

Midnight Express: the oncoming train (Part Two)



By Rose and BK

A web enhancement for Episode 25 of the Midnight Express Podcast



Part one of this series outlined a station for the Hierarchy that could be easily used in Wraith: the Oblivion as a stop for the Midnight Express. This article provides background information on three carriages that could appear as additions to the ghostly train. Snapshots are provided as inspiration with each entry to give Storytellers a starting point for visualisation.

Making a train car for the Midnight Express

I wanted to invent an engine that could run for ever. I could have developed a new train, had I stayed in the railway: it would have looked like the AK-47 though.

Mikhail Kalashnikov

The railroad of history is littered with train disasters that provide ample inspiration for a Wraith chronicle. From the first railroad derailments to modern accidents, it can be difficult to select a disaster from which to draw a carriage. In many disasters involving trains, there are cars that are completely demolished within seconds, so it's hard to imagine what clues to leave for that car to hint at its past while using it for the Midnight Express. There's also surprisingly few subway or underground train disasters that result in the complete destruction of the carriage — a pre-requisite for the vehicle to cross the Shroud. There are many instances of deaths surrounding underground trains (which creates viable story elements for both PC and NPC Restless), but as for destruction of the cars themselves, it takes bombs or floods to ruin them. Even Earthquakes have barely damaged underground tubes to the point of collapse. While there may be very few subways to pick your cars from, there seems to be no end to destroyed or abandoned underground stations to make stops for your Midnight Express, as discussed in Part One.

Tips for making your own car, template

Good design is making something intelligible and memorable. Great design is making something memorable and meaningful.

Dieter Rams

A very early formula for designing your own train car for the Midnight Express is to look at images of train cars through history of your region. No matter which car style strikes your fancy,

there will usually be some point where a car of that model was involved in a disaster or accident. Once you have a model number, you can look for the name and history of a train that would have made a good candidate to cross over into the Shadowlands. Looking up stories of ghost trains can help for mood and inspiration, but often those stories change so much over time that one can't rely on the information about the train to be accurate. Accuracy isn't really needed, but those touches of realism are what can really bring a ghost train to life for your players. Where conflicting local history and tall tales emerge, this provides the Storyteller with options to decide what is 'true', and whether certain Wraiths have taken ownership of the continuing local legend. Activities that bring the train crash back into the public consciousness, or spark local traditions (such as children daring each other to enter the abandoned carriage, or teenagers spooking each other by saying the name of a dead conductor three times whilst going through the tunnel that claimed his life) can also be a source of Memorium.

Once you have a train, or subway car in mind, it will need to have a role on the Midnight Express. Is it simply a Passenger car? A sleeper car? The Midnight Express is said to have only one Engine, but there's no hard and fast rule that it can't have more assisting engines with their own stories. Perhaps you have decided that the train has an engine at each end, so that it does not require a turn-table at a train station to reverse direction. What flavour does this auxiliary engine, whose only purpose is to retrace a journey, present in your story? Does it have a separate Engineer and crew, or are there times when the train is a 'dead stop' and the crew must traverse the length of the train?

The next part is describing not only what it looks like or can be used for, but why would the players characters use it. Will they see other Wraiths there? Did any of those Wraiths 'come with' the train car, bound to the vehicle that took their lives? Does the Midnight Express inherently support legends of the carriage by ensuring that it arrives, thinly visible through the Shroud, on the anniversary of its' derailment? Answering these questions will provide ideas and motivations for NPCs and inspire plot hooks. Stitch together as many stories as you feel will flesh out your train cars almost as if they were characteristics of a larger being, that being the entirety Midnight Express itself. The podcast episode introduced the idea that the Midnight Express could be sentient, and as such, it would have a purpose in collecting carriages (and perhaps even in the order in which they are attached). If Nicholas the Ferryman is indeed in the service of this relic, there need to be little clues to tip canny players to this relationship.

The Hanging Car, a modern addition

On September 15, 1958 in Newark Bay, New Jersey, the Central Railroad of New Jersey (CRNJ) morning commuter train #3314 ran through a stop signal, derailed, and slid off the open Newark Bay lift bridge. The pass was set up to automatically derail a train if it ran two of the stopping signals without slowing. The Lift Bridge was designed to be completely locked before a train could pass across the tracks. However, on that day, the conductor suffered what was later believed to be a heart attack. There was no Deadman switch installed on the train as they were not mandatory at the time.

Once it ran the two stop signals, the train derailed automatically; the automatic derailer was designed to knock the wheels off the track so that the resistance of the ties and ballast against the train's wheels would bring a slow-moving derailed train to a stop. This would have worked but the train was travelling too swiftly for these counter-measures to be effective. After reaching the bridge two diesel engines, and two passenger cars slid off the open bridge pass and sank into the bay before the rest of the train would stop. For one unlucky car, the stop was not enough and it hung off the lift bridge by its rear truck for two hours before it finally fell into Newark Bay.

While the diesel engines were salvaged, nothing is known of the passenger cars resurfacing in the living world. One surfaced in the Shadowlands instead. The car that hung suspended over the water for two hours had injured and frightened passengers trapped within it and their anguish infused the car with sufficient emotional energy to enable the crossing. The energy of their terror has brought it across the shroud and it has since joined the ranks of the Midnight Express. The inside of this carriage smells of seawater and there are many soggy patches that veteran passengers know to avoid. Perhaps due to the suspension that led to the destruction of the car, gravity tends to be randomly affected within its confines. Passengers in this car report an 'off kilter' sensation, the sense that the orientation of the inside forces of the carriage are at odds with the actual orientation of the tracks (and rest of the train). This will make Dexterity and Athletic rolls at an added difficