a soul gazer is strengthened by divine blessing. This increases the following ability scores by Str +4, Con +4.

GM Ideas:

- Isaiah meets the heroes in a club. Do they have any great unatoned sins? If so, he waits until the heroes are alone and attacks.
- The heroes witness Isaiah killing someone inside a car. Do they get involved?
- A hero takes a vow of vengeance against someone. Upon completing his vengeance he becomes a soul gazer.
- Two soul gazers meet and each believes he sees the other as an evildoer with great sin upon his soul. Their fight rages across the city, sometimes openly, sometimes subtly. Can the heroes stop the war before an innocent is killed?
- Heroes who investigate a strange murder learn that the profile is identical to a string of serial murders going back as far as twenty years. The killer is a soul gazer, and his work is not yet done.
- Isaiah has come to visit his brother in a local hospice. The heroes are also there visiting an elderly relative or a friend. A male nurse in the hospice is slowly poisoning the patients and getting away with the murder of those fated to die anyway. The soul gazer discovers this and attacks the nurse right in the hospice.
- A federal agent has come to town and is searching for someone fitting Isaiah’s description. The heroes spot Isaiah on the streets of Pinebox.
- The strain of living for almost two centuries has snapped a soul gazer’s mind. Now on a murder spree for crimes no more severe than jaywalking, one of the heroes is now the next victim.
- After accidentally killing an innocent child, a soul gazer has decided to stop killing and allow himself to die of old age. However, his Soul Touch ability remains. Now serving as a priest in a local church, he also acts as an anonymous informant for one of the heroes.

Pinebox Personalities

Isaiah Roberts

Isaiah appears to be in his late thirties to early forties. His frame is well defined and slender. He wears faded jeans, a sweat-stained white crew-cut t-shirt, and well-worn, dusty cowboy boots. His head is covered by a black cowboy hat; its frontal brim is bent low to shade a face that sports a five-o'clock shadow. A cigarette is constantly clamped between his lips and his skin is drawn taut like old leather.

Character Profile

(January 13, 1921 – Present)

Isaiah was born and raised in the Blackburn community of Golan County, Texas. He has a younger brother named Timothy, who is currently in the Pinebox Hospice dying of age and cancer. Isaiah was a strong and independent child, spending much of his early years combing the piney woods of his home and fishing and swimming along the banks of Lake Greystone.

Isaiah's memories of his childhood are warm ones, full of love and peace. His father died when he was very young, and his mother, Mary, raised her two boys as best as she could. It was not easy raising the boys, and when the Great Depression hit, she could not find any work to pay for their home. She took up with the local Sheriff, Andrew Tate. Andrew had a thing for Mary, and now he seemed to bring her some peace of mind in the knowledge that her boys would be taken care of.

Unfortunately, Andrew was a true beast of a man, and many episodes of family violence followed her moving in with him. Then, one stormy summer night, as lightning flashed and thunder roared across the sky, Mary had enough. She fought back.

Andrew, in a drunken rage, had struck Timothy. Mary grabbed a wooden baseball bat and swung with all her might at Andrew. He fell, his ribs broken and screaming in pain. He yelled that he would kill her and her boys. Timothy fled into the night, while Isaiah

watched Andrew pull his service revolver and shoot his mother. Her back seemed to explode in a burst of red as she fell to the floor before her son. Andrew, gripped in his fury and rage, raised the pistol to fire at Isaiah, but something happened and Isaiah fled into the night.

Secrets

As young Isaiah stood before his mother's killer, the spirit of Leanne Jones appeared between them. Leanne had been a beautiful young teenage girl who had disappeared several years before, the victim of Andrew's rage and lust. He had tied the girl's body beneath the Blackburn boat docks and sliced her open to attract the alligators. The body was consumed and shortly thereafter the Sheriff closed the case. He claimed that the Leanne had become smitten and followed a boy to the city of Beaumont. Her parents never accepted that explanation, but murder was never proven. This night she would protect the boy from the fate she suffered. Startled, Andrew shot wildly and Isaiah ran from the house toward the lake.

His mother's dead face stood vivid in his mind, and Isaiah could not stop picturing her precious blood spreading upon the wooden floors of their little home. He could hear Sheriff Andrew calling for him in the rain and giving chase. Somewhere, deep within the boy's soul, he cried out for revenge. "I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" He chanted as he ran toward the Wayne home on the lake.

