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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*.

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Virus

GM Notes

Virus is written in the manner of an adventure starter. We give you all the details and background to kick off the adventure, then let you and your players determine where it goes from there. This adventure is written from the assumption that the heroes know one another and have already experienced a few adventures together in our present-day world. With a little modification on the part of the GM, this adventure could be tailored to kick off a new campaign or to occur in a more futuristic setting.

In *Virus*, the heroes are given the means to immunize themselves against a coming plague, but the vial's owners want it back.

Background

This adventure is initiated by a hero's old girlfriend, Laura Knowles. She is a virologist doing research for an Australian-owned pharmaceutical company called Safe Health Inc. For the last four years she and two other Texas-based researches have been collaborating with a team based at the Australian home office on advanced gene-therapy techniques. Both teams recently celebrated a milestone achievement in developing a new blank-slate virus for delivering gene replacement. Although other blank-slate viruses exist, this one is 99.34% communicable and completely infects the subject within 5 hours of contact. This makes it ideal for gene therapy.

However, she recently became suspicious of the research from the other "team". After quietly digging for several months, she discovered that the pharmaceutical company is little more than a façade for another, mysterious organization. She learned that the results the other team fed her came from unethical human studies carried out in third world countries. With their recent breakthrough, the other team planed a new "field test" of their creation using an inert gene sequence. However, unlike previous tests this one is to be conducted in the United States!

Further complicating matters, Laura believed their recent discovery may not be as perfect as they had originally thought. She found evidence that outside of sterile lab environments, when the so-called blank-slate virus interacts with other common diseases the result is a new super-virus of potentially deadly proportions.

Laura created a vial of immunoglobulin (IgG) as a short-term, passive immunity against the virus and copied key documentation supporting her revelation. As a safeguard, she mailed the vial and a short note to her old boyfriend (one of the heroes), who lives in the city to be targeted. She then called her ex and left a voice mail telling him to expect a package.



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Unfortunately for her, Safe Health's wiretap on her phone alerted them that something was wrong and they now hold her against her will. After letting her sit in fear for a few hours, she was told that if she called the recipient and got the package returned then she would be freed and the trial stopped.

Introduction

The adventure begins with a pair of two-day old voice-mail messages from a hero's old flame. Which hero is entirely up to the GM, as are the details of their relationship. We suggest someone from two or three years in the hero's past. This is the player's time to shine, so let him (or her) roleplay the situation and help fill in the details.

Ideally, pick a moment near the end of another adventure to reveal the messages. Since both messages are two days old, it makes sense to time things such that the hero was inaccessible or preoccupied during this period. This provides a more seamless transition from one adventure to the next. The voice mail messages are as follows:

"Hey [hero name]. Long time no hear, huh? Look, I'm in trouble. There's a package heading your way. Keep it safe. I mean it. Call me."

A second message follows.

"Hey [hero name]. My, uh, my assistant grabbed the wrong address and mailed you something by accident. Just, uh, keep it safe for me, okay? Whatever you do, don't open it. Just hold onto it and someone will get it from you. Take care, [hero's name]. ... I'm sorry."

Home Sweet Home

When the hero arrives home, he discovers that he has been burglarized. Although he has no way of knowing at this point, his home has been ransacked by individuals working for Safe Health. A few home electronics or other expensive items have been taken to make it seem like a normal robbery. The "burglars" leave no clues to their identities. However, a note on the door indicates that an overnight delivery service is holding a package that requires a signature for pickup. (This is not actually Laura's package. See *Bait & Switch* below.)

Mail Call

Agents for Safe Health monitor both the hero's home and the delivery service office where the package is being held. The hero must go to the delivery service office in person during normal business hours and present a photo ID to pick up the package. If the hero has appropriate identification, he is given a square package roughly the size of a basketball. There is no return address on the box. This is not Laura's package, but something else entirely. Just what is left up to

the GM. Perhaps it is a fruitcake from a relative, a replacement part for the hero's computer, or one of the items found in *Modern Dispatch #45: Pinebox Pawn* such as the talking toaster.

A pair of female agents monitor the delivery service office at all times. Use two appropriately leveled bounty hunter ordinaries as found in Chapter 8 of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*. The agents' only goal is to retrieve the package, not beat up the heroes. As such, as the hero leaves the building an agent attempts a "snatch and grab" if feasible. Allow the hero *Spot* and *Listen* checks against the agent's *Hide* and *Move Silent* skills. Grabbing the package from a hero is a grapple. Begin with a touch attack, and if successful then conduct an opposed strength check to wrest away the package. If she succeeds in getting the package, she runs to a car being driven by her partner and peels away. The car drives to the Golan County Regional Health Center. See *Hospital* below.

If the attacker is captured or incapacitated, she carries no identification and refuses to answer any of the heroes' questions. Once the fight is lost, she allows herself to be taken to jail without a struggle. At most, she can be charged with assault and attempted robbery. Within 24 hours she is released on bail and spends the remainder of the adventure in a hotel room awaiting further instructions.

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Bait and Switch

Regardless of who wins the struggle for the package at the delivery service office, the hero must eventually return home. Once there, he is intercepted by a neighbor, who gives him a package she had been holding for safe keeping, since the postal worker was going to just leave on his doorstep. This is the Laura's package. It is a plain, square, eight inch box. The delivery address is written in Laura's distinctive handwriting. When the heroes open the box, read or summarize the following:

The brown cardboard box opens to reveal an inner box made of Styrofoam. This box is composed of two pieces fitting snugly together. Sandwiched safely between the two pieces of padding are a pair of freezer packs, a vial of yellow-tinted liquid, and a syringe. Accompanying the items is a note written on a piece of paper from a Safe Health Corporation notepad.

Consider creating a player handout of this note in advance to add a touch of realism to the adventure. Otherwise, the note reads as follows.

[Character name], I'm in BIG trouble. Hopefully by the time you get this I've called you and explained everything. I don't know how far these people will go. I'm sorry to drag you into this, but the testing is happening practically on your doorstep. They're going to test SH122-4 (my blank slate) at the hospital and the elementary school. They don't understand that it's only safe until it combines with another human virus. If I'm right then we'll have a super-virus pandemic on our hands. This will give you temporary immunity for 7 - 10 days. Give yourself .25 mL for every 40 pounds of body weight. Hopefully by the time you get this, I've already shut them down. I've got evidence but I don't know who to trust. This is big.

In a normal gaming scenario, there is enough inoculation serum to provide each hero with one full dose. If you want to ratchet up the tension and create a little more drama, provide only enough serum for 2/3 of the heroes.

Gene Therapy and "Blank Slate"

Gene therapy is an experimental practice of repairing defective genes responsible for a wide range of human disease. The most common way of replacing defective genes is by introducing a benign virus that has been altered to carry normal, healthy human DNA. Thus, the term "blank slate virus" in this adventure refers to a virus that has been stripped of its adverse effects for the purpose of later being modified to carry and deliver a healthy genetic payload.

Lines of Investigation

The heroes now have three primary lines of investigation. They can search the elementary school, they can search the hospital, or they can investigate Safe Health and Laura's current whereabouts.

W.B. Travis Elementary School

The day the heroes arrive, the elementary school is holding a health fair. Although it takes much investigation to confirm, the fair is sponsored by Safe Health. The school cafeteria has been transformed into a circus of booths, tables, and visual aids covering the gamut of human health. The exhibitors are a mixture of volunteer health professionals from the community, commercial health care outreach representatives, and state / local health education experts.

The heroes may gain entry to the school any number of ways. In conjunction with roleplaying, they may employ *Diplomacy*, *Bluff*, *Hide/Move Silently*, *Disguise*, or even *Forgery*. Set the DCs following

guidelines in the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*. Although the school administration is not likely to believe baseless claims of danger, they do allow the heroes to enter if they produce Laura's letter as evidence. However, the police are also notified, which the heroes may find unwelcome.

