

# CIRCUS GAME.

A 3 HOUR RPG SCENARIO BY MATT COWENS

In which a group of young circus performers are abandoned, and must track down their circus family, learning where they come from and how important they are to each other in the process. The players take on the roles of circus performers in America, in the 1870s. The civil war has ravaged the south, and while reconstruction money is starting to flow into the bigger cities, life is very hard in small town America. Times are hard, and the players find themselves having to make some tough choices.

Thematically the game deals with what it means to be a family, with consequences, and with the price of happiness.

## SYSTEM

The scenario is presented with a very simple d6 based system. Characters roll a number of dice indicated by their most relevant skill or stat – 2d6 is the default roll if no skill applies. The dice are added together, with a higher total being better. Characters have a hit point total, and in the case of combat characters roll against each other. The difference between the two character's rolls is how many hit points of damage are done. Damage can be bruising (which knocks a character unconscious, but heals quickly) or lethal (which heals slowly, and can kill a character). Exact effects and outcomes of rolls are left at the discretion of the GM. The focus of the game is on decision making, so mechanics have been kept deliberately light. GMs are encouraged to adapt the scenario as they see fit using their favourite system, if a more structured approach is desired.

## GM'S SUMMARY

One year ago, in the town of Patience, The Great Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus ran into trouble with the locals. A group of three drunk youths (the Murphy brothers) accosted a female acrobat, threatening to assault her. The strongman, Mighty Rex, caught them, and defended her. In the process he accidentally maimed one of them, breaking both his arms and his cheek bone. They returned for revenge later that night, shot Rex, and burned down a tent with several performers inside. Six performers and several monkeys died.

The next morning, the circus members buried their dead in a field near town, packed up and disappeared. When the townsfolk of Patience woke up, they found seven of their children missing.

The Ringmaster, Wilhelm Gottkreig, and the Tattooed lady, Petra Constantin, kidnapped the seven children and took them to a witch. At the last house they stole children from, there was a pair of twins. They took both the twins, planning to keep one of the babies as their own if it was not needed in the ritual. Using a dark curse, the witch Granny Jones infused the children with part of the spirit of the dead performers, and caused them to magically age, transforming them into teenage circus performers, complete with fake memories of growing up in the circus as orphans.

Gottkreig and Constantin had buried the ashes of their dead friends in the field where the circus was set up. As part of the curse, all life in that field died, and the earth there is now barren. The barrenness is slowly spreading, killing the town of Patience. Over the past year times have been very hard in Patience, and people have begun to leave town for more pleasant climates.

One year later, Petra Constantin receives a message from one of the infants – a girl who is now the circus's psychic. The message was simple – life may grow once more before the next full moon.

Constantin and Gottkreig leave the circus, taking their truck, and head for Patience. Along the way they try to leave clues as to what happened, so that the infants will hate the people of Patience when they arrive. They hope to make the reunion as painful as possible, as they do not feel that honour has been served yet.

### **What will the PCs do?**

The PCs will try to track and catch up with their leaders. They are, at heart, just youngsters, and the ringmaster and tattooed lady are the only parental figures they remember.

The game has 3 main parts:

- Encounter the town of Charity, and try to survive without the rest of the circus. There will be a former circus member in the town, with a message from Gottkreig and Constantin. There will also be a young girl whose father is an abusive drunk, who needs their help. They will need to barter for supplies to repair their wagon.
- Encounter the witch and learn their origins
- Encounter the town of Patience (where the Circus and their real parents are waiting), and decide what to do – whether to undo the spell and go back to being infants, to stay with Gottfreig and Constantin, to try to go independent. Each choice has a price, a sacrifice to be made.

## **CHARACTERS**

The cast of the game is reasonably large, though most characters are easy to remember:

### **The Player Characters**

The Albino Strongman – Lukas Radu

The Lizardboy -

The Acrobatic Twins (one will be an NPC)

The Conjoined Psychic (a girl who has a conjoined twin the size of a 2 year old attached to her side)

The Monkey Tamer

The midget juggler and mentalist

### **The Important Circus Members**

Ringmaster (4d6, 15hp)

Tattooed Lady (3d6, 12hp)

Wagonmaster (3d6, 14hp)

The Gimp (5d6, 22hp)

### **The Deceased Circus Members**

The Professor (a mentalist)

Amazing Jane (an albino psychic)

The Incredible Rondo Brothers (acrobats)

Jojo the animal girl

The Indochina Lizard Girl

Mighty Rex (a strongman)

### **The Townsfolk**

#### **Charity**

**Sheriff Steel** – an open-minded man who cares deeply about his town (3d6, 16hp)

**Remus Jorgensen** – the general store owner (3d6, 10hp)

**Mr Chin** – a tailor (2d6, 10hp)

**Simon Thatcher** – a butcher(3d6, 10hp)

**Selma Jones** – owner of the Jones Saloon. A kindly, matronly figure. (2d6, 12hp)

**Cannonball Boris** – an ex-circus performer blacksmith, who has a crush on Jane Wilcox (5d6, 25hp)

**Jebediah Wilcox** – a mean old drunk widower who beats his children (5d6, 25hp)

**Jane Wilcox** – Jebediah's beautiful 17 year old daughter (2d6, 12hp)

**Timothy Wilcox** – Jane's younger brother. An inquisitive 8 year old scamp. (1d6, 8hp)

**Sarah Wilcox** (deceased) – mother to Jane and Tim, wife to Jebediah. He strangled her a year ago, in a drunken rage, and hid her body in an old well.

