Today: A Game About the First Day of the Rest of Your Life

By Eric J. Boyd

Today: A Game About the First Day of the Rest of Your Life

By Eric J. Boyd

Table of Contents

Today:
A Game About the First Day of the Rest of Your Life

> *"Pain is no evil unless it conquers us."*
> *—George Eliot*

Everyday someone in your city, your town, is on the edge. You can't always tell by looking them over, but if you look into their eyes, their souls, you can see that something inside them is in danger of breaking. Pain is a part of the human condition; no one can avoid it. But sometimes the Pain becomes overwhelming, it consumes everything that is good, blots out the sun, and threatens to swallow your entire life. Sometimes this overwhelming Pain is fresh and fiery like a fever or an open wound, other times it's an old festering sore that is slick with the pus of curdled memories. It doesn't matter, one day will come when the Pain is brought to a head. On that day, your ability to Fight, to stand strong in the face of your Pain, determines whether you live or die. Of course, the physical death may not come quickly, but the spiritual one will be immediate — there will be no more Fight in you, you will be only an empty shell drowned in Pain. A Pain that will only be extinguished in death.

Today might seem like any other day, but today is the day you face your Pain. Maybe it's a choice you made, or maybe it's a series of rude coincidences — either way, today you Fight or give in, break down or break through. A part of you already knows which way it's gonna turn out; it's been written in your eyes for a long, long time.

Character Creation

> *"When there is pain, there are no words. All pain is the same."*
> *—Toni Morrison*

The characters in this roleplaying game (RPG) are people with deep Pain that defines their lives and threatens to consume them. Up until now, they have been able to Fight a

3

holding action and keep their Pain at bay, but today it will all come crashing down and they will come face to face with the people that have caused or abetted their Pain and be forced to confront the manifestations of Pain that have tainted their lives.

Once you note a couple of basic facts about your character (name, age, occupation, etc.), you get to move on to the big stuff. The most important part of character creation is to determine the pivotal event that created your character's Pain. No complex conspiracies or grandiose tales — keep it simple: abuse; the death of a loved one; betrayal; a missed opportunity; an act they can never take back. Even though it's simple, the character's Pain must be something big, so powerful that it has brought them to the brink of despair. If they cannot summon the will to Fight, then the character will give in — commit suicide, fall permanently into substance abuse; go insane, etc. The stakes are big, so make the Pain something worth destroying your character's life over. Note the Pain you have chosen in a couple brief sentences; avoid the temptation to go any longer than this. The events surrounding the Pain will be filled out during play.

Next, choose three manifestations or effects the Pain continues to have on your character's life. These effects are their Pain made real in everyday life. These manifestations can be attitudes or behaviors, physical or social limitations — anything that serves as an echo of your character's Pain. Often, the character will deny that these traits have anything to do with their past, but we all know that Pain is what drives them.

Finally, briefly describe three people (one of whom can be dead) who are associated with your character's Pain. These people are the perpetrators, instigators, and passive observers of the pivotal event that created the character's Pain, as well as people who serve as reminders or help continue the pattern that Pain has written in the character's life. Each of these non-player characters (NPCs) will appear in a scene during the game, so choose with this in mind.

Example: *Margy Kline was sexually abused by her alcoholic father when she was a child. She ran away from home as a teenager and never came back. That's her Pain. Her three current manifestations are: Can Never Find a Good Man, No*

Education, and Can't Stand Being Touched. Her three people are her father, Jack Kline (now dead), her mother Gertrude Kline, and an abusive ex-boyfriend, Nick Ramis.

Example: *George McIntyre is a widower after his wife Gina died of stomach cancer last year. That's his Pain. His three current manifestations are: Crippling Loneliness, Sees Gina Everywhere, and Heavy Drinking. His three people are his wife Gina (now dead), Gina's mother Rose, and his young daughter Alice, who looks so much like her mother.*

The characters are trying to make do and make a life despite their Pain. This is represented by their Fight pool, the willpower and stubborness that keeps the character going in the face of their Pain. (See below for more about how to use a character's Fight pool) When creating a character, choose three people who are associated with the character's Fight — people who motivate them and bring them hope. One of these people can also be associated with your character's Pain. That's how grief and despair often work, after all, with some people serving as both your salvation and a piece of what's dragging you down. There is a character sheet included at the end of

these character creation rules to use in noting all these items.

Example: Margy Kline's three people are her teenage son Mikey, Patty, a supportive co-worker, and Jackson, a neighbor in her apartment building who may be sweet on her.

Example: George McIntyre's three people are his young daughter Alice (also a part of his Pain), his brother Herb, and Daria, one of Gina's best friends.

Players can choose either to let each of their characters exist separately, in which case it is possible they will not interact at all during actual play, or to tie their characters together through common bonds. Characters may share a person in common, perhaps connected to both characters' Pain or both characters' Fight. Or a single person could be associated with one character's Pain and another's Fight, with the potential for highly charged interactions. An even more emotional option is to have another character be one of the people associated with a character's Fight or Pain. Such characters would frequently interact in potentially explosive ways.

Example: Ben Kline is Margy's cousin. His Pain centers on the hunting accident where Jack Kline was killed. He and Margy both have Jack Kline associated with their Pain, but for very different reasons. A meeting between the two could occur in play through this tie.

Players should collectively decide upon a setting for the game. While the default setting is one of modern urban America, players should feel free to make location more specific (Detroit, for example) or to completely change it with respect to time and place (a game set in czarist Russia, for example).

Today
(Is the First Day of the Rest of Your Life)

Name:

Age:

Occupation:

Your Pain:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Three Manifestations of Your Pain:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Three People Associated With Your Pain:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Three People Associated With Your Fight:
_____
_____
_____
_____

Your Current Fight Pool:

"We must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey."
—Kenji Miyazawa

Progression of Play

> *"The pain of the mind is worse than the pain of the body."*
> —Publilius Syrus

Today is intended to played by at least three players preferably in a single session. Each player creates a character as described above. There is no gamemaster (GM) in this game. The player to your left is given control of the Pain for your character. This player will frame the Pain scenes for your character that feature the three people associated with the character's Pain. This player will role play these people as well. Where a character has a second character as one of the people associated with his Pain, the second character's player should be sure to sit on the first player's left.

The player to your right is given control over the people associated with the Fight of your character. This player will play the three people associated with the character's Fight in scenes where they appear. Where a character has a second character as one of the people associated with his Fight, the second character's player should be sure to sit on the first player's right.

If characters share a common person associated with their Pains or Fights, seating should be arranged to allow the players to role play the common person for each other if possible. If this cannot be worked out completely, stick with the default rules noted above.

Play constitutes a series of five scenes and a final epilogue for each character, constituting the one day in their troubled life where their Pain comes to a head. There will be three scenes focusing one the character's Pain and the people associated with it, and two scenes that center on the character's Fight and associated people.

Play always begins with an introduction of each character, his or her Pain, and the key people in that character's life. Then, each character in turn has his or her first Pain scene. From there, play proceeds from character to character, giving each a chance for a scene. Scenes for each character alternate between those focused on Pain and

on Fight, with the first, third, and fifth scenes being
Pain scenes. Each Pain scene threatens to reduce your
Fight pool, while each Fight scene has the chance to raise
it. (See below for how the Fight pool is tested in the two
different types of scenes)
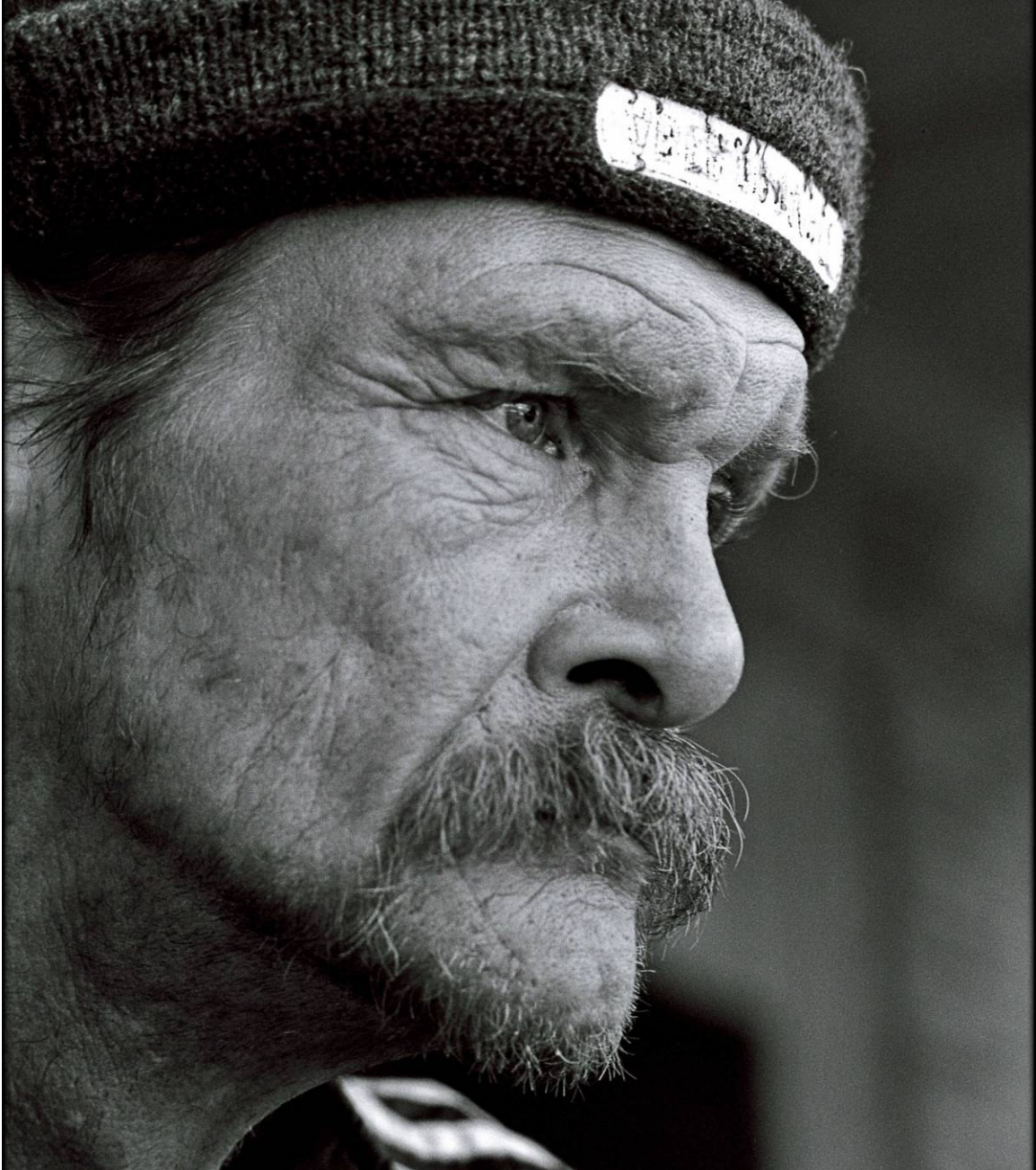
After the fifth scene for each character has been played,
each player in turn narrates an epilogue to wrap up their

character's story. If the character's Fight pool is
positive, then the character has weathered the storm of his
or her Pain and come out the stronger. They have won their
Fight. They have started to move on and can move past the
Pain to embrace the people that have been there to support
them. If the character's Fight pool at this point is zero
or negative, then his or her Pain has won and they give in
to it permanently. Death, self-destruction, and madness
become the only roads for such a character.

Pain Scenes

> *"Given the choice between the experience of*
> *pain and nothing, I would choose pain."*
> *—William Faulkner*

The player controlling a character's Pain frames three
scenes — the first, third, and fifth for that character.
Each will center on a confrontation between the character
and a person associated with their Pain. If this person is
dead, then a flashback, nightmare, or other strong
remembrance takes place. Hooking this interaction to one
of the manifestations of the character's Pain is a good
start to such scenes and also yields a mechanical effect
(as discussed below). Each person and manifestation can
only be used once (i.e., in a single Pain scene).

Each scene should follow chronologically within one day in
the character's life. Location can vary, but should
generally be at plausible locations within the same city or
town where the players have agreed the action for the game
should take place. The controlling player should establish
the time, location, and what the character is currently
doing as the person associated with their Pain appears.
Once done, free role playing can take place between the
players. People associated with a character's Fight may
also be present if the character's player does not object.

Example: *After introducing the character, George McIntyre's
first Pain scene is framed as involving Gina's mother,
Rose. The player controlling George's Pain frames the
scene as Rose knocking on George's door at 8am Saturday
morning after George was up half the night drinking
heavily. The scene framed, free play proceeds.*

10

Eventually, a crisis or decision moment will arrive, most likely when the person associated with the character's Pain makes some demand or accusation against the character that cannot be simply avoided. At that point, the character's player must test the character's Fight pool. Then, once the results are determined, the Pain scene is narrated to its conclusion based on the results of the test.

Example: After George stumbles to answer the door, Rose smells the liquor on him and a heated verbal exchange begins. The player controlling George's Fight pool requests that Alice be allowed to enter the scene. George's player approves, and Alice comes downstairs in her pajamas, happy to see her grandma. Play continues until Rose tries to take Alice out of the house. George's Fight pool is tested. The result dictates that George's player must narrate how the scene ends badly. George refuses to let Alice leave, hurting her arm in the process, before he proceeds to forcibly kick Rose out of his house. Rose threatens to go to court to take Alice from him.

Fight Scenes

> *"It's odd that you can get so anesthetized by your own pain or your own problem that you don't quite fully share the hell of someone close to you."*
> —Lady Bird Johnson

The player of the character gets to frame two scenes between the character and the people associated with the character's Fight. These are the character's second and fourth scenes. These are scenes where the character may have a chance to rally his energies to Fight more strongly against his or her Pain. As with Pain scenes, chronology and location should be established to allow for events during the same day of the character's life, the day they are being confronted with their Pain. The player chooses which people will appear in the scene, to be controlled by the player seated to his right.

Once framed, the scene continues with free role playing between the players. The content of such scenes should generally be more positive, with the person offering the character support or solace. Once at a good transition

point, the character's Fight pool can be tested. This can result in an increase in the character's Fight pool, a strengthening of their resolve to face down their Pain. But even these scenes hold the risk that a character's Pain will cause them to lash out at those closest to them. When this occurs, the Pain can become even more tragic.

Example: *George's player frames the scene. With Rose gone, George settles into his weathered recliner and lowers his head into his heads. His dry sobs echo in the darkened living room as wan light ekes past gaps in the blinds. Alice approaches her father.*

With the scene framed, the player seated on the right role plays Alice trying to comfort her father. After a few minutes of interaction, George's Fight pool is tested in an attempt to increase it. The dice are not kind, and George's player must narrate the end of the scene with George lashing out at his daughter. Alice whispers that she'll never leave George, not like Mommy did; that she loves him so much, more than Mommy loved them both. George flies into a rage and slaps his daughter in the face. Alice runs upstairs crying and screaming how much she hates her father.

Epilogues

> *"Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding."*
> *—Kahlil Gibran*

After a character's Pain and Fight scenes, the player has a chance to narrate an epilogue for that character that ends the day and determines that character's fate. The content of an epilogue is dictated by the character's Fight pool after the fifth scene. If it is positive, then the character has weathered the storm of his or her Pain and come out the stronger. Any other people can be present if the player desires and role played by the appropriate player. The character's player should provide a quick scene summary to ensure that everyone is on the same page about his ideas on what the scene should contain. Then free role play should occur; no tests are made during an epilogue. Any kind of positive content can occur: people associated with a character's Pain can be reconciled with; people associated with the character's Fight pool can

become closer to the character; the character can leave the current location and start anew; etc.

If the character's Fight pool is zero or negative, then his or her Pain has won and they give in to it permanently. Usually only the character will appear in such an epilogue. Often a manifestation of the character's Pain will come to completely dominate the character, setting him or her on a course of self-destruction from which there is no return. Any kind of negative content can be included, but it should be such as to foreclose any chance of redemption or turning back.

Example: *The time has come for George's epilogue. George's Fight pool is only 1, but that's good enough to qualify for a positive ending. George's player states he wants Alice and Rose to be in the scene, and that George is deciding to give up drinking, join AA, and let Rose move in and help him raise Alice. With this quick summary in mind, the players role play the scene and get to enjoy the reconciliation and general good feelings as George conquers his Pain while still honoring his wife's memory.*

Example: *Assume instead that George's Fight pool is -2 after the fifth scene, in which he had a confrontation with*

*his daughter Alice that prompted her to run away. George's
player describes the scene. George sits alone in his
weathered recliner, a bottle of whiskey in one hand. A
scrawled note on the coffee table contains his apology to
Gina, for failing her, for hurting Alice, for ruining
everything they tried to build together while she lived.
He takes another long swig of whiskey before putting his
pistol in his mouth and pulling the trigger.*

Fight Pool Mechanics

> *"Pain is weakness leaving the body."*
> *—Daniel R. Evans*

Every character starts with a Fight pool of 5 six-sided
dice (d6s). This pool can increase and decrease over the
course of the game. Its final amount at the end of a
character's fifth scene is of prime importance; then it
determines whether that character's epilogue will feature
them overcoming their Pain or succumbing to it.

Testing a character's Fight pool is done differently
depending upon whether it is during a Pain or Fight scene.
In each Pain scene, the character must test his or her
Fight pool at the climactic moment to determine how the
scene will end. The player must risk a certain number of
dice in each scene, but may choose to risk more dice than
required, up to the character's entire Fight pool. In the
first scene, the player must risk at least 1 die; the third
scene requires a minimum risk of 2 dice; and the fifth
scene requires at least 3 dice be risked during the test.
In addition, if the player controlling the character's Pain
frames the scene to include one of the character's
manifestations of Pain in a meaningful way (as determined
by the majority of the players), then 1 additional die must
be risked in that test. These mandatory minimum risks can
result in borrowing (see below). Each manifestation of
Pain may only be featured in one Pain scene.

Once the number of dice being risked in a Pain scene is
determined, the character's player rolls all the risked
dice. Any dice that come up with the result of 1 or 2 are
immediately lost from the character's Fight pool and set
aside. Confronting Pain has taken its toll on the
character; note the character's new Fight pool on the
character's sheet. Look at the remaining dice. If no dice

remain, the player controlling the character's Pain narrates how the scene ends badly for the character. If the highest remaining result is a 3, then the character's player must narrate how the scene ends badly. If the highest remaining result is a 4, then the player controlling the character's Pain narrates a mixed result, with the character's player adding something good. If the highest remaining result is a 5 or 6, then the character's player narrates a good result of how the character holds his or her own against the Pain and pushes it back.

Example: George is in his first Pain scene involving his mother-in-law Rose (see the scene's narration above). George's player must risk at least 1 die on the Fight pool test, plus an additional die because the player controlling George's Pain included George's heavy drinking in a meaningful way. George's player decides to risk just the 2 required dice. He rolls both dice — getting a 2 and a 3. The 2 is set aside and George's Fight pool is immediately reduced from 5d6 to 4d6. The remaining 3 means that George's player must narrate how the scene ends badly.

In Fight scenes, the character's player can risk any number of dice (even including borrowing, for which see below) to try and build up the character's Fight pool. Once the player chooses how many dice to risk, he rolls all of them at an appropriate transition point in the scene.

Any dice that come up as a 1 or 2 are immediately lost from the character's Fight pool, and the character's new Fight pool should be noted on the character's sheet If no dice remain, the character's player must narrate a bad result, as even with supportive people around him, the character's Pain causes him to lash out. If the highest remaining result is a 3 or 4, then the player controlling the people associated with the character's Fight narrates how people support the character and try to help, but it is not enough to truly reinvigorate them. No dice are gained. If the highest remaining result is a 5 or 6, then the character's player narrates how people inspire the character to Fight. Add 1 die to the character's Fight pool for each 5 or 6 rolled.

