

We Die At Midnight

An Exercise in Epistolary Story-gaming for 5 players

Introduction: Twenty Years Ago

The five of you all knew one another, back then. You may have been friends, or rivals, or mere acquaintances, but you all travelled in the same circles, as they say. So it is not surprising that you were all together on that day, when the Red Carnival came to town. You went on a lark, and ended up entering the fortune-teller's tent together.

The fortune-teller was impossibly old, but with a voice as sharp as a whip she named each of you, and told you that the most important day of your lives would come precisely twenty years into the future. She made a prediction, bizarrely specific and improbable, for each one of you, of something that would happen that day, to let you know that this was the most important day. One of you asked why that day should be so important.

"Because that day will be your last," she said. "You all will die at midnight, that night. You may drown in the sea, and be damned, or you may burn to ashes and be saved, but die you will, on that day."

None of you really believed this. You certainly all tried to forget the dark prophecy. You've lived your lives, lives with perhaps more than their fair share of darkness and regret. You've drifted apart, living many miles away from one another, but you have kept in touch occasionally, and each have all of others' e-mail addresses.

That was twenty years ago today. And the predictions that were made are starting to come true.

Mechanics of Play

This game is played in real time, over e-mail. Play begins at 8 PM, and goes for four rounds, each of which lasts an hour. At midnight, the final fates of the characters are revealed. This game is designed for a group of 5 players. During each round, each player sends one e-mail to the entire group and, in rounds 2-4, one e-mail to a specific player only. These e-mails are to be written entirely in-character and are done in a mostly freeform manner, with certain specific limitations on what facts can be established in them. At the end of the game, all of the e-mails are compiled and revealed to all, and the final fates each character are revealed.

At the beginning of the game, the following facts about the players exist:

- Each knows himself to be a bad person. Not beyond all hope of redemption, but quite possibly headed toward that point.
- All of them currently live or work near the sea. All are currently in the same time zone (settle on which before play), but too distant from another to physically interact during the game. Each carries a mobile device capable of sending e-mail from anywhere they are likely to go.
- Each player should pick a name for his character, and give them to the others. After each player has picked a name, note the alphabetical order of these names (by last name).

Round 1: 8:00 to 8:59 PM

In the first round, each player writes only one message, addressed to all of the other players. Ideally, each should write their message during the first half hour, send it as close to 8:30 as possible, and spend the second half hour reading and absorbing those of the other players. Each character has just had a similar and somewhat terrifying experience: the event that the fortune-teller told them so long ago would happen on the day they all died has happened. Maybe it's just a coincidence, so they e-mail the other people who were there, people they have not seen in quite some time.

Each of the mails in this round should establish the following facts:

- What the fortune-teller predicted for the writer's last day.
- How it came to pass.
- What the writer's job or career (or lack thereof) situation is currently.
- What the writer's family/relationship situation is, in general terms
- Something that is a part of the writers life which is a source of serious potential danger

Round 2: 9:00 to 9:59 PM

In the second round, each player writes two messages, one to the group and one to the character whose name is immediately after theirs in alphabetical order. (The last player on the alphabetical order list writes the first player.) The message to the entire group should be primarily about comparing notes, and what has happened in the previous hour. These should establish the following facts:

- What new danger (completely separate from the danger mentioned in the first mail) has arisen in the past hour
- What is preventing the writer from avoiding or travelling away from the sea
- What element from one of the other characters' narratives has appeared in the writer's own life

The second message in this round is to a single other character. This message is about that other character's shameful secret, from the time the two characters knew each other. The message may be an accusation, or possibly a joint confession if the writer was involved in the events in question. These should establish the following facts:

- What is the secret, and how did the writer learn of it.

Round 3: 10:00 to 10:59 PM

In the third round, each player again writes two messages, one to the group and one to the character who's name is two spots down on the alphabetical list (again, wrapping the list around at the end). The first message, to the group, should focus on the narrative, relating their efforts to avoid both of the two dangers that confront them. It should establish the following facts:

- How both dangers are converging to make the imminent death prophesied seem more and more likely.
- How fire has been introduced or enlarged in the writer's life this hour.
- How a second element from one of the other characters' narratives has appeared in the writer's life this hour.
- Something related to the writer's dark secret, as related in the second round's private message, should appear, although that should not be obvious to anyone other than that message's sender.

The second message, to a single other character, is a message of thanks, which should mention a good turn that that other character has done in the past that the writer never before adequately expressed his gratitude for. That good turn should be something that was, morally, the right thing to do, and not something that merely benefitted the writer. It should establish the following fact:

- What was that good turn, and how it did or did not inspire the writer to behave similarly later in his life.

Round 4: 11:00 to 11:59

In the final round, once more two messages are sent. The first is a reply, sent to someone who has sent the writer a personal message, and the second is to the group.

The first message should respond, either to the message about the writer's secret or to a message of thanks. The writer may choose which to respond to.

The second message should bring the character's narrative to a head, leading him to a brief resting point (just long enough to have composed a message) before having to face serious danger. It should contain the following:

- Something that recalls a detail or theme in the letter of thanks that he has received
- The final scene that the writer is about to or is in the midst of facing should involve both fire and the sea.

Ending the Game

At Midnight, the game is over. Each player then votes, once for each character (including their own), in whether that character dies by drowning in the sea or by burning. They may vote based on what they think is likelier based on the narrative, or, considering the part of the fortune-teller's prophecy that held that those who drowned would be damned and those who burned would be saved. After this initial vote, all players are given access to all of the private messages that were sent during the game. After reading those private messages, they may reverse their vote on one, and only one character. Finally, the votes are tallied and the final fates of the five characters are revealed.