From the time of their entry into the school cafeteria, the heroes have fifteen minutes until the fair begins. One area demonstrates the human ear by displaying the live video of an otoscope, soon to be used on eager volunteers. Another area administers free vaccinations. Yet another area demonstrates lung capacity by having children blow into a device. Many other exhibits dot the cafeteria, but it is the lung capacity exhibit that delivers the viral agent.

The elementary school was chosen as an ideal site for testing the airborne version of SH122-4. While the heroes may suspect the immunization booth as a likely culprit, the Safe Health team is poised to deliver a puff of aerosolized viral agent to each child who tries their "game". The device looks similar to a miniature carnival strength test. A bright red ball the size of a ping-pong ball sits in the bottom of a tall, clear plastic tube. Each child takes a deep breath and blows into a mouthpiece attached by hose to the bottom of the tube. The "contest" is to see who can blow the ball up the tube the highest. When each child empties her lungs in an attempt to win, the device puffs a measured dose of virus into breathing tube. As the children gasp for air, they draw the virus deep into their lungs. Observant heroes may *Spot* (DC 18) a small puff of vapor at the bottom of the tube.

The Safe Health agents wear "business casual" slacks and polo shirts with no logos or other marks hinting at their affiliation to Safe Health. The pair knows that what they are doing is illegal, but they are being very well compensated. Because the pair knows that they are taking a big risk, they appear nervous (*Sense Motive* versus the agents' *Bluff*) to perceptive heroes who question their affiliation.

Furthermore, they genuinely believe that they are testing a benign drug. Although Laura has warned her former employers about the virus' danger, they have chosen to take the risk and have not communicated the danger to their underlings. Even so, both agents have received a dose of the same inoculation Laura sent to her ex-boyfriend.

After fifteen minutes to search the area, the bell rings, the cafeteria doors burst open, and crowds of children chatter and push from one area to the next. If the heroes uncover the deception, the Safe Health agents prefer escape over combat. Should a fight break out (especially if gunshots ring out), the cafeteria is quickly consumed in chaos. Do not be afraid to escalate the situation just as it would in real life—screaming children fleeing from all points of the school; security, police, and SWAT teams surrounding the campus; TV camera crews covering the action as it unfolds. For the Safe Health agents' statistics, use appropriately-leveled Fast/Dedicated Ordinaries from Chapter 8 of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*.

Hospital

At the Golan County Regional Health Center, Safe Health agents prepare to inject SH122-4 into dozens of people who think they are getting a flu shot. This pair of agents is setting up a table in one corner of the hospital cafeteria. They are masquerading as state health officials here to offer low-cost shots to the poor and elderly. A dozen such people loiter in the cafeteria, waiting for the immunizations to begin. When the heroes arrive, one agent is unfurling a table-cloth and setting up a sign. The other agent is in the parking lot unloading padded boxes of SH122-4 from a rental vehicle onto a rolling cart. It takes roughly eight minutes to return from the parking lot to the cafeteria.

Like the agents at the elementary school, these agents know that they are conducting illegal human testing but have been paid handsomely to take the risk. If closely questioned, perceptive heroes may notice

(*Sense Motive* versus the agents' *Bluff*) that the agents seem nervous.

The boxes brought in by the second agent are well padded with Styrofoam and contain pre-filled, disposable syringes of the inoculum. Should the heroes get a close look at the syringes, this liquid is a different color than the one given to them by Laura. Naturally, this is because SH122-4 is a different substance than the immunoglobulin. To clinch matters, the heroes may *Spot* (DC 18) a label reading SH122-4 on two of the boxes.

After returning with the supplies from their vehicle, the Safe Health agents can be ready to start administering shots within 10 minutes.

Heroes who secure a sample of SH122-4 (at least one syringe-worth) and get it in the hands of health care professionals (such as the Center for Disease Control) make great strides in softening the long-term impact of the super-flu. See *Resolution* below.