#### **Patience**

**Frances Montgomery**, and **Ed Heard** – parents who lost children last year (3d6, 12hp)

**Father Reynolds** – a Priest (2d6, 10hp)

**Granny Jones** – a Witch (2d6, 8hp)

**Merv** – a general store owner (3d6, 14hp)

**Jo and Carl Sleeping-Feather** – diner owners (3d6, 12hp)

## **SEQUENCE OF EVENTS**

As the players move through the scenario, they will come up with their own events and means of dealing with (or avoiding) problems. This is the suggested sequence of events for the scenario, all the events taking place within the space of 3 or 4 days:

1. The night before abandonment. The circus is outside the town of Charity. Several minor events happen, giving spotlight time to a small number of characters in each scene.
2. The characters wake up alone. They make their way in to Charity. Their wagon axle snaps.
3. Negotiations with Boris. He will fix the wagon if the PCs help him woo Jane Wilcox.

4. Trouble at the Wilcox house. What will the PCs do to get the Wilcox kids away from their abusive father?
5. Head for Patience. Along the way memories start to come back. They meet a woman who loved The Professor. She shows them a disturbing photograph of the old circus performers.
6. Meet the witch. PCs pass the witch's house, may speak with her. She lays all the cards on the table, so to speak.
7. The town of Patience. The PCs must decide what to do – they must take action at midnight, one way or another. What price do they want to pay?

The players will have at least two tough decisions to make during the game. Whether to follow the circus to Patience is not one of them.

## **DETAILED PLOT ARC**

### **Events Outside Charity**

The circus travels a route that takes it past many small towns. Unable to compete with established circuses in large towns, Forepaugh and Sells make their living from country folk. As the game opens, the circus has set up in a large field outside the town of Charity. They are about 35 minutes' fast wagon ride from town. It is early autumn, the leaves are just starting to turn and there is a hint of a chill in the air. The game opens with a set of scenes at night, at the circus. A performance is taking place, with townsfolk arriving on foot and in wagons, reluctantly handing over coins to see the show. This collection of scenes needs to establish the following information:

- The appearance of the player characters
- They are outsiders, regarded as freaks by ordinary people
- Circus folk, and the PCs in particular, look after each other
- Tim Wilcox is being beaten regularly
- Sarah Wilcox is a restless spirit, and needs help
- The world is a scary place

### **Mini-scene One**

In the main tent, the strongman and the lizard boy are completing their act. As they leave the main ring, they see the boy Tim being dragged off by the Ringmaster as he has been caught sneaking in. Tim's face bears old and fresh bruises, and he holds his arm as if it has been twisted. As the performers leave the tent, a couple of aggressive young farm-boys (3d6, 12hp) yell out 'Freaks' at them. There is an air of tension and the possibility of conflict, depending on how the PCs react.

### **Mini-Scene Two**

The psychic girl is returning from locking up her night's take in the Ringmaster's wagon when she is accosted by a farmboy (3d6, 12hp). He is looking for some affection, but is deeply prejudiced and unattractive. If the girl is feeling threatened, her conjoined twin will fix its milky eyes on the boy and threaten him in babyish tones (the conjoined twin is an NPC). The boy will turn mean, verbally at first, then physically if not stopped. Any other PC who wishes to may overhear this and intervene. At the very least the farmboy will be interrupted by the acrobat twins, who meet up with the psychic girl before the scene gets too nasty.

### **Mini-Scene Three**

The monkey-trainer is locking up her monkeys for the night when they become spooked. Behind her, a spectral figure of a woman appears. She has heavy bruising on her neck, and looks very sad. She points at the road, where the monkey-trainer will see Tim being dragged out of the main tent and sent on his way. This is the ghost of Tim's mother Sarah. She disappears shortly, though will mouth incomprehensible words and make choking and breaking gestures in response to questioning.

### **Mini-Scene Four**

The Professor finishes his juggling act, and is told by the Tattooed lady to gather all the PCs and bring them to the mess tent. Madame Constantin wants to talk to them all before they go to sleep. The Professor should catch glimpses of all the other scenes, and his arrival can be used as a device to end each mini-scene.

### **Madame Constantin's Pep Talk**

This takes place in the mess tent, around a trestle dinner table. It is a scene of domesticity and normality, in the midst of the circus oddness. Madame Constantin smiles at the assembled PCs maternally, and speaks from the heart:

*You have been with the circus all your young lives, my dears. You have seen much of this America, but have you wondered where the circus came from? We have been heading steadily east these past months, and soon we will reach the town where we first found you, orphans all. Are you excited about finding out where you come from? Please remember that you had no home there, no family, and we have taken you in and made you welcome. Please remember that you will always have a home here in the circus. I have a special treat for you – a traditional dessert from my home country. Here – try some.*

Thematically, this game deals with ideas of family, and belonging. This scene should be played seriously, and should help to establish a tone for the game. It is also, of course, the scene in which the PCs are drugged so that they can be abandoned. Whether they eat the food or not, Madame Constantin is planning to pump sedative gas into their tents during the night, so they will sleep in well after the circus is gone.

### **Abandoned**

The next morning the PCs wake up groggily in their tents. There is a stillness in the air, and the sun has risen higher than usual. As they emerge from their tents it becomes clear that it is already late afternoon. The rest of the circus is gone, with only a single covered wagon and patches of flattened grass remaining. The PCs are split between two tents (one for boys, one for girls).

