

Talent Night: A Scenario for *Dread*

by Gord Sellar

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Talent Night: A Dread Scenario by Gord Sellar

All that time working with kids, and yet somehow you've forgotten what it was like to be one of them...

This is a Dread scenario for up to six players. The characters are a collection of adults who all work at the same middle school. They have known one another for a while, though they are of differing degrees of closeness. Each teacher has a dark secret of some sort, whether something related to work, or related to their own childhood. They must cooperate in order to survive the night, at which point they may be lucky enough to find a way to safety.

In the wake of a shocking mass suicide pact at the middle school, the children's horror, grief, and terror has shattered the veil between our world and the myriad outer realities where terrifying powers dwell. The children's bodies have been claimed as conduits by sentiences from those other realities, to be used in balancing the scales of this universe, exacting revenge for the wronged children... or, perhaps, simply inflicting mayhem. Once play begins, the children are no longer "human": they have transcendent powers, supernatural strength, the ability to generate illusions, and so on.

The teachers and staff who make up the group of characters have a range of relationships, which complexify their interactions and add layers of conflict, cooperation, dependency, and connection between them as characters.

Prior to filling out the questionnaires, players should be told the basic setup of this scenario, and no more. Essentially, they are all middle-school employees, and tonight is Talent Night at the school. A few months ago, a group of 7th graders committed suicide on school grounds, and their discovery was a major local scandal in the town. It was a major event for a few weeks, but then school administration and the school board decided it was time to move on. Therefore, the annual Talent Night was not canceled. Instead, the Principal insisted on making the Talent Night into a sign to the rest of the world that the school had recovered, that things were going fine, that there was no problem and everyone had moved on. Nonetheless, there remained lingering sense among the faculty and staff, even through the hectic preparations of the last month or so.

Finally, the big night is here: it's Talent Night, and the school auditorium is packed with families, many of whom are just as eager as the school board to move on. The air is thick with tension, and the lights come down: the show is about to begin.

If the Tower Collapses

In this scenario, there are a multitude of possibilities for what can happen if the tower collapses.

For one, the children, now conduits for transcendent powers, can simply tear an adult to pieces. This death would be quick, violent, and bloody.

However, this is not all the transcendences can do: they can also drag the teacher off to a hell-dimension wherein they experience a balancing repercussion for their own dark secret crimes or misdeeds.

Another possibility is that the adult--especially one whose crimes are minor--joins the ranks of the conduits, enacting vengeance against other adults... though any adult who is a personal antagonist for him or her.

However, the dominant theme here is the issue of bullying, and the complicity of adults in the school system with bullying that goes on, if not as active bullies, then as people who allow such horrors to occur.

Themes

This scenario is dependent on three themes:

- Survival
- Confrontation
- Comprehension

Characters must struggle and flee to **survive** each onslaught by the Transcendences. They may use their surroundings--but must deal with the difficulty of the school being weirdly altered by the Transcendences. They can find objects normal in middle schools, as well as objects from their own memories in high school, to fight against the Transcendences. They will also need to try figure out whether they can reconcile themselves to killing the conduits--the children who are students at their school--in order to survive.

The **confrontations** of the characters face should emerge slowly over the length of play. Each character is in some way complicit with the state of affairs that led to the children's group suicide, as well as the ongoing misery of many other children, and each character has a dark secret he or she would not like to have revealed to the others... and yet, these revelations are inevitable, and will take place in sequence, in the form of children enacting or embodying the adult's darkest secret in as literal a manner as possible. The characters' prior refusal to act, or their own actions, constitute important contributing factor to this horrible event: they are, in some way, complicit with the suicides. As the story proceeds, their crimes or misdeeds will become apparent to other teachers, and they will have to face and deal with their own human failings and the consequences of those failings.

Finally, the characters find themselves in a radically different setting than they believed they were in. They must struggle to understand what is happening, and why, as well as what they can do to stop it, escape it, or survive it. **Comprehension** is a key theme necessary to their survival.

STORY PROCESS:

There are three acts to this story:

1. The Collapse: The characters experience the breakdown of the Middle School Talent Night, the kids are transfigured, and generally the shit hits the fan.

While encounters depend on the characters actions, they will inevitably experience the following events:

1. The Talent Night Collapses. Things go bad rather rapidly in the middle of a musical number that is being performed by an outgoing, popular student named Peggy Smith: children begin levitating, transforming, violently attacking, as physical disturbances in the school's structure (or a gas leak) begin to occur... Everyone ends up having to make at least two or three pulls to get out of the auditorium alive, and doing so may cost them some guilt-inducing actions, such as trampling weaker people, or forcing their way ahead of panicked families. (Theme: *Survival*.)

2. The Flight. Characters must escape the immediate threat that the auditorium represents; when they emerge, they will but realize that they're not in the school they were in a few minutes ago. The area outside the school can also be rendered inaccessible, to prevent escape: perhaps the fleeing parents flood out the main exit of the school, only to burst into horrible flames as soon as they get out the door. Once free of the auditorium, the characters will need to seek out spaces that are, at least temporarily, safe. (Theme: *Survival*.)

3. Finding Their Way: The characters are in an unfamiliar and hostile terrain. Figuring out the layout of the school and managing to find the resources they need (weapons, for example) that they need in order to survive the night will require them to develop a comprehension of their physical situation, if not the unfolding supernatural nature of it. (Theme: *Comprehension*.)

2. The Trial by Hunt: The characters are pursued by the transfigured children through the halls of the (also transfigured) school, out into the school grounds and beyond if necessary. This can be very creepy-crawling, or spatterpunk, or whatever the group and GM want. Along the way, the material generated by the character questionnaires is used to construct personalized mise-en-scènes in which several characters--likely those with the darkest secrets--are forced to confront their moral crimes.

1. The Pack: Roving bands of violent, cannibalistic, transfigured middle-schoolers in monstrous form wander the school. Encounters with them are potentially deadly; to up the creep factor, scouts can be encountered first. (Theme: *Survival*.)

2. Mrs. Halpern/Mr Hendricks: The nerdy History teacher, herself/himself bullied severely as a child, seems to have been involved in setting off the events at the school. Halpern/Hendricks is now patrolling the hallways, surrounded by a small batallion of ghostly middle-schoolers; they get is glimpsed, run into maybe, but always seem to escape. It is in the presence of Halpern/Hendricks that the Confrontation events sometimes occur. (Theme: *Survival*, *Confrontation*, or *Comprehension* -- or

any combination thereof.)

3. The Body: The characters encounter the body of one or more of the children from the group suicide. The body should be of a child toward whom one character acted wrongly. It is inanimate at first, but eventually attacks, is transformed, and so on. The attacks can be verbal/psychological, as well as physical. (Theme: *Survival, Confrontation, or Comprehension* -- or any combination thereof.)

4. The Trap, and Other Dangerous Spaces. A room, space, or hallway is a deathtrap. Characters may pull to detect, but only if they elect. Once inside, several pulls will be necessary to get out. Similarly, other locales can be dangerous spaces: the school swimming pool, the sports field out back, the gym... (Theme: *Survival* or *Comprehension* -- or both.)

5. Equipment Spaces: the school gym's equipment locker will have potential weapons, as will science labs. These spaces will not be empty, however, not will the gaining of equipment always be easy. Some life-threatening attacks or confrontations must occur. Can combine with #4, the Trap, or with #3, The Body. The characters will have to earn their equipment through pulls from the tower. (Theme: *Confrontation, and Survival.*)

6. Professor Halpern/Hendricks' office: On first examination, it seems like any department-head's private office. Characters entering this room will be able (after pulling to search carefully) to find signs of some kind of magical ritual: internal organs partially burned in a brazier, what look like spellbooks scattered around the floor behind the desk, and so on. (Theme: *Comprehension.*)

3. Sentencing: The characters have stood metaphysical trial for their ethical crimes. The collective, spiritual trial is over, and now sentencing is meted out to the survivors.

1. Driving to the Endgame: The characters are driven toward the locale of the endgame of this incident: the site where the mass student suicide took place. The characters can be driven there by Halpern/Hendricks, by a nameless horde of monstrous children, by a fire, or whatever. Characters can opt to avoid this call, but will do so only at fierce resistance by Halpern/Hendricks and the roaming packs of children. (Theme: *Survival.*)

2. Endgame 1: Those players who are driven to the site of the suicide, or who choose to go there, are confronted by the apparent ghostly presence of the children who committed the mass suicide. There, they confront their own complicity with the situation, to determine whether they can survive their guilt. Characters failing in this confrontation die or lose their minds. (Theme: *Confrontation and Comprehension.*)

3. Endgame 2: Characters who somehow manage to avoid being driven to the site of the suicide will confront Halpern/Hendricks in a final, terrifying battle, fought with whatever they can find: gym equipment, torture equipment strewn about in horrifyingly transformed classrooms, fire extinguishers, and so on. Should they manage to kill Halpern/Hendricks, the link to the transcendent world is severed. This outcome allows to survive the night without dying in Endgame 1 conclusion--and it is the only way they can survive: given enough time, they will eventually succumb to a tower collapse. (Theme: *Survival and Confrontation.*)

Characters:

The Principal: rushed the recovery over the suicides over worry s/he will lose the job. Isn't particularly interested in the school, or in children. Was a slacker through college, and cheated a lot; probably doesn't belong in (or believe in) the education system at all, but is a good smooth-talker. Is always short of money for a reason the player will determine.

The Biology Teacher: Is indeed something of an adult bully, with a well-concealed streak of prejudice. Is recovering from an addiction, and secretly enjoys watching kids squirm during dissections, specifically picking individual kids--including several of those who killed themselves--to demonstrate the dissections in front of the class. Knows about the Gym Teacher's Big Dark Secret but doesn't particularly care.

The Gym Teacher: A typical jock, but with those characteristics tempered by a strong religious belief. The Gym Teacher actually told some of the students to kill themselves once, sarcastically, in class. The Gym Teacher had an affair once with a high school student, but it was covered up and the Gym Teacher was transferred to this school. Is obsessed with one sport in particular, but has never been very good at that sport. In good physical shape. Is terrified of going to hell someday.

The Librarian: Is married to one of the other characters, but having an affair with a different character. The librarian experienced bullying as a child, and also visited retribution on bullies in a terrible, powerful way-- becoming a bully in the process. The librarian often saw the children (those who later committed suicide) in the library at noon, and but never spoke to them.

The School Nurse: This job was the second choice, and is unsatisfying. The school nurse was ugly as a child, and picked on, and is desperate for approval. Distrusts one of the other characters, who is reminiscent of a bully from childhood. Is gifted with a mild touch of telepathy and precognition.

The Guidance Counselor: Has hated one of the other characters for years, ever since some incident at the faculty Xmas party. Had an abusive parent, and grew up to be one. Is now divorced with no visitation rights to the child, and is very, very lonely. Spends a lot of time in the office, obsessing over one student in particular who is reminiscent of the guidance counselor's own child. Is in charge of the talent show.

The Principal: Questionnaire

1. You rarely talk to your ex since he/she left town: what's the one thing you do still, occasionally, talk to one another about?
2. Are you still worried that the student suicides may cost you your job?
3. What's the one thing you've never smooth talked your way out of?
4. You've always been bad with money, because...
5. Back in college, a night spent studying was a night wasted. You'd much rather be doing what?
6. In your fantasy about destroying the school, which method of destruction do you use?
7. Which of your employees (in the group) do you absolutely hate?
8. When everything goes to hell, what makes you smile and feel a little hope?
9. What was your favorite method of cheating back in college?
10. A few years ago, your youngest sibling disclosed a secret to your family. What was the secret, and what was your reaction?
11. On a cold winter night, your favorite thing to do is?
12. How have you always imagined you would die?
13. What is your name?

The Biology Teacher: Questionnaire

1. What kind of a town did you grow up in?

2. Which group of people do you hate with a burning passion, because they keep whining and crying about their civil rights?

3. What do you usually eat for breakfast?

4. When was the last time you had sex?

5. What was the feeling that surprised you, six months after your wife died of leukemia?

6. Which kind of student do you hate to have in your class?

7. Why does it please you so much to see kids squirming when it's frog-dissection time in class?

8. What's the one vice you can't help but indulge in, no matter how hard to resist the urge?

9. Where's your favorite place to spend your ten minutes of free time between classes?

10. How did you find out about the Gym Teacher's Deep Dark Secret, and how do you feel about it?

11. What's your favorite part of the day?

12. What is the name of the daughter, and why do you think she ran away from home three years ago, never to be seen again?

13. What's your name?

The Gym Teacher: Questionnaire

1. How do you stay in such great shape?
2. What's your favorite restaurant in town?
3. Ultimately, what was the core of your family's problems when you were growing up?
4. Where do you avoid sitting in church on Sundays?
5. With which sport are you obsessed?
6. What is your favorite passage in the Bible?
7. Why have you always feared that you would go to hell someday?
8. What kind of car do you drive?
9. How do you live with yourself knowing one of the kids who committed suicide was in your class, and you told him to kill himself?
10. What was the name of the student you had an affair with?
11. What time do you usually wake up in the morning?
12. What is your relationship with your mother like?
13. What's your name?

The Librarian: Questionnaire

1. What was your favorite book as a child?
2. What is your favorite kind of music?
3. How do you travel to school on workdays?
4. Which parent do you blame more for you childhood problems?
5. With whom (among the other characters) are you cheating on your spouse?
6. Do you believe in ghosts?
7. What's your happiest memory from your whole life?
8. Do you believe two people can really, truly understand one another?
9. When you took excessively brutal revenge on the bully who made your life miserable in middle school, why did your feelings surprise you?
10. What do you call your lover when you are alone in private?
11. Why did you never end up talking to any of the kids involved in the suicide pact, even when they came to the library?
12. What is the one food you cannot stand the taste of?
13. What is your name?

The School Nurse: Questionnaire

1. What job did you *really* want to do someday, when you were a child?
2. Do you prefer cold weather, or hot weather?
3. Finish this sentence and explain why you think so: People who believe in God are just _____...
4. How long did it take you to get over your fear of needles and blood?
5. How does your desperation for approval manifest in your daily life?
6. You might have had a better childhood and been bullied less if only what?
7. Which of the other characters have you never quite trusted, but always admired, and why?
8. How did you lose your virginity?
9. What's the strangest thing you've ever eaten?
10. How did you discover your mild psychic powers of telepathy and precognition?
11. To where do you dream of traveling, though you've never been there before?
12. What's the first thing you think of when you drive past your parents' home?
13. What is your name?

The Guidance Counselor: Questionnaire

1. What kind of car do you drive?
2. If you could make only one wish, what would it be... no, what would it *really* be?
3. When students drop by your office, what music are you usually listening to in the background?
4. Why were you granted no visitation rights to your kid when you and your spouse divorced?
5. Which subject did you *always* hate in school?
6. How much longer do you think you'll be willing to work as a guidance counselor?
7. What's the most embarrassing thing on your work computer's hard drive?
8. The incident at the faculty Xmas party in 2011 was too much. What was the incident, and which other character have you hated for being involved in it?
9. How did you get roped into organizing and producing Talent Night this year?
10. When you filled out the job forms back in high school, what kind of work was suggested for you?
11. What is it about the student Sarah M. that reminds you of your own daughter?
12. When the suicides were discovered at your school, what was your first thought?
13. What is your name?