Without proof, hospital administrators are unlikely to believe the heroes' claims of tainted "flu shots". A call to state health officials confirming that no agents are present at the hospital may help shift an administrator from Unfriendly to Friendly. The heroes could also steal or destroy the boxes of syringes, thus preventing their use. Like their colleagues at the elementary school, these Safe Health agents prefer fleeing capture over lingering around for combat. Should a fight ensue, a police officer rushes to the area from another part of the hospital. Other authorities arrive within four minutes. Treat the Safe Health agents as Fast/Dedicated Ordinaries as found in Chapter 8 of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*.

Laura and Safe Health

After the Safe Health agents' failure to retrieve Laura's package, they try a different tact. Laura is being held prisoner for just such an instance. The timing of this encounter is left up to the GM to implement at a dramatically appropriate moment. Ideally, the

following scenario occurs while the heroes are on site at the elementary school or the hospital just before confronting the villains. Alternately, it could be employed if it looks like the heroes' investigation is hitting a dead end.

At an appropriate moment, the hero who formerly dated Laura receives a phone call on his cell phone. Due to the individuality of roleplaying, it is unlikely that the following read-aloud text can be used precisely as written without pause. Be familiar with the content and roleplay. For added fun, go into another room and call the player on a phone near the game table. For even more fun, recruit a female accomplice to play the part of Laura.

[Hero name?] Is that you? Oh God, please don't let them kill me! Do whatever they say. Give them back the vial. They promise they won't hurt me if you give them what they want. Please--

The woman's voice is abruptly cut off and replaced by the cold, iron voice of a middle-aged male.

[Hero name], I am tired of this inconvenience. You have something that belongs to us. Return the vial and do not interfere with our little experiment. In exchange, I will return Laura to you alive. She will not be...further... harmed. If you don't give me what I want, I have no reason to keep Laura alive. In fact, I might take out my frustration on her.

Go to Terminal C of the Houston Intercontinental Airport with the vial. We'll be watching you. You'll get another call to prove that Laura is still alive and in the airport. Go to Baggage Return 4, put the vial on the belt, and walk away. When you comply, Laura will be sent to meet you. You have exactly three hours, which is the length of time it takes to drive there. If you are late, you'll find a corpse waiting for you.

This elaborate tradeoff is mostly an excuse to get the heroes out of Pinebox while the human trial is being conducted. However, the mysterious caller actually does intend on following through. Laura's inoculation

vial is an inconvenient loose thread that could unravel the plans of the shadow organization behind Safe Health.

In the unlikely event that the heroes follow the caller's instructions, they find Laura wandering around the terminal as promised. Although she has a few bumps and bruises, at first she doesn't appear to be seriously hurt. However, she seems groggy and does not recognize her former boyfriend. As the minutes pass, it becomes apparent that she is suffering from acute amnesia. Heroes who try a *Treat Injury* check (DC 14) find needle marks that might indicate she was injected with a memory-wiping drug. Her entire life's history has been wiped clean.

Resolution

This adventure could take any number of interesting directions, including serving as a launching point for a long-term cat and mouse campaign with the sinister forces behind Safe Health. Who was really behind the fake company? What were their true intentions for SH122-4? These are questions only *you* can best answer for *your* campaign, although in the Pinebox campaign setting this adventure has indirect ties to *Modern Dispatch* #41: *Fallen*.

That being said, if the heroes successfully prevent Safe Health from spreading SH122-4 then they have almost literally saved the world and most certainly the lives of tens of thousands of people. Depending on their actions, the world may never know their sacrifices, or they may laud the heroes as, well, heroes.

Inversely, if the blank slate virus is released, then within 12 hours it combines with a common strain of influenza to create a super-flu. This virus is 99.34% communicable and proves to be very deadly for the young, elderly, or immunodeficient. Even a normal, healthy adult is left incapacitated for almost two weeks. The Safe Health agents are all immunized with a vaccine developed by the "Australian" team. The first year, this virus impacts the security and well-being of almost every country on the globe, and its economic impact is felt for several years.