It is very unusual for them to have slept so long, and they are likely to be very suspicious. There are two old horses hitched to the wagon. They are quite grumpy, and refuse to be ridden. The fastest way to catch up with the circus is to take the wagon across country towards the town of Patience. This is faster than the road, but much bumpier. Whether they take the road or go cross country, their wagon is about to break down. The front axle will begin to creak. The character driving the wagon must get over 10 in a listening roll to hear the ominous sound. The axle will snap if the wagon continues. If all the PCs

dismount and walk alongside the wagon, it will crack but make it to Patience before needing repairs.

Players should be given ample time to dissect their circumstances, complain about being abandoned, and begin to get on each other's nerves.

If they walk for a little over an hour, they will see the buildings of Charity begin to appear in the distance.

### **Charity – a town of mixed fortunes**

In the town of Charity, there are very much two kinds of people. There are some very reasonable, hard-working people who will regard the PCs with the same suspicion they treat all outsiders to. They are not prejudiced or mean, just cautious around strangers. The Hotel owner Selma Jones and Sheriff Steel are two such characters.

The other kind of person is the kind who has fallen on hard times, and looks to blame and persecute others to make themselves feel better. Luckily these people are in the minority, but there are several of them in the town. Jedediah Wilcox is one such man, mean and bigoted.

### **Main Locations**

There are two main roads in Charity, arranged in a T junction. At the intersection of the two roads is the **Town Hall**, which contains a single-room library/records office, a sheriff's office with two cells, and a courtroom that doubles as an indoor market space in winter.

There is a **general store** next to the town hall, selling all manner of supplies. There is a **laundry and tailor's**, a **butcher**, a **hotel** owned by Selma Jones, and a **blacksmith's** owned by 'Cannonball' Boris, a former circus performer.

The other location which will become of interest to the PCs is the Wilcox farmhouse, located north of town. The circus has been travelling steadily east for several weeks now, so PCs may assume that their 'home town' is to the east of Charity.

### **Town Hall**

The town hall is where the PCs may find *Sheriff Steel* (3d6, 16hp). Steel is a large man of Irish extraction, with a thin face and piercing brown eyes. He has a gruff demeanour, but is one of the fairest men the PCs are likely to meet. He does not pre-judge them, and so long as they behave themselves he will treat them with respect. He owns a rifle, which he keeps locked behind his desk, and a pistol which he wears on his hip, along with his badge. He is clean shaven, and has a look vaguely reminiscent of a card shark.

He saw the circus pass through town early in the morning, stop for supplies at the general store, then head out east in a convoy. He talked briefly with Gottkrieg the ringmaster, but all they talked about was the weather.

If the PCs come to him with a problem, Steel will hear them out, and proceed cautiously. He knows Wilcox is a drunk, and suspects that he beats his kids. He even wonders about the disappearance of Mrs Wilcox – wonders whether something sinister didn't happen to

her. Steel can be a close ally of the PCs, though he will always be gruff and direct in his dealings with them.

### **General Store**

The general store is owned by *Remus Jorgensen* (3d6, 10hp), a Baptist whose family moved to America from Denmark when he was a boy. He is very suspicious of outsiders, and does not trust young people or strangers with his stock. If the PCs have cash he is happy to deal with them, but is far from polite.

### **Laundry and Tailor's**

Owned by *Mr Chin* (2d6, 10hp), a Chinese American who speaks only a little English. His wife and two children can also be found here most of the time. He is a friendly, vocal individual.

### **Butcher's**

*Simon Thatcher* (3d6, 10hp) is the town's sullen butcher. He moved out here to get away from an arranged marriage, and feels isolated and lonely. He is saving money to move away from town, but business being what it is, he is probably trapped here for several more years.

### **The Blacksmith's**

Charity has a colourful blacksmith known as *Cannonball Boris* (5d6, 25hp). He is a huge, barrel-chested man with an enormous walrus-like moustache, who speaks in a booming voice. He is over six feet tall, and has thick-set limbs. In the past, Boris was a circus performer who would stand in front of a cannon and stop a cannonball with his stomach. He even worked with the Forepaugh and Sells circus for a short time, about four years ago. He retired here to make an honest living, and give his body some much needed rest.

Boris will help the PCs as much as he can, and is easily able to fix the axle of their wagon. It will take him the better part of a day to fix it, and he will demand a price. The monetary cost of the repairs is \$65 (the PCs start with only about \$15), but he is willing to waive that fee if the PCs will do him a favour. He is madly in love with a young woman called Jane Wilcox, but her father hates him. He wants to convince Jane to marry him, and come live with him in the apartment above the blacksmith's. He just can't get close to her, and he's also a little shy when it comes to ladies. If the PCs will act as a go-between, he will happily repair their wagon.

It is hoped that the PCs will see the act of being a go-between as preferable to trying to raise \$50 in one day. Short of stealing the money, there is no way the PCs can get that much money in less than a week in Charity. If they did odd-jobs and impromptu performances around town, they might make a combined \$10 a day if they were lucky.

### **What is known about the Wilcox Family**

Boris is coy about details – he doesn't want to put the PCs off. He will describe the father as 'mean', but that's as far as he goes. It is common knowledge in the town that Jebediah is a drunk, and common gossip that he beats his children more than he needs to. Half the town is convinced he killed his wife, the other half think she ran off with some stranger. The daughter, Jane, is a beautiful girl who is very sweet, but not too bright. She is old enough to leave the family home, but many think she stays for the sake of her younger brother. Tim Wilcox is a fairly typical 8 year old. He steals apples from people's trees,

ends up in fields where he has no business being, and is always falling over and scraping himself up. He has much of his mother's demeanour and appearance.

### **The Wilcox Farmstead**

About a forty minute walk north of town is the Wilcox farmstead. It is comprised of a shabby house near the road, and a collection of animals and land stretching off in gently rolling hills. It has an appearance of neglect – enough is being done to scrape a living off the land, but little more. There is a porch, dusty windows, and a bare, slightly squalid interior.

As the PCs approach, Jebediah (5d6, 25hp) will be sleeping off a bottle of gin in his bedroom. Jane is in the kitchen doing her best to make soup with limited ingredients, while Tim is playing cards on the floor in the main room.

Jane is a sweet, easily persuaded girl who will be very flattered to find out someone is in love with her. She is very easy to convince to leave her father.

Tim is less sure that it's a good idea – he doesn't want to be left alone with his father, and fears that his father would try to hurt him, his sister, or Boris. He is, of course, right.

PCs can gain easy access to the house, or can lure Jane and Tim outside to talk. Before they leave the farm, however, Jebediah will wake up and confront them, wielding a large carving knife (add 1d6 to his total while he's wielding this). He is a mean drunk, and is perfectly willing to stab any or all of the PCs, or his own children if they try to leave. This confrontation may take place in the house, on the porch, or on the road outside the house. Jebediah will run to catch up if needed, and is surprisingly sprightly for a ramshackle drunk.

The players will have to decide their best course of action for dealing with Jebediah. In a fight, the strongman and lizard boy together could beat him, and if all the PCs attacked him he would stand no chance (though he could injure one or more characters). The immediate threat is small – it's the longer term danger that must be dealt with.

If the PCs do not kill Jebediah, or report his actions to the sheriff, he will come into town drunk at night, sneak into the blacksmith's, and kill his son Tim (as a mean drunk he doesn't want to stand up to Boris directly, so will attack his own son instead).

The best way to deal with Jebediah is to prove that he's a murderer. To do this the PCs must communicate with the ghost of his dead wife. They may use a séance, or the psychic girl may try a tarot reading or spirit communion (run the conjoined twin as an NPC for this). Failing this, young Tim sometimes sees his mother at night, and can prompt the PCs. She stands outside his window and points up the hill (toward the old well). Her remains are in the well, and can be found relatively easily by the sheriff if he's pointed in the right direction.

If the PCs get the children away but do not find a permanent solution to Jebediah's anger, there will be a death. Sometimes a negative outcome can have a huge impact on players – feel free to have the young boy killed. Provide opportunities for the PCs to solve the problem, but do not worry overly about having a safety net.



### **Key Decision One**

How to approach the task of uniting Boris and Jane is the first key decision that is likely to have significant consequences for the PCs. As such, it is important to get as many of the facts and factors out in the open as possible. It is not a mystery to solve, it is a problematic situation to resolve. Try to emphasise how important the decision is, and allow the players time to talk through what they are going to do. Whatever they do, there will be consequences.

### **Moving On**

The PCs can pitch their tents behind Boris's shop. Boris will repair the wagon early the next morning, and is happy for the PCs to depart whether they have succeeded in persuading Jane or not. As long as they have tried to help him, he will help them. "After all," he tells the party, "circus folk stick together – even after the cannonballs stop flying."

Travelling east, the PCs will pass outlying farms and open scrubland. The town of Patience is about 3 days' journey from Charity. The PCs have enough food to last the journey, but the weather is starting to get a little cold. They will meet a traveller on the way, heading in the opposite direction, and there will be an opportunity for them to find shelter for at least one night indoors if they wish, at the homestead of a lonely old witch.

During the journey, the PCs will have unusually vivid dreams. Describe to them dreams of being a performer with a different skill, of fire and violence, of a cottage on a hill and an old lady singing lullabies to them.

### **A Passer-by From the Past**

About a day and a half out of Charity, the PCs will see a covered wagon heading towards them. A middle-aged woman is at the reins, leading an amiable looking horse as it plods along the dusty trail. The woman's name is **Annabelle Stephens** (3d6, 10hp), and her horse is called Snowy. She's a friendly sort, who has had some experience with circuses in the past. She will stop, and offer to share a pot of tea with the PCs. In the back of her wagon she has all her worldly possessions, including a precariously balanced framed poster that will fall out of the wagon at an opportune time. It is several years old, yellowed at the edges, and it shows a tall juggler and mentalist called 'The Professor'. Anyone who looks closely will see a Forepaugh and Sells wagon in the background. The poster describes The Professor as being an amazing mentalist, and one of the circus's star attractions. He is clearly *not* a midget.

If questioned, Annabelle will reveal that she had a brief affair with the Professor some years ago, when the Forepaugh and Sells circus was passing through Patience. She loved him dearly, but he wouldn't stay in one place. They met up about once a year when he came through town, and she thought that could have been enough for her. But then, a year ago, there was a tragic fire, and the professor died. Things had gone from bad to worse since then, with crops failing and the town turning sour. When autumn came, and she found herself starting to look out her window and hope to see the circus, she realised that her life in Patience was over. She couldn't stay there, haunted by the past. She's moving back east, back to her family. She couldn't sell her old house, so she has just left it empty for whoever takes it.

She remembers some of the other performers from the circus – a lizard boy, an albino acrobat, a psychic midget girl. She doesn't remember their names, or much more about them than those generalisations.

She passed the circus a day ago, heading towards Patience, but took a wide berth around them. She couldn't stand to see the Professor's old friends, his old wagon.

The encounter with Annabelle is intended to provide the following key information:

- There was a performer called the Professor, who was not a midget
- There was a fire a year ago in which some circus performers were killed (none of the PCs remember anything like this)
- The town of Patience is suffering

### **Optional Action Hook**

The Murphys, a hillbilly family from outside of Patience, has found Annabelle's empty house. Realising that she has left, and will be travelling with all her valuables, they decided to follow her. The Murphy brothers are three mean, masked, ornery men between 18 and 22 years old, riding horses and carrying blackjacks (4d6, 14hp each). They have been slowly catching up with Annabelle, and her stopping to talk to the PCs is the opportunity they need to finally catch up. The youngest Murphy brother, Patrick, is particularly mean. Both his arms hang at odd angles, and his face is heavily scarred, after the strongman Mighty Rex attacked him a year ago. His arms work, but they ache something fierce.

They will wait in the distance, trying to hide beneath a ridge or hill, until the PCs move on. Then they will close in on Annabelle, attack her, and steal everything she owns.

Observant PCs may notice them on the horizon, and will have an opportunity to confront them, or lay an ambush. More careless PCs may be drawn back to help her by her cries, carried on the wind, or a psychic message from the conjoined twin.

The boys are carrying out their mother's orders (their father being in a vegetative state due to trauma suffered in the civil war). They are mean, and callous, but they feel that what they are doing is 'looking after their own', and as such is simply what must be done. They are a tough bunch, and will provide a challenging fight for the PCs.

### **The Witch's Cottage**

The next location the characters will encounter is the witch **Granny Jones's** cottage. This is where they will learn how to undo the ritual that has made them what they are. Again, as the key to the scenario is the decision, rather than working out the puzzle, there is no need to be coy with information. The witch is an NPC who is very happy to share what she knows with the PC. Full knowledge will only make their eventual decision that much harder.

*The cottage – “As you begin to near the town of Patience, dark clouds are gathering above you. You see on the crest of a hill an inviting looking cottage. Warm light spills out of the windows, and lightly fragranced smoke drifts from the chimney out towards the road. You can smell cinnamon, and baking, and you are struck with an acute sense of déjà-vu. A figure waves to you from the porch – it looks like an old lady, sitting in a rocking chair.*

*Despite the distance, you can make out what looks like a freshly baked pie cooling on the window-sill.”*

Granny Jones will beckon the PCs inside. Based on their dreams, and the nature of the game, it is likely that the PCs will be curious. If they do not wish to visit the cottage, it is possible to give the PCs the relevant information later in the adventure – Granny Jones could show up in Patience, or perhaps one of the characters could have a prophetic dream.

*The interior of the cottage is warm and comfortable. There is a crowded sitting room, filled with photographs and paintings. It looks like the photographs are of many different families. There is a large kitchen, with a huge variety of herbs and spices hanging to dry or powdered in jars. There are cookies in the oven, just finished baking.*

Granny Jones talks in an oddly blunt, but still roundabout manner:

*“It’s so good to see you again, dears. Almost a year since we made you. My, how you’ve grown! Not so much as that night of course, aha, but still you’re growing into fine youngsters.”*

If asked any sort of question, she will do her best to answer fully. She doesn’t know what caused the trouble in Patience, but she does know that Gottkreig and Constantin stole 7 babies, and that the spirits of their dead friends were used in the ritual to transform the babies.

*“Crowded in their, at times? You’ve still got the wee ones’ spirits inside of you. And the others, of course. They weren’t hard to bring back, bind into your flesh. Growing you up was the hard part, you ate so much! But Granny Jones likes to bake, and young gestalts like Granny Jones’s baking, sure enough. One night, more than a decade of growing!”*

Granny Jones gives the PCs the following information if prompted or encouraged:

- She performed a ritual a year ago to imbue 7 babies with the spirits of the dead circus performers. Two of the babies were twins.
- The babies’ spirits are still alive inside the PCs. It’s like they’re sleeping inside them.
- The attributes of the performers got a little mixed up when the ritual was performed.
- The town is feeding the spell, at the cost of its own death through failed crops and tainted water.
- The ashes of the circus performers are part of what’s poisoning the town. She doesn’t know where in the town they are, but if they were blessed (by any religious means) it would break the curse.
- If the PCs break the curse, they will *probably* end up back as infants, and the spirits of the deceased performers will move on to wherever it is that spirits go. However, it’s not an exact science.
- If the PCs do nothing, the spell will slowly start to deteriorate, and they will become schizophrenic and physically unstable as the babies try to regain control of their bodies. Granny Jones doesn’t think any of them will live for more than five or six years if they don’t take action.
- If a human sacrifice is made over the ashes (or the spot where the ashes are buried), it will bind the spell and keep the PCs as they are. Only one human sacrifice is

needed to keep all the PCs as they are. The town will still die off as the land will be further poisoned.

