

13 DESCRIPTIONS OF MODERN HORROR

These descriptions of possible locations of horror are all “shards,” according to Tabletop Adventures’ Shards and Bits writing standards. Bits are short pieces of description intended to be dropped in any place. Shards are longer and describe specific places, or situations such as weather, time of day, etc. Most of these pieces are gathered in Shard Sets, related descriptions that can move characters on from one point to another in a place or situation. Material included was slightly modified from descriptions found in *Halls of Horror* and *Against the Darkness: Into the Fire*, an adventure scenario for *Against the Darkness*, the Vatican horror roleplaying game.

1. Sinister Mansion

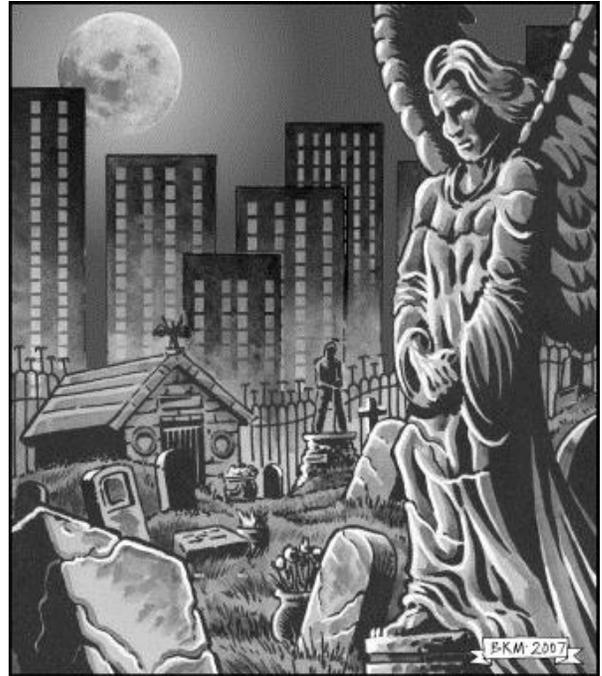
The old mansion looks forbidding as its four stories rise above the smaller, newer houses on the surrounding blocks. Its wrought-iron gates hang lazily on their hinges; the gates are not closed and locked, but neither are they precisely open, as if no one has taken care to open or close them in quite some time. On either side of the gate, high brick walls stretch out in opposite directions, then disappear as they make right-angle turns to enclose the entire city block on which the mansion rests. Beyond the gate a cobblestone walkway leads up to a wide, impressive, screened-in porch. The effect would be beautiful were the path not so overgrown with weeds, and had the lawn and flowerbeds been cut and tended. As it is, the parts of the lawn that you can see look neglected, chaotic with overgrowth. As your eye follows the walkway up the wooden stairs to the porch, you see that the door to the screened porch is closed. [If the sun is in a position to shine into the porch through the screen:] **The light of the setting [rising] sun bathes the porch in a lurid orange [yellow] light, revealing a set of battered wicker furniture; two chairs and a love seat sport cushions thick with dust. The door to the house itself stands closed [or open, at the GM’s preference]. [If the sun is *not* in a position to shine into the porch through the screen:] **The interior of the porch is hidden in shadow, though a few darker shapes suggest the presence of some furniture. You can just barely make out the door to the house itself. [The mansion could be: haunted (with the PCs trying to prove/disprove this); a villain’s hideout with kidnap victims locked in a subbasement; the headquarters of a superhero group gone missing; the abandoned dwelling of a deceased miser rumored to have stashed his wealth in the walls; the PCs’ next home makeover project; or an unlikely place for an information drop or secret rendezvous.]****

2. Library

Dust and trace amounts of mildew provide most of the smells here. There are very few patrons – one teenager checking out a special book for a school project, a homeless man staying warm, and a tattooed woman with a large stack of books taking copious notes on a pad of paper. A little pale sunlight comes in the windows but one set of blinds is closed for each one open, creating an odd checkerboard appearance of light and shadow inside the library. The wooden shelves are old and creak unexpectedly in the profound hush. As you glance at the racks of books, you find few new-looking covers mixed in among well-worn bindings, and many that appear to be very old indeed. The rows seem to go on and on, getting dustier the further you get from the checkout desk. It would be easy to imagine getting lost among the stacks of books here, or nodding off in one of the study niches and waking later to find yourself shut up in here for the night.

3. Graveyard

Jumbled stones and markers lie everywhere in this cemetery. Dozens of marble and granite statues and headstones, some barely waist high and others fifteen feet tall, dot the ground. Some are huge representations of angels or saints while others are the owners themselves in repose. A few are intact but most are not; stains from rain, smoke, exhaust and a dozen other sources have settled over the once-pristine markers. Mausoleums sit in bunches throughout the cemetery. Some are at the tops of small ridges and require a bit of a climb to get to, while others sit right on the cobbled walkway. Even in the daylight they are eerie – most have cobwebs, what glass they have is broken, and any protective grates have been wrenched off. Distantly a car rumbles and passes on the highway, otherwise the graveyard is deathly silent.



Shard Set: Abandoned Warehouse

4. Exterior

Desolate buildings, the vast majority boarded and tagged with signs marking them as condemned, surround the warehouse. It is a small wonder that this building is not marked as well, because it is certainly in no better condition than its neighbors. For several blocks there are no signs of new progress: no construction signs, no signs promising beautification in the near future, no indication that anyone in the government would ever want to give this place attention, for better or worse. The warehouse itself is two stories high, with most of the windows cracked or wholly shattered by stray rocks and potshots from weapons. The front door is almost entirely rusted, its protective coating long since worn away. The knob is also oxidized, but signs of wear over the rust show that it has been used more recently.

5. Interior

The interior of the warehouse is almost uncomfortably open, with only a couple of broken, moldy cardboard boxes littering the floor. What is most noticeable, however, is the lack of sound; the room seems almost intentionally devoid of any noise. Your footsteps should echo in a room as open as this one but they seem disturbingly muffled. The only doorway shows a stairwell where bolted, black steel stairs lead down. [An investigation of the stairwell's door reveals the following:] The wooden frame has been bumped and dented by numerous things over the years. One thing that stands out is a relatively fresh series of jagged lines across the lowest parts of the doorframe: on each frame you can see four distinct lines of scratches, nearly parallel, an inch or so apart. They don't look like rat-scratchings. [The scratches were made by human fingernails digging into the frame, but being dragged across nonetheless.]

6. Basement

There is just a small landing at the bottom of the steel stairs, with only a large door reading 'Keep Out.' This door is steel, but the hinges and lock look rather old. [The lock can be picked though it is somewhat difficult. If the characters make it into the room beyond:] **The chamber beyond reminds you more of a mockery of a theater or church than anything you would expect to find in a warehouse. Cheap folding chairs are lined side by side into a number of rows. Beneath them are discarded food containers and soda cans, as if this space had been reserved for something less than sacred. The nature of the activities is thrown into question, however, as you look beyond the rows of chairs to where a large cement block rises up from the floor. It is about eight by four feet and at least three feet tall. Chains and belts are crudely bolted to its surface, and the stony gray is stained to a dark brown in a number of large splotches. [If the characters search the rest of the room:] The rest of the area is almost disturbingly empty, with nothing of any significance to be found beyond what you first saw. The only thing behind the slab is a nondescript round drain, about six inches in diameter, its grate mottled with rust and some other brownish substance.**

Shard set: Small Country House

7. Approaching the House

Dark, forested hills loom in the background behind the house, imparting an eerie look despite the weak sunlight. Peeling paint gives the house a diseased appearance. A dozen different types of weeds fill the lawn, though mossy flagstones mark out the path to the front door. Wind-hardened, cracked wooden steps creak underfoot. The porch door hangs to one side, dangling on a rusty hinge; its screen has been shredded. The porch, which once was closed in by windows, is now littered with broken glass and brick pieces. A vine dangling from the roof is growing into the room through one of the open windows.