If the heroes secure a sample of SH122-4 and get it in the hands of health care professionals (such as the Center for Disease Control), they make great strides in softening the long-term impact of the super-flu.

About SH122-4

While this adventure tries to stay on the side of science "fact" instead of fiction, at least part of the premise behind Modern Dispatch #65 is questionable. The idea behind gene therapy is to cure a single person, not infect a large group of people with the same treatment. Real researchers look for a virus that is highly infectious (meaning, effective on the subject being treated), but not communicable among multiple people. While some people (such as the mysterious group behind Safe Health Corp) have their own motivation for infecting entire populations, gene therapy is not a plausible reason for developing a virus like SH122-4. Thus, the likelihood of duping an honest researcher into believing she was doing ethical research is pretty slim. Unless she was told it was for a new generation of super-vaccines for third world countries. Hmmm....

PINEBOX NEWS

November 21, 2005

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Three Teens Missing After Fall Festival

By Theresa Lee

The Golan County Annual Fall Festival has been marred by the disappearances of three local teens; Angela Mayes, Trisha Douglas, and Thomas Brewer. The teens were last seen by friends in downtown Pinebox, taking part in the Ghost Dancing Ceremony. Each was wearing Halloween costumes with ghostly motifs. Thomas was wearing a white costume that outlined a skeletal frame, while Angela and Trisha were dressed in black with white painted faces.

The teens apparently left the festival around one in the morning and it is presumed they were in Brewer's late model Ford truck. Angela Mayes parents reported their daughter missing to the authorities early Tuesday morning.

A subsequent search by local police and the Golan County Sheriff's department recovered Brewer's truck parked on Six-Mile road just south of the Devil's Mouth, near Wilson's Quarry. Sheriff Anderson reported that, "There was no sign of struggle or anything, and it looks as if they just walked into the quarry down into the Mouth."

The Mouth is a small spring fed pond at the base of the old rock quarry, and is a popular teen swimming hole. The hole is approximately thirty feet in diameter

and more than sixty feet deep. The edges are sheer rock, and some have reported underwater cave entrances as well. The spring-fed water is ice-cold, even in the middle of the summer. The Devil's Mouth has been blamed for more than one missing or drowned person, the most famous case involving freelance reporter Jennifer Ridge. In the 1970s, Alicia Johnson killed

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Community Calendar

November 21

Nature Walk—Raise money to preserve our forests. Meet at Indian Mounds Park 10 a.m.

November 22

True Church of Pinebox Tent Revival—Father Jacob Mallichy invites all to a tent revival for music and fellowship. Begins at 7 p.m.

Health Fair—Travis Elementary is having a health fair in the school cafeteria. Volunteers are still needed. Call the school office.

Free Immunizations—Free immunizations at the Golan County Regional Health Center.

Cont'd.

Ravens Cursed— Worst College Team Ever

By Daren Smith

The Raven's football team seems to be cursed, as they suffered yet another defeat against North Louisiana last weekend. This loss marks the 23rd straight loss for the team in the past three seasons.

"We just are not executing on either side of the ball," said Head Coach Preston Blakemore. "We have the talent to be competitive. We just aren't getting it done."

Many Ravens' supporters are calling for the firing of Coach Blakemore and his staff, though the players still support their coach.

"It's not his fault we aren't winning. It's the curse," said starting half-back Alexander Toomy. "It all started three seasons ago against St. Joseph's in Landry's Parish Louisiana."