Granny Jones is like a bumbling scientist in her views towards the ritual – she did it because she was asked to, she wanted to find out what would happen, and she has no particular view on whether it was right or wrong, or whether human sacrifice is a bad thing. She's fascinated by the whole situation, and would love the PCs to come back and tell her what happens if they're able.

If the PCs wish to coerce or attack her, she reacts as a strangely calm old lady (2d6, 8hp). She has no supernatural strength or defences. She does not have a 'clean' solution to their problem – it's blessing, or sacrifice, or inevitable decline into madness, physical deformity and death.

If the PCs compel Granny Jones to come with them, she will be a polite burden to them for the remainder of the scenario.

## **Patience**

Patience is only a small town, and is slowly being abandoned as residents lose hope. There are currently only about a hundred people living in Patience. Notably, though there are several young couples, there are no children. After the kidnappings of a year ago, young families moved out of the area. The parents of the kidnapped children have stayed, hoping to one day see their children again, but even they are starting to consider leaving town.

As the PCs enter the town of Patience, they are struck with an acute sense of despair. The town is soaked in negativity. The people are depressed, the animals lethargic, and the very air tainted with a gloomy autumnal sense. There are very few plants in the centre of town – those that survive are sickly weeds. There are several dead trees lining the streets.

There is a main street (called Main Street), on which there are several stores. There is a general store, a diner, and a hardware store. The hardware store is boarded up and closed. The circus is set up two miles past the town centre, in what used to be a beautiful public park. It is now a dusty wasteland.

### **Locations in Patience**

#### **Merv's General Store**

Merv (3d6, 14hp) is a hard working man from Nevada, who came to Patience to build up a business, with the aim of selling it on and retiring. Over the past year, he has seen that dream evaporate. Taking a last ditch gamble, he has bought ten farms in the past year from people desperate to leave. He is in debt, and is losing hope. He hides his worries under a jolly disposition, but will be wary of circus folk. He will happily tell the PCs where the circus is, describe the show he saw a year ago. He knows about the fire, and suspects there may have been some trouble before it, earlier in the evening. He remembers the kids that were taken, every one, and how it effected their mothers. He doesn't want any trouble, but he suggests that the PCs maybe shouldn't spend too much time in town.

### **The Plains Diner**

Run by a pair of Native American twins, the Plains Diner is about as stereotypically Confederate as you could get. **Jo** and **Carl Sleeping-Feather** (3d6, 12hp) just want to fit in, and forget about their parents' traditions and customs. They understand prejudice, and will be kind to the PCs. They will even offer them a free meal, as they are closing up shop and leaving in the morning.

### **The Church**

A rickety wooden building, the Baptist Church is home to **Father Reynolds** (2d6, 10hp), a preacher whose flock are deserting him. He fears that Satan has a hold of his town, and that they are all being tested 'just as God tested Job'. He is not a zealot, but he has clung to his faith rather tightly over the past few months. The PCs will have to sweet talk him if they are to convince him to bless the ashes of the dead circus performers. Alternately, they could steal the water from the baptismal font and use that. Either way will work.

### **The Park**

A dusty wasteland 2 miles from the centre of town, ringed by huge dead trees, the park is a mockery of life. A sickly stream wends its way across one edge of the park. Dead trees reach bare branches towards the sky. A swing hangs limply, unused from a branch. The circus have set up just one tent here – the Big Top. The wagons are arranged in a semi-circle behind it, and the carny-folk are waiting nervously by their wagons. Gottkreig and Constantin are inside the Big Top. Fifty yards away from the Big Top is the spot where the fire occurred, where the ashes are buried. The ground there is discoloured, dark, and there is a lingering sense of malice spreading from that epicentre.

### **Events in Patience**

The following events may take place in Patience:

- Talking to the locals
- Finding a priest to bless the ashes
- Confronting Constantin and Gottkreig
- Performing a sacrifice or blessing the ashes
- A climactic confrontation between the villagers and the circus folk

The people remaining in the town do not trust the circus, and many of the parents want revenge on the circus for stealing their children. This will culminate in a confrontation between the townsfolk and the circus people. The townsfolk will gather, carrying farming tools and flaming brands. Most of them want to chase the circus out of town, but one or two of them have more bloodthirsty goals.

### **The Angry Mob**

The angry mob is being led by two people – **Frances Montgomery**, and **Ed Heard** (3d6, 12hp each). Frances lost her son a year ago, and Ed lost his twin baby girls. They were kidnapped by the circus, and Ed and Frances both want revenge. Their bitterness has driven them away from their spouses (Jake Montgomery and Kate Heard respectively). They are empty now that their children are gone, and they want someone to pay. They figure the circus was in town, it's their fault, and they want blood. They will incite the crowd to anger, and will try to lead an attack against the circus at the climax of the night. They don't have a particular member of the circus in mind – they just want someone to die. Frances is carrying a civil war officer's pistol.

### **What Constantin and Gottkrieg Want**

The tattooed lady and ringmaster are waiting in the Big Top for the PCs. They want to talk to the PCs, make sure they know exactly what happened a year ago. They abandoned the PCs so that they could arrive in time to get set up, so that the PCs could spend some time together, and so that when the PCs learned what was happening, they'd have some time alone to think it over.

Now that the PCs know everything, it's time to make a choice. They have to choose whether to stay loyal to their circus family. If they want to stay with the circus, there's a price to pay – one human sacrifice. To make it easier for them, Gottkreig and Constantin have kidnapped old lady Murphy (mother to the ornery Murphy brothers, whom the PCs may have met on the way to Patience, and who lit the fire a year ago). She is trussed up, ready to sacrifice.

Gottkreig and Constantin knew the townsfolk of Patience wouldn't welcome them back, so they've taken the precaution of setting up circus hands with rifles in defensive positions around the wagons. They won't tell the PCs this unless they have to – but they are prepared to kill every man and woman in Patience if it'll let them keep their new family together. The PCs need only kill one woman.

### **The Stage is Set**

This is the set-up for the climax of the game. There are ordinary circus folk, who are nervous and armed and just want to make it out of town in one piece. There are unhappy townsfolk, who consider the circus bad luck at the least, probably untrustworthy. There are some people in town who want to see circus blood spilled tonight. There's a priest who fears for the spiritual safety of his town, and a pair of circus leaders who want their children to choose them, and are willing to do anything to protect the family they've made. There are ashes buried in the middle of the park that need blood, or blessing, to either feed or break the curse that binds the spirits of the dead performers into the bodies of the kidnapped children. There are seven young circus performers, one with a conjoined twin, who will revert to seven babies if the blessing takes place. This is the tangled web that the players must unravel or cut through at the climax of the game.

It is entirely possible that the party will split, with some members working against the others. This is an excellent outcome, and should be fully explored.

Tension is a key emotion to emphasise, as is confusion. Emotional appeals from families old and new will help to muddy the issue, and a sinister character as the sacrifice victim should help make that a less obviously bad choice. Give the players time. Probe them with questions to make them doubt their choices. Feel free to up the tension and conflict between NPCs, to see how the PCs react. The final choice is the payoff for the scenario – make the players work for it. They must all agree for the ritual to be successfully confirmed or reversed – a split party will produce a less than perfect result.

## **The Consequences**

### **Undoing the Ritual**

There are 8 heads among the young performers – and only 7 babies. The conjoined twins and the twin brother and sister may both be hoping that they are in fact one baby split in two.

The twin brother and sister are the same baby. The curse split a single baby in two, infusing both bodies with the essence of the acrobat. They will recombine if the ritual is reversed.

The conjoined twins are two separate babies. The little conjoined girl is a very sickly baby, who will die within weeks of returning to her normal body. Her sister is very healthy. The curse combined their bodies to make one functioning, albeit unusual form.

If all the players agree to undo the curse, and are able to bless the ashes, then there will be a blinding flash of light that knocks everyone in the park unconscious. When they wake up, there are 7 babies lying in the middle of the park. Their parents and friends rush forward and reclaim them, and life begins to return to normal in Patience. The angry mob disperses, and the circus is left to drift out of town. The circus does not stay together long, and is never seen again in Patience.

If the ashes are blessed against the will of some of the performers, the same thing happens, but those who objected are left in their PC shapes (as teenage circus performers). The babies are all sickly, and while they will survive, they are forever haunted by strange dreams of their time as other people. The PCs who stayed as performers feel a part of them is missing, and will develop mental instability and physical deformities over the next year. They all die within 4 years of the curse first being laid upon them.

### **Confirming the Ritual**

If the PCs make a human sacrifice over the ashes, spilling blood onto the ground, it will confirm the ritual. A dark cloud will rise up from the ground, buffeting all those around. The cloud will sweep through the town of Patience killing every plant within a 5 mile radius. The townsfolk will be driven back by the force of it, though the circus folk will feel strangely invigorated.

The PCs remain in their current state. They grow normally, and are free to choose their own destiny. There is only one change – Gottkreig and Constantin become even more like a mother and father to the PCs. Gottkreig especially is impressed with their loyalty, and when he retires he will leave the circus to one of the PCs.

The town of Patience becomes a ghost town, and is eventually razed to the ground as a health hazard. It later becomes a nuclear testing site.

If blood is spilt but nobody is killed, then the ritual will be prolonged. A small cloud of black dust swirls around the PCs, and they feel absolutely no change. They will live normally for an extra 5 years, before the mutations and madness begin. In this case the angry mob is still free to confront the circus, and it is likely that more blood will be spilt. Once the circus folk begin firing guns, the mob will panic and disperse, but in the confusion **Frances Montgomery**, and **Ed Heard** will try to get their revenge by killing a circus

member – this can be one of the PCs, or it can happen in front of the PCs for dramatic effect.

### **Doing Nothing**

If the PCs cannot agree on a course of action, or if they decide they don't want any part of the ritual, then the night will quickly head toward a confrontation. Led by **Frances Montgomery**, and **Ed Heard**, the mob will advance on the big top, shouting and waving torches. They will try to set fire to the big top, and will beat up any circus folk they can get their hands on. The circus is outnumbered, and the circus hands with guns are not bad people, so they will try shooting over the heads of the crowd. This will cause the people at the front of the crowd to push backwards, then the back of the crowd will surge forward toward the big top. It will be only a matter of moments before something catches fire, and someone is shot.

Confusion will reign, with several townsfolk being shot, people running in panic, and circus wagons racing off into the darkness. The PCs can escape, but they will be chased by Frances and Ed, who are out for blood. If the PCs stand their ground, then Frances and Ed will emerge from the crowd to target either a PC, or an NPC such as Madame Constantin or Gottkreig.

