

Priceless

A youthful adventure for any horror RPG

Priceless is a tournament-style adventure for six players. It takes place during a night in the life of the Harrington family, and focuses on role-playing rather than statistics or combat. The best system to use is *Call of Cthulhu*, (and in fact we've drafted our head bad guy from it), but it can easily be used in any horror campaign. Players will take the role of children in the adventure, and should be prepared to act as such. The module is very linear and focuses on a final puzzle that the children must "solve" together. The puzzle does not have a clear answer, and can only be resolved through character interaction during the course of the game. The era and location for the game is "sometime in the late 1800s or early 1900s, in an English-speaking country."

The Past

The Harrington children were sick. A scarlet fever epidemic swept through the country, and all the children fell deathly ill. The situation looked grim, but fortune has enabled all six to get well. Although her children were not fully recovered, Mother had to leave to go into town for the morning. A violent storm arose, but luckily Mother managed to return in the afternoon, and she and Father have sent the servants home to their families in preparation for the storm. Perhaps it is lingering traces of the fever, but something about dear, sweet, kind Mother seems... different.

The Premise

As her children were dying of the fever, Mother used her Amulet to heal them. The Amulet is actually a device that summons and binds Nyarlathotep (or any powerful demonic figure appropriate to the game setting). Nyarlathotep is

bidden to come and answer one wish of the summoner, but the summoner must then try to pass his Ordeal at a time of his choosing.

Mother was forced to try the Ordeal the next day. She explained her departure as if it were a trip into town; in reality, she disappeared from our existence. Sadly, she did not pass, and is currently a prisoner of Nyarlathotep. Nyarlathotep's servant has replaced Mother, and is going to (over the course of the night) replace each of the household in turn, then open the Gate to allow its master's avatar to appear.

The Amulet appears as a small oval locket, made of what looks to be silver, now so tarnished as to be black. Worn traces of lettering can be found on the front, but they are not legible. If the locket is opened, children without second sight will see merely the inside of an old locket. To those with second sight, however, the inside of the locket will appear to be a window onto the void of space, sprinkled with stars (although the children do not know astronomy, the stars are the polar constellations, curiously distorted, as they might have looked tens of thousands of years ago). Whomever holds the Amulet (which starts under Jane's mattress) will see things as they truly are, can resist the sucking force of the Gate, and can invoke the bargain with Nyarlathotep. The Amulet is otherwise unremarkable, not really the kind of thing Mother would wear. But she always wore it anyway.

The Present

The scenario starts at the dinner table, where both parents and all the children are gathered together. A storm blows strongly outside, and

by Sandy
Antunes
and
Matt
Grossman

...

Artwork
by
Jennifer
Mahr



leaving the house is impossible. The children might still try to do this; the storm is supernatural, caused by Nyarlathotep's power, so there are worse things out there than the elements. The exact nature of external threats should be left up to the Keeper, but the point is to keep the PC's in the house, not kill them while they try to escape.

After dinner, Father will probably write in his study, as usual, while Mother will read in the library. The Keeper should play Father as a stern but loving fellow, and Mother as an ice-cold cobra. The players should have access to any equipment that the Keeper deems reasonable for an affluent house and appropriate for that child.

The Play

This adventure can be played diceless. Character skills are not given as numbers, but as rankings: "high" (roughly 7 out of 10), "above average" (5 out of 10), "average" (3 out of 10), and "low" (1 out of 10). Common sense and the specifics of whatever system you're using should prevail. Keepers are encouraged to not roll a die, however, but to make calls based on the relative skill and the particular situation. An average Listener who sits at the Library door will "barely hear Mother murmuring to herself as she reads." A high Listener, however, would hear something more like "Mother mumbling Latin to herself as she reads." The players should remember they are playing children, and well-behaved upper-class children at that. They are expected to sneak around, cause mischief, and get into trouble, not to charge headlong into battle (besides, the lock on the gun case cannot be opened by any of them). Use of the map and counters (dice, miniatures) to represent the locations of the family during play are recommended.

Sanity losses should be roleplayed rather than rolled, as children have a different perception of the world and also recover more rapidly than adults. Also, placing the responsibility on the players to roleplay their characters' fears increases the fun of this scenario. There aren't many major scares here, at least in CoC terms. Suitable responses to a threat might include Perry grabbing his slingshot and hiding in his closet, Isabelle closing her eyes tight, John clutching his favorite plush toy, Harriet wetting her pants, etc. Encourage the players to voluntarily suggest their own responses, rather than forcing die rolls to dictate their actions.

The Progression

1) Things in the house start getting replaced by servitors of Nyarlathotep; first, Miko the cat. The cat will try to take Ruffles the dog. When bedtime

A Childishly Frightening Adventure

comes, Mother will take Father. After everyone else has been taken, she will visit each of the children's rooms, oldest to youngest, to take them. Thus avoiding Mother is a prime concern. She keeps trying to separate the children by asking them to do chores — feeding the cat, carrying some books up to the attic, helping her brush her hair, etc.

If a child wanders off alone after bedtime, at an appropriate moment, the Keeper might take the player aside and describe what is happening to him or her. The character will be suddenly paralyzed with terror, and will watch in horror as a mist rises from the floor and his or her body slowly disintegrates. This process takes several minutes and can be interrupted by the arrival of another non-substituted creature (there's safety in numbers). If this happens, the mist dissipates, and all of its effects with it, until next time (ha ha). It is recommended that substituting the players be used as a threat, to stress the urgency of the situation, rather than actually replacing any of the children.

The replacements will appear strange and detached to anyone who observes them (see **Perceptions**, below). Any replaced child becomes an NPC, although players might enjoy continuing to play their characters and trying to replace more children. Characters might also try to win over replaced characters (especially the dog, as mentioned below) to try and help them. The substitutes possess the capabilities of the originals, and try to make their act convincing. They are copies, with their bad tendencies amplified. Only the dog still has a remnant of the originals' love for the children.

2) The players must avoid angering Father, who believes that "proper children are best seen, not heard, and they should be seen as little as possible." He is a stern disciplinarian, but fair. He will not get drawn into any of their "silly games and nonsense," and expects to be left alone.

3) Mother will be reading in the library unless otherwise occupied. Her book is a slim volume, printed in the seventeenth century from the mad scrawls of an anonymous medieval wizard trying to make sense of the Amulet. It has been passed down through Mother's family for generations. Titled "Libris Gemmam Eibon Fierit" (Book Belonging to the Jewel made by Eibon, or simply "Book of Eibon's Jewel"), and anyone with a knowledge of Latin can read the title. Of all the characters, only Ford and Jane can make any progress with the difficult medieval Latin of the book itself. All they will be able to figure out in the limited time available is that the "shadowy man" offers to do favors for the holder of the



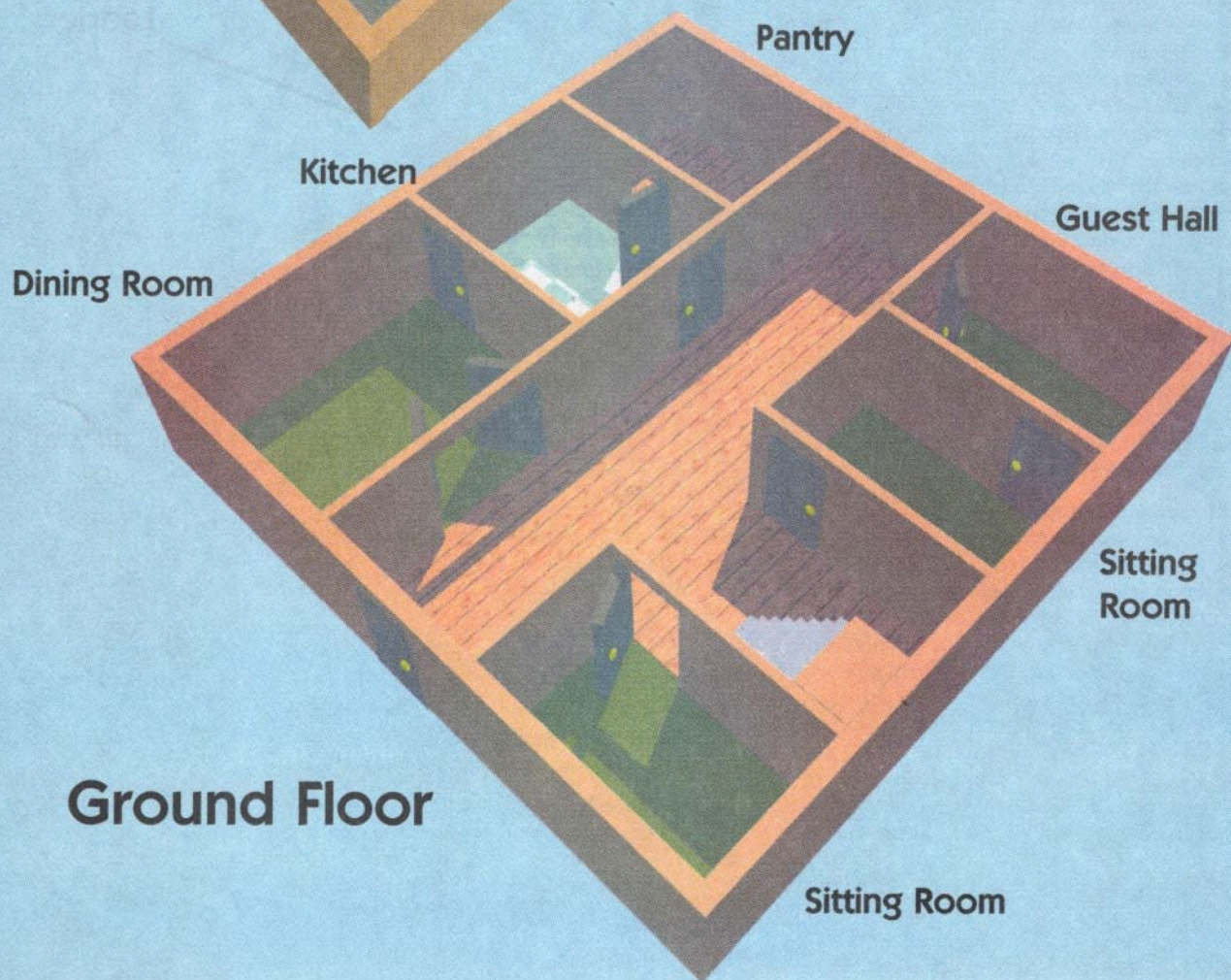
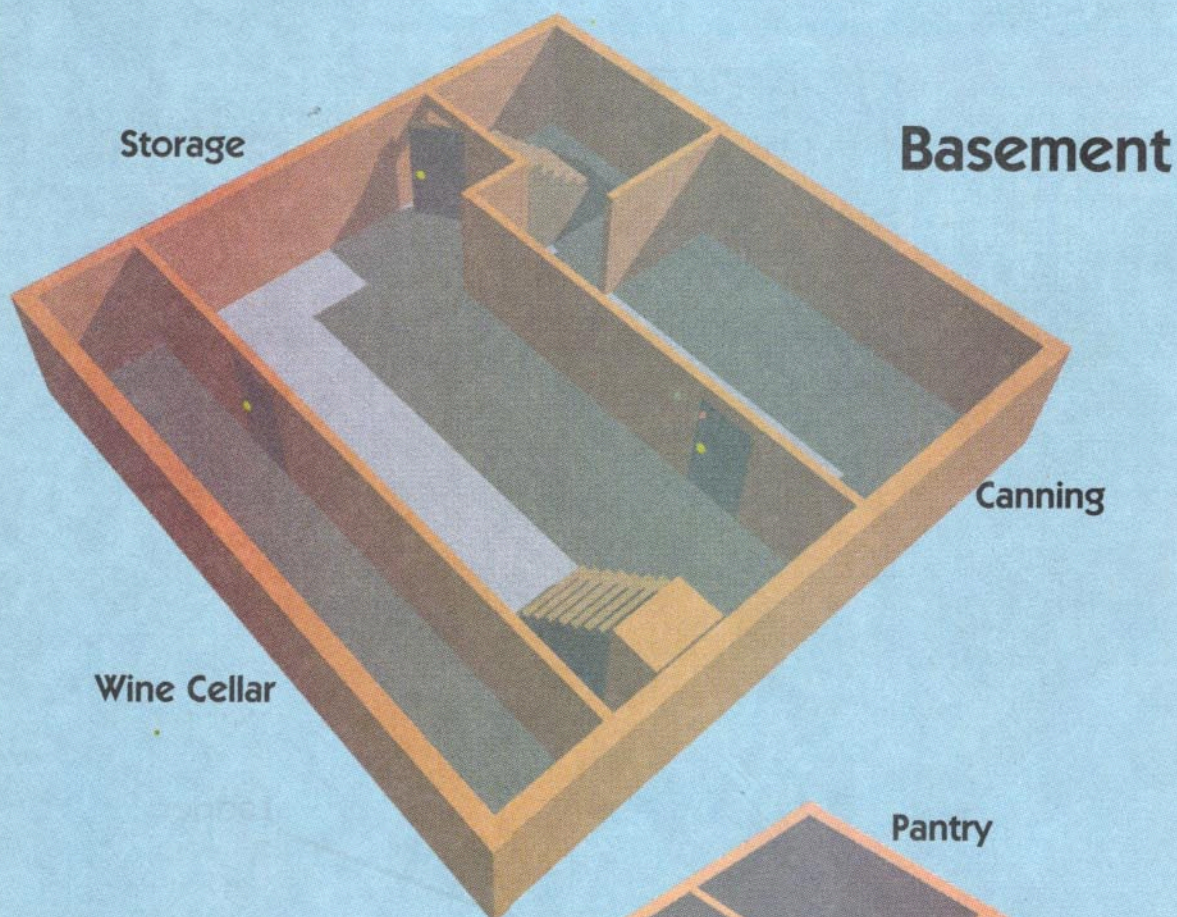
amulet, but that the ordeal is "too terrible to be described". Whether or not the amulet was actually made by the wizard Eibon is up to the Keeper.

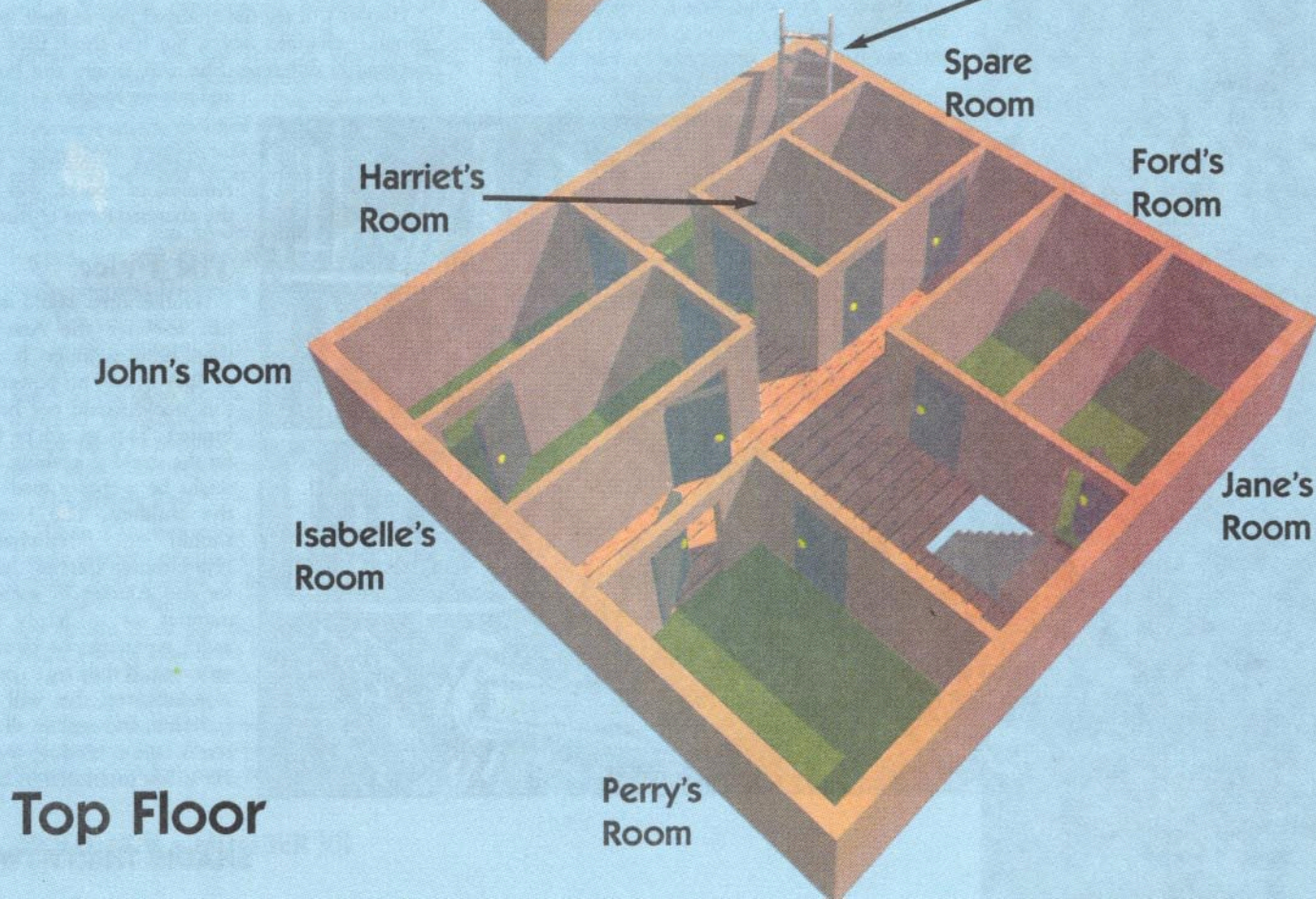
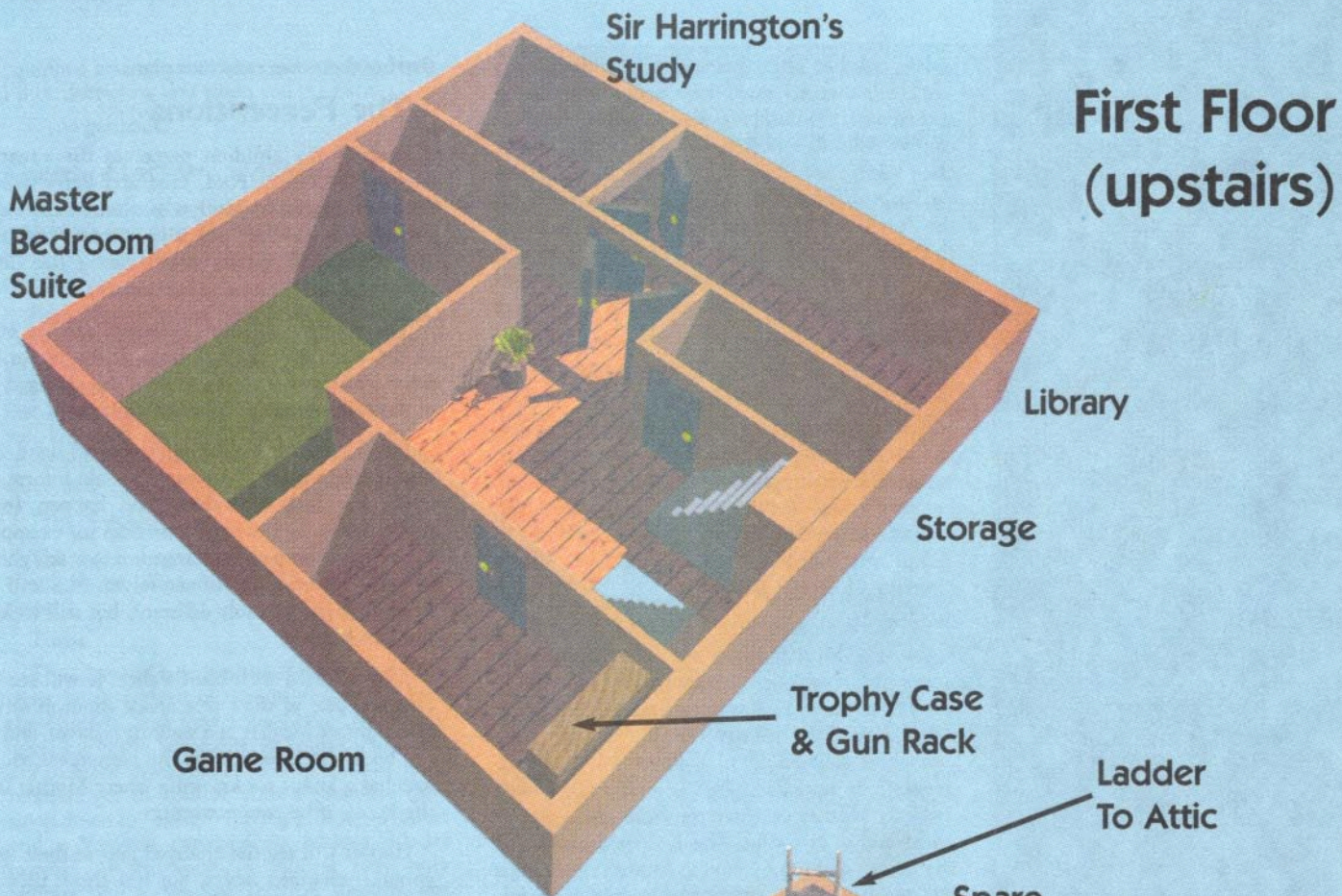
After Mother has read the book enough, she will go to the attic to open the chest (see #5).

4) The replacement Cat (and Dog, if taken) can be befriended by whichever of the children loves them (role-played). Harriet has an advantage with the Dog and should be able to befriend him easily. The replacements can thus be allies.

5) The chest in the attic contains the Gate that Mother will use to communicate with Nyarlathotep. It is just an old chest that contained various mementos of Mother's family, including the Amulet. At the Keeper's discretion, there might be more there, but nothing really relevant.

The chest is locked. If opened, it starts to draw anyone nearby in as if with a strong wind. Whomever opened it will be slowly sucked in





unless another child helps. Two children must work together to save the opener from being sucked in. If the child is pulled to safety, the chest can be easily slammed shut. If a child falls in, the chest slams shut on its own. Mother is immune to the sucking force of the Gate, as is whoever holds the Amulet. If Mother opens the Gate, or one of the children falls through, Nyarlathotep will arrive a few minutes later. He appears as a shadow of a man, done in textures of black and deeper black.

Literally a shadow, he passes through solid matter without effect. He is calm and collected, patronizing to the children, and interested in bargaining anything he has (Mother, any pets that were replaced, any children that fell into the gate, Father if taken) for the Amulet. He is, however, constrained by the Amulet not to lie, and not to accept any bargains until the Amulet's bearer knows the full state of affairs.

6) The children's best hope is to avoid being replaced by Mother, figure out that the Amulet is important, then open the gate and avoid falling in. The more they stay together, and the more clues they deduce early on, the greater their chance of succeeding as a group. As time progresses, it is more likely they will either be sucked away by Mother or enter the final scene unprepared and unknowing. The Keeper should keep the action moving by having Mother or the pets constantly checking up on the children while fur-

thering their own nefarious plans.

The Perceptions

Each of the children perceives the situation slightly differently. Ford, Jane and Perry will all see it as mundane; Mother is mother, the cat is unchanged, and the book is just a piece of fiction (Ford believes it is Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Jane the Bible, Perry the Dictionary).

The younger children, however, can see more of the truth than their siblings. If the player has Perry disliking a pet, he will see the changed pet as the spiky ghoulish creatures they are.

Isabelle is gifted a bit with second-sight, and also precognition. The Keeper should inform her when she feels something bad happen (each replacement, or the chest opening, for example). She will see the pets as changed, into spiky, ghoulish versions of their former selves. She will see Mother as inexplicably different, but still looking just like Mother.

John is gifted with clear sight. He will see the changed pets as their true spiky ghoulish selves, gradually see Mother as a walking cadaver, and see the book she is reading as the *Necronomicon*. He also has a knack for knowing where Mother is in the house, if he concentrates.

Harriet will see the changed pets as their spiky ghoulish changed selves, but not think they are necessarily different. She will ignore the book, and not see Mother as different.

Anyone holding the Amulet, of course, will see the changed forms of things.

The Price

Nyarlathotep would most like to have the Amulet; then, he is no longer bound to obey it, and his power on this world would not be so limited. This would be bad for the world as a whole, but might be a choice made by the children. The Keeper should emphasize Nyarlathotep's fervent desire for the Amulet in such a manner as to imply the awful repercussions of such an event. If they try to order Nyarlathotep, he will be quite fair, and explain all the terms before binding them. He is less interested in hav-



A Childish Frightening Adventure

ing a child take his Ordeal, since he knows they would fail. So, he will offer a counter proposal.

Since they are children, he will patronizingly explain the situation, to wit:

"Whoever has the amulet can request one wish from me, but then must take my Ordeal. I doubt whether you would succeed, thus you would have to sacrifice yourself. However, I am willing to offer an alternative to you.

"If you all agree to take part of a wager, I will return thy Mother [generous Keepers can add in any other characters who were stolen by Nyarlathotep during this scenario]. The Wager is a test of character. If you do well, none of you need ever take the Ordeal. If you do poorly, I will give you ten years to prepare for it. Are you interested?"

He cannot explain the Wager, for that would invalidate it being taken. The Wager is (besides the focus of this scenario) a completely fair test, and Nyarlathotep is equitable and fair in his presentation. His motivation is both curiosity and gain. Returning the family costs him almost nothing, but should the Wager go well for him, he would cause 10 years' of anguished anticipation in the losers. Well worth risking. If they accept, present them with the Puzzle.

The Puzzle

The Wager is a test of sacrifice. First, all the children must promise to not speak or communicate with each other in any way (Keepers should enforce this). Next, he shows a red ball in his left hand, a blue ball in his right hand.

He then explains.

"You must each, in one minute, choose either red or blue. You may not communicate in any way. Each of you will first close their eyes, and then choose. Here are the consequences. If only one of you chooses red, I will release your Mother and depart, never to trouble you again. If no one chooses red, I shall merely depart and... entertain myself back home with your mother. If more than one person chooses red, I will return thy Mother, but in 10 years' time, each of you that chose red must face my Ordeal. Remember, you must remain silent and blind as you choose." He then orders them to close their eyes. Then, he orders them to choose:

"Those who choose red, raise one hand. Those who choose blue, remain still."

The Keeper should be completely silent after they choose. Eventually, one of them will open their eyes. If no one chooses red, when they open their eyes, tell them they see nothing — not the

chest, not Nyarlathotep, not their Mother.

If at least one chose red, tell them when they open their eyes, Nyarlathotep is gone and their Mother is there. Do not tell them who or how many chose red, but let them wonder among themselves what the future holds.

The Players

Ford (Eldest Child)

Age: 14

Strength and Constitution: average

Dexterity: high

Intelligence: above average

Education: above average

Power/Spirit: average

High Skills: Dodge, Spot Hidden

Above Average Skills: Fast Talk, Jump, Listen, Latin, Persuade, Throw, Track, Grapple

Average Skills: Climb, Conceal, First Aid, Library Use, Sneak, Swim, Shotgun, Fist/Punch, Head Butt, Kick

Low Skills: Hide, Locksmith

The eldest of the children, you take care of the others when your parents (frequently) aren't around. Last night, while checking on the others, you saw Jane was still awake, and holding Mother's locket! You don't know why she has it, but plan to ask when you two are alone (the younger children need not be troubled by this).

Jane (Eldest Daughter)

Age: 13

Strength and Constitution: average

Dexterity: high

Intelligence: above average

Education: above average

Power/Spirit: average

High Skills: Fast Talk, Library Use, Kick

Above Average Skills: Conceal, Dodge, First Aid, Jump, Track, Listen, Latin, Persuade, Spot Hidden, Throw

Average Skills: Climb, Hide, Sneak, Swim, Shotgun

Low Skills: Locksmith, Fist/Punch, Head Butt, Grapple

As eldest daughter, your mother visited you last night, the night before she left. Although you

were still slightly feverish, you recall she looked worried and sad. She handed you her locket, the one she always wears, and said "Please keep this safe, and I'm sorry. Remember I always love you." You hid the locket underneath your mattress and went back to bed.

Isabelle (Twin)

Age: 11

Strength and Constitution: low

Dexterity: average

Intelligence: above average

Education: average

Power/Spirit: high

High Skills: Sneak, Track

Above Average Skills: Spot Hidden, Hide

Average Skills: Climb, Conceal, Dodge, Library Use, Listen, Persuade, Shotgun, Kick, Latin

Low Skills: Fast Talk, First Aid, Locksmith, Swim, Throw, Fist/Punch, Head Butt, Grapple

You are still slightly sick; the fever seemed to hit you and John worse than the others, like always. You always felt closer to John, maybe because you're twins, maybe because you both get sick a lot. You're sure you're going to get well quickly, but for some reason you are worried about mother, deeply worried. Sometimes you get these bad feelings right before something bad happens, and you are getting a very bad feeling now.

John (Twin)

Age: 11

Strength and Constitution: low

Dexterity: average

Intelligence: above average

Education: average

Power/Spirit: very high

High Skills: Spot Hidden, Conceal

Above Average Skills: Persuade, Listen

Average Skills: Climb, Conceal, Dodge, Hide, Sneak, Track, Latin, Fist/Punch

Low Skills: Fast Talk, First Aid, Library Use, Locksmith, Swim, Throw, Shotgun, Head Butt, Kick, Grapple

You are still slightly sick; the fever seemed to hit you and Isabelle worse than the others. You two have always been close, both as twins and because you both get sick more often than the others. It's not fair, why did God make you so

weak? You can tell that you're still sick, because everything looks funny, kind of feverish and strange, especially Mother.

Perry (Impish Child)

Age: 9

Strength and Constitution: average

Dexterity: high

Intelligence: above average

Education: low

Power/Spirit: low

High Skills: Locksmith, Sneak

Above Average Skills: Climb, Dodge, Hide, Listen

Average Skills: Conceal, Jump, Spot Hidden, Swim, Throw, Head Butt, Grapple

Low Skills: Fast Talk, First Aid, Library Use, Persuade, Track, Fist/Punch, Kick, Latin

A mischievous sort, you are glad you're not sick anymore. Now that all you children have an excuse to skip school for the next few days, you plan to have fun checking out that strange locked chest in the attic that mother opened when she got home this afternoon. You're sure you can get in without the key; the lock looks even easier than the one for Jane's diary!

Harriet (Youngest Child)

Age: 8

Strength and Constitution: low

Dexterity: average

Intelligence: above average

Education: low

Power: above average

High Skills: Hide, Listen, Sneak, Language (Dog)

Above Average Skills: Conceal, Spot Hidden

Average Skills: Climb, Dodge, Jump, Other Language (Cat), Persuade, Track

Low Skills: Fast Talk, First Aid, Library Use, Locksmith, Swim, Throw, Latin, Fist/Punch, Head Butt, Kick, Grapple

The youngest of the children, you think they treat you too much like a baby, even though you're almost nine! That's why you love Ruffles the dog, he is your best friend in the whole world. He understands you, at least! 