Example: *George's player chooses to risk two dice on his Fight pool scene, narrating how George's daughter Alice tries to comfort him (see the scene's narration above). He rolls both dice and gets a 1 and a 2 — a horrible result! Both dice are immediately lost from George's Fight pool (now only 2d6 after the loss sustained in the previous Pain scene). Since no dice remain, George's player must narrate how George lashes out at Alice.*

Under certain circumstances, a player may risk more dice than the character actually has in his Fight pool. This is called "borrowing" dice. This can happen if a player is forced to risk more dice in a Pain scene than the character currently has, or if the player decides to borrow during a Fight scene to potentially increase the character's Fight pool by a larger amount. In either case, the dice mechanics proceed as usual with one exception: results of 1 and 2 on the dice can force a character's Fight pool into negative numbers.

Note that what constitutes a good or bad result is dependent on the Pain and circumstances of each character. Violence from a mean drunk is a bad result (as George shows above), while a battered woman defending herself with force would likely be a good result. Generally speaking, any action that conforms to the manifestations of the

character's Pain is a bad result because it locks them into their cycle of self-destruction. On the other hand, any action that that runs contrary to a manifestation of the character's Pain is likely a good result because it shows the character engaged in the Fight and moving toward a life beyond the Pain.

Designer's Notes

I'll be completely honest with you — this game scares me a little bit. The themes and images likely to be evoked in actual play of this game will be outside the comfort zones of many people, maybe even my own. But before simply writing this off as an exercise in game design, I'm going to play it, and play it the way these ideas and images have inhabited my heart during the last day. When I looked at Ron's list of four terms, the first thing that occurred to me was some sci-fi romp in the cosmic spheres. But I let things stew a bit in my gray matter, and then this game concept erupted almost fully formed into my consciousness.

A game centered around Pain, not movie stuff, but real life Pain. I considered not writing it, sticking with something safer, but this game *wanted* me to write it. I hope I have pleased whatever muse touched me.

I've always known that role playing is more than fantasy fulfillment; that it can be cathartic and release dark parts of ourselves in constructive ways. And maybe it can help us understand our fellow humans by walking in their shoes, if only for a single session.

If you're going to play *Today*, please be careful and kind to each other; you don't know how close to someone else's real Pain you may be treading. And talk about it afterward, with each other, with me, and with the community at www.indie-rpgs.com.

Summary Tables of Fight Pool Mechanics
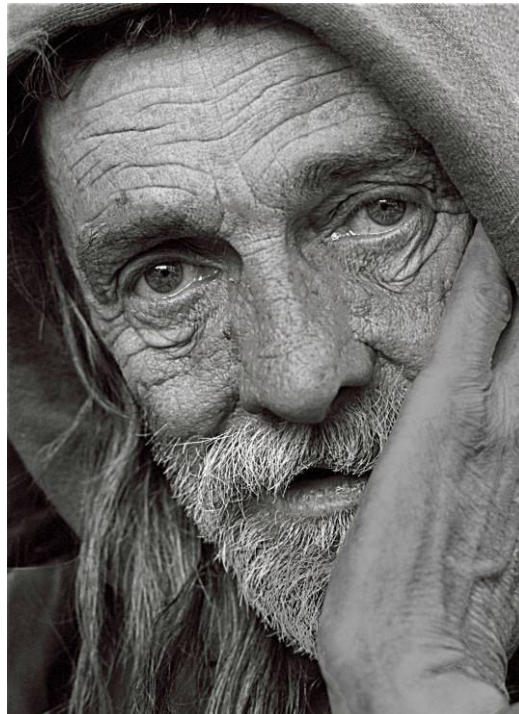
Pain Scenes

Highest Die Result	Narration
No Remaining Dice (all 1s or 2s)	Player to left narrates bad result.
3	Character's player narrates bad result.
4	Player to left narrates mixed result with character's player adding one good thing.
5 or 6	Character's player narrates good result.

Fight Scenes

Highest Die Result	Narration
No Remaining Dice (all 1s or 2s)	Character's player narrates bad result as character lashes out.
3 or 4	Player to right narrates good result but no dice gained.
5 or 6	Character's player narrates inspiration and gains 1d6 per 5 or 6 rolled.

Acknowledgements and Inspirations

"Many of us spend our whole lives running from feeling with the mistaken belief that you cannot bear the pain. But you have already borne the pain. What you have not done is feel all you are beyond the pain."
—Saint Bartholomew