### **Resolution**

The decision regarding the ritual signals the end of the game. Describe the consequences fully, then ask the players to reflect on their choice. Players may wish to know what would have happened if they had made other choices – feel free to discuss this with them. Emphasise that some choices have more positive consequences than others, but there is no way to 'win' the scenario, other than to really get into character and play through the emotions and difficulties of the choices the characters have to make.





## CIRCUS GAME

Lukas Radu (18)  
*The Marvellous Albino Strongman*

18 Hit Points



What I look like:

*Over six and a half feet tall, with skin as pale as alabaster and pink eyes, I am a tower of a man whose barrel chest hides a heart of gold.*

What I'm good at:

1. Feats of strength (4d6)
2. Bonding with vulnerable people (3d6)
3. Noticing Stuff (3d6)

My role:

I'm like a big brother to the others. I'm always looking out for them, trying to keep them all on the straight and narrow. I wish people didn't always treat them like freaks – or treat me that way either, for that matter.



My hopes and fears:

I am scared of people rejecting me, and of accidentally hurting someone with my unnatural strength.

I hope to one day find romantic love.





## CIRCUS GAME

Jojo Williams (16)  
*The Fantastic Lizard Boy*



15 Hit Points

### What I look like:

*A smiling, agile fellow, my skin is covered in reddish scales, my tongue is forked, and I have webbed hands and feet. I tend to wear only shorts, as I get hot easily.*

### What I'm good at:

1. Acrobatics (4d6)
2. Sharp eyesight (3d6)
3. Moving fast (3d6)

### My role:

Lukas is a big brother to all of us, but he's always so serious! I like to try to look out for the others, but that doesn't mean I can't crack a joke now and then. Even Lukas needs to laugh sometimes, though he probably wouldn't admit it.



### My hopes and fears:

I am afraid of fire.

I am also afraid of something bad happening to my circus friends.

One day I hope to fall in love, and settle down with the right girl.







## CIRCUS GAME

Nadine Searle (15)  
The Wonderful Fortune Teller



14 Hit Points

### What I look like:

*I am a petite, dark haired girl with large, expressive eyes. I would consider myself pretty, if only I didn't have a two-foot-tall conjoined twin attached to my hip, like a blind, silent, living doll. I'd be normal if it wasn't for her. I hide her under a cloak or shawl as much as possible.*

### What I'm good at:

1. Empathising with people (4d6)
2. Mechanics and carving (3d6)
3. Nimble Hands (3d6)

### My role:

I'm usually quite upbeat, in spite of the burden I have to carry on my hip. I like playing with machines and wood, and dreaming of a normal life. I get on well with the boys, but sometimes I think Jane is a bit immature. I guess I'm a typical middle child...



### My hopes and fears:

When I read people's fortunes, it's my twin that tells them their future, not me. I'm afraid that one day she'll take over my mind when I'm not reading the tarot.

I dream of being normal, of being free from my twin.





## CIRCUS GAME

Alex/Alexis Hargreaves (16)  
*The Astonishing Escape*  
*Artist Twins*  
12 Hit Points



### What we look like:

*We are two androgynous looking twins, a boy and a girl. We are short, thin, and very supple. We are very fair skinned, with fine blonde hair. We dress alike, and share many mannerisms. We talk in soft tones, and often wear our grey leotards even when we're not performing*

### What we're good at:

1. Contortionism (4d6)
2. Fast reactions (3d6)
3. Knots and locks (3d6)

### Our role:

We're in the middle of the children, and we get on well with the others most of the time. We don't like being told what to do, so we sometimes fight with Lukas and the Professor. We like to be the centre of attention, and we get jealous if people treat us differently from each other.



### Our hopes and fears:

We are both terrified of being separated from each other.

We hope to find out more about Nadine's bond with her conjoined twin, and how much they can communicate with each other.







## CIRCUS GAME

Sally Thomas (13)  
The Incredible Monkey Trainer



10 Hit Points

### What I look like:

*I'm a small, pretty, doll-like girl with blonde pigtails and blue eyes. I behave like a bit of a tomboy, playing with my monkeys, but I like to wear frilly dresses (though the monkeys often get them dirty). I can pout with the best of them, and have been known to poke my tongue out.*

### What I'm good at:

1. Dealing with animals (4d6)
2. Sneaking around (3d6)
3. Sports and games (3d6)

### My role:

I'm the youngest performer at the circus, so I sometimes get treated like a baby. This makes me angry, and I make rash decisions, which gets me in more trouble. I'm always tagging along and getting in the way. At least my monkeys always accept me...



### My hopes and fears:

I'm afraid of being alone and unwanted. I feel like I constantly need to prove myself.

I dream of being taken seriously, of being important and loved and respected by my circus family.





## CIRCUS GAME

### The Professor A Startling Juggling Dwarf

14 Hit Points



#### What I look like:

*A 3-foot-tall dwarf, I usually dress in a formal suit, and carry an umbrella. I can ride a unicycle, and often use one to get around. I'm often seen carrying a book, and I like to quote famous people.*

#### What I'm good at:

1. Juggling/Dexterity (4d6)
2. Book-smarts (3d6)
3. Hiding (3d6)

#### My role:

I'm older than the others, but for some reason I spend more time with them than with the grown-ups. I try not to give them too much advice, but it's hard when I'm so much wiser than them. I like to think of myself as a kindly uncle...



#### My hopes and fears:

I'm afraid that nobody takes me seriously, so I'm always reading to improve my mind.

I dream of one day becoming a real professor (of literature or science), though what university would hire a dwarf?