Suddenly a Native American stepped from a tree. The warrior was covered in tattoos and his eyes were eerily white. The figure calmly pointed to a nice-sized rock, brown and sharp edged, approximately the size of a softball.

Andrew was approaching quickly from behind. Isaiah grabbed the rock and turned on his mother's killer, whose face was consumed in madness and bloodlust. The rock struck the Sheriff across the bridge of his nose with a thud, followed by a crack, and he fell forward.

Andrew was not dead, but unconscious, and the Native American was gone. Isaiah stood in the rain, the lightning flashes outlining his frame in the night. What to do? Would he go to prison now? The Sheriff moaned, and Isaiah's heart leaped into his throat. He had to kill the man. He had to.

Then a strange calm came over the boy. Leanne appeared, smiled at him, and gestured toward the nearby boat dock. Isaiah understood. He dragged the Sheriff to the docks, and used the old tie ropes to strap the man underneath. Sheriff Andrew's head remained just above the water.

Isaiah surfaced before Andrew, holding the Sheriff's own pocketknife mere inches from his face as the drunk murderer awoke. "This is for killing my mother" He sank beneath the dark water and moments later the water around the Sheriff turned a pinkish tint. Isaiah surfaced and stood above the dock, pausing to watch as the alligators glided silently toward their prey.

Later, when Isaiah fled into the night, he was unaware that he had become a Soul Gazer.

Character Speak

"Mister, you better turn away now. You don't wanna see what's coming."

"If you do the crime, you must...die."

"The right hand of Justice. The hand of God. Vengeance is mine."

"Prison? Oh yeah, I could do prison!"

PINEBOX NEWS

September 19, 2005

Volume XII, Issue 24

New Mayor Sworn in on Steps of City Hall

Mayor James Flowers was sworn in on the steps of City Hall today, becoming the 125th Mayor in the history of Pinebox, Texas. Mayor Flowers replaces the recently deceased Mayor Red McCoy, who fell victim to a bear attack a few weeks ago.

In a speech to over a hundred well-wishers, city-councilmen and others, Mayor Flowers promised to see to recent reports of corruption in city government. He also promised to fight for lower property taxes throughout Golan County.

He remembered Mayor Red McCoy as a man of action, and asked for a moment of silence to remember the contributions of Mayor McCoy. He then gave a bouquet of yellow roses to Lalie McCoy, Red's widow.

Mayor Flowers is a lifelong resident of Pinebox and a graduate from Pinebox high in 1985. He started a paint and body shop in 1989 and the business has grown very successful. Mayor Flowers was elected to the Chairman of the Better Business Consortium of Golan County in 1996, and is an elite member of the Wolf Hunters Club. He was appointed to replace the deceased Mayor by the City Council last Tuesday and will serve out the term of Mayor McCoy.

GM Ideas:

- Mayor Flowers hires the heroes to find out the truth regarding what happened to Red McCoy or to discover his ties to the Texas National Militia.
- A bomb is set off in Flower's Paint and Body Shop. The Texas National Militia is responsible. Mayor Flowers looks to hire someone he can trust to protect him and his family.
- Mayor Flowers decides to go after the Texas National Militia and seeks to hire someone to infiltrate the group.

Community Calendar

September 19

4-H Club car wash fundraiser—Donald Donuts parking lot, 12 p.m. - 4 p.m.

Golan County Historical Society monthly meeting—First State Bank meeting room, 6 p.m.

Pinebox High School open house—PHS, 5 p.m. - 8 p.m.

September 20

Woodsmen luncheon—Catfish King, 12 p.m.

Cont'd.

"It was a bear!" Sheriff Anderson Closes Case

Golan County Sheriff Butch Anderson announced today that the rampage at the Timberland Country Club that killed Mayor Red McCoy was caused by an enraged, rabies-infested black bear. He went on to blame Louisiana Game Authorities for its release into the wild.

Recently, the Louisiana Game Authority has been releasing black bears into the woodlands of western Louisiana in the hope of restoring the bear to its native habitat. Hunters devastated the black bear population in the mid twentieth century, and many animal rights activists have pushed for rebuilding the population.

While many witnesses to the attack stated that the beast could fly and had literally "ripped" the Mayor to shreds, Sheriff Anderson dismissed such claims, stating that the "late hour and the amount of alcohol consumed could make for wild stories." He emphasized that "science and good investigative techniques" have proven the attacker was a black bear.

While no black bear remains were found, Sheriff Anderson assured the citizens of Pinebox that the bear is most "definitely dead." He went on to state that the bear

was obviously in the last, extreme stages of rabies, or it never would have attacked such a large gathering of people.

Anderson also laid to rest rumors that Mayor McCoy's body suffered knife wounds instead of claw marks. "No human would do what that bear did. A trained medical professional said that the mayor's wounds were claw marks. Do you think you know more than the coroner?"

GM Ideas

- A wildlife activist named Heather Mays comes to Pinebox seeking the truth about the bear attack. She does not believe it was a black bear, and enlists the support of the heroes to prove it.
- Eco-terrorists, hearing of the bear attack, come to Pinebox and campaign against the city leaders.
- More people are attacked by the "bear", forcing the Sheriff to admit that he was wrong in announcing that the threat had ended. The heroes are asked to protect an accountant who has caught glimpses of a creature at the edge of his wooded property.

Harmony Parties Raise Interest Throughout County

By Melinda Lee-Jones

Harmony Farm, best known for its sixties rebels and wheat germ slushies, has entered the twenty-first century with a bang! The owners of Harmony Farm are providing a series of free rock concerts featuring several local bands, including WindDig, Joshua's Heart, and MelonWood. Flyers are being passed around the ETU campus, and several outspoken city leaders are warning the youngsters to stay away from that "commie-cult of peaceniks."

Reverend Michaels of the Risen Church of Pinebox has been very outspoken regarding the effects of such rock concerts. Furthermore, he has asked Sheriff Anderson to supervise these parties. The Sheriff has refused, stating these affairs are taking place on private property. He has said there will be several law enforcement personnel in attendance to stop underage drinking or any drug usage by the partygoers.

Only the first hundred people are to be let in, so arrive early and bring your own drinks. The Harmony Farm folks also request that you be prepared to clean up after yourself, but that all are welcome.

Editor's Note: Melinda Lee-Jones is currently missing. If you have any idea of her whereabouts, please contact the Pinebox Police Department or Golan County Sheriff's Department immediately.

Farmer Claims Aliens Took Him and his Herd into Outer Space

"There's aliens amongst us!" Dave Blewer proclaims loud and often.

Blewer, a local farmer and rancher, swears that strange lights in the night sky above the national forest are actually "alien spacecraft". He has filed an insurance claim stating that over fifty head of cattle are currently missing from his ranch. He blames the aliens for rustling his herd.

"Yeah, the little gray ones. They been coming to my place for the past three weeks. Took me right out of my bed one night. They did terrible things to me, and I saw my cows there too."

Sheriff Anderson has recently arrested Dave Blewer, and Judge Lindsey has committed him for his own protection for the next thirty days. However, fifty head of cattle are indeed missing from the ranch.

Even more interesting is that Dave has suffered a severe sunburn on his face and hands. It is as if "he were exposed to a sunlamp for way too long," according to Blewer's physician, Dr. Jameson.

Many people have reported the strange lights in the night sky over the national forest and out toward the Burn. No proof of the Unidentified Flying Objects has been recorded.

Captain Sean Nelson of the Air Force was contacted and he stated, "there are no UFOs in the Golan county area, and no experimental US planes have flown there either."

GM Ideas

- The heroes go hunting for proof of UFOs. They find some. See Modern Dispatch #49.
- Dave's wife, Jane, hires the heroes to rescue her husband from the institution. She warns "they" are coming back. The mysterious men in black are also spotted on her farm. She asks for help.
- Elements of a special US task force (Department 7) are seen in the area of the Burn. No one is being allowed in. Do the heroes try to discover what's out there?
- Overnight, all the cattle are returned to Blewer's ranch. Every single cow is pregnant.
- Blewer escapes the institution on his own, killing a doctor and security guard in the process. Since escaping, he has carjacked three different vehicles, killing those who do not get out of his way fast enough. Based on the sightings, Blewer seems to be searching for something. Will the manhunt catch up with him before he finds what he seeks?
- The heroes begin having flashbacks of being strapped to operating tables. In these "dreams", Blewer is also present. Does he have the answers they need to fill in their memories?

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