8. Decayed Quality

You have entered what was once a finely decorated room. A wall hanging depicting a woods scene is now frayed but was once no doubt very expensive, as were the leather sofa, roll-top desk, and table. Little light reflects off the very tarnished silver knobs and other fittings. A slightly sweet smell of decay permeates the room. [The furnishings are dry and decayed and remain in place only because they have been undisturbed. Putting weight on any of the furniture will reveal that the legs are totally rotten.]

9. Lonely Bedchamber

The old wooden door groans deeply as you push it aside, rusted hinges popping and squealing from disuse. Dust covers everything in the room. The lack of footprints indicates you are the first to venture in for a very long time. The contents seem almost surreal: though everything is draped with curtains of cobwebs, it still appears as if the previous occupant (or occupants) will be returning for a night's rest. A dressing table, its surface warped and cracked, sits along the wall across from the door, with the matching chair pulled out slightly. A hairbrush and hand mirror still lay where they were placed. [If the brush is picked up, the bristles will begin falling out; the mirror's reflective surface is spotted with age.] **The four-poster bed lies with its tattered sheets turned down for the night. [If the characters sit or lie on the bed, the frame breaks and the mattress falls to the floor while a multitude of insects erupt out of the mattress to add to the commotion.] The closet door is stuck shut and only a strong pull finally opens it. Inside are dusty, moth-eaten clothes of a bygone day. [A journal or diary could be in the drawer of the dressing table, or a photo pinned inside the closet.]**

10. Claw-foot Bathtub

In the bathroom, an old-fashioned pull-chain toilet squats in one corner. The old bathtub is porcelain, very deep and set on white clawed feet. Its faucet is equally ornate, the gray metal a bit corroded, but set with decorative lines and planes. A cork on a darkened brass chain lies loose in the bottom, ready to plug the drain if needed. The white porcelain of the bathtub, still bright along the top, is discolored about half way down and all across the bottom by thick, dark, reddish stains. It is as if at one time the tub was half-full with something very red that permanently discolored it. The tub is empty and dry, and the faucet does not even drip. You seem to see traces of iron in the red, but there is no line of red drip marks from the faucet to the tub, which you might expect if the water was iron-filled. [If someone tries the handles:] The handles turn with no problem but nothing happens.

11. Stairs to Nowhere

You stand at the foot of a worn set of stairs. The treads are much lower in the center of each step, suggesting the countless comings and goings of generations of people. The narrow stairwell reaches upwards for several feet and then stops abruptly at the ceiling. The paint and paper on the ceiling and walls is yellowed and faded, exactly matching everything in the area. There is no evidence there was ever an opening here, except for the dilapidated staircase.

Shard Set: Desecrated Chapel

12. Ritual Circle

The chapel's pews are pushed haphazardly out of position and now stand near the walls. Two carved wooden chairs sit near the exit and another seems to have been knocked out of the way. A small table stands in the back, its tall taper candles oddly bent and twisted. In the far back corner another small table has toppled, and dry, withered flowers spill across the floor. In the center of the room, an elaborate, very precise, double circle has been drawn on the wooden floor in chalk and other materials. The space between the two rings of the outline is filled with esoteric symbols and text.

13. Desecrated Altar

The mess is even worse in the front of the chapel. Any furniture with religious symbols is overturned. The wooden crucifix which once hung in a prominent position now lies on the floor, broken into two pieces. On the altar itself are the stubs of two thick black candles, their oily drippings discoloring the polished wood. Between these are the remains of a black rooster. Dry blood clings to the front of the altar, lies in drops on the floor, and is also splashed on the walls and the stained glass window in the front of the chapel. The blood is augmented by black paint, which covers the stained glass and smears the walls.