Few local fans have forgotten the unfortunate accident that took place three years ago in a game against the Crusaders. In that game, Crusader linebacker, Mike Donato, had sacked the Raven's quarterback four times in the first half. Donato wrecked the Raven's backfield, holding the running game to twenty total

yards. After the accident, it was alleged that the Raven's starting offensive guard, Jim Bo Martin, and offensive left tackle, Billy Halliday, conspired to take out Donato early in the third quarter. Martin pulled, but instead of taking out the end, moved to hit Donato. Halliday clearly cut Donato's legs, resulting in a crippling injury. Halliday and Martin were placed on suspension for their actions, but Donato never played again, having to suffer through three major surgeries to repair his knees.

The St. Joseph's game was the last victory for the Raven's team, and some superstitious players and fans claim that Donato's family placed a voodoo curse on the Ravens.

"It's no secret that Donato's family are voodoo priests," said Toomy. "I grew up in Landry's Parish, and everyone knows it."

Despite superstitious excuses, the team must play better. They may be the worst team in college ball, leading all other teams in injuries, fumbles and interceptions.

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Missing Teens (continued from pg 1)

her boyfriend and dumped his car into the Mouth. The car was never recovered.

“Those kids probably were going skinny-dipping down there and got into some sort of trouble,” Sheriff Anderson said. “We are investigating a possible drowning and have called in divers to search the swimming hole.”

The Sheriff's department also recovered the costumes and other clothing near the Mouth, apparently carefully laid aside. Search dogs are currently combing the area for any signs of the three teenagers.

“There were no signs of trouble anywhere, and no foul play is suspected at this time,” Anderson said.

The divers did not find the bodies, but Jake Dari, a local diver, reported that they have called for special equipment to help investigate the caves below. However, he is doubtful that the teens swam into a cave.

“It's too deep and dark, especially at night and I do not believe they are there. But it's better to be sure,” Dari said.

The teens have been missing since October 31st and anyone with information regarding the disappearances are asked to contact the Sheriff's department immediately.

GM Ideas

- A cave dwelling eel-like creature, more than four feet long, is making the cave its home and comes out at night to feed. Its bite causes paralysis and it drags its victims deep into the earth via one of the caves.

- Strange lights have been seen over the Devil's Mouth, and the teens were victims of UFO abduction.
- A Siren-Spirit of the forest beckoned the teens from the pool and led them deep into the forest beyond the Quarry. They were taken into another dimension via a portal through an ancient pine tree. The dogs have tracked the teens to the tree, but no further. Any night between midnight and three am, when the moon is full, the door is vaguely visible, and the Siren-Spirit (succubus demon) is temporarily released into our world. The teens are still alive, but trapped and tortured in the pseudo-dimension of the Siren-Spirit.
- Jake Dari goes into the caves, but does not come out. Fearing the dangerous cave dive, the Sheriff's department calls off the search. Dari's wife offers a substantial reward to anyone willing to make the dangerous dive to find her husband.

For more information on the Devil's Mouth and Wilson's Quarry, see the Pinebox campaign setting on our website at 12tomidnight.com.

Ravens Losing Streak

(continued from page 1)

“I don't believe in curses, and that Donato boy has suffered enough. I realize I can't stop the story from spreading, but I think it's wrong to do so, and I'm talking to the players. It's easy to scapegoat, but ultimately it comes down to lining up and playing the game as it's meant to be played,” said Coach Blakemore. “We just need to refocus and get ready for next week's game.”

Unfortunately, that game is against the Crusaders. Does anyone know of anyway to break the curse? I hope so, but until then I predict the Crusaders will win 21-3.

GM Ideas

- Several Ravens' supporters attempt to hire the characters to travel to Louisiana and ask the Donato family to remove the curse.
- To lift the curse, characters need to take part in a white voodoo ritual to exorcise the evil spirits. Unfortunately, the spirits are transferred from the team to the heroes, causing them to suffer ill luck and a -1 to all save, hit, and damage rolls.
- Coach Blakemore has a serious gambling addiction. He has been drugging the players' sports drinks before each game to insure their loss. Now the Ravens quarterback, Marquez Uman, is dying from a drug overdose. The heroes must track down the source of Uman's poisoning if there is any hope of identifying an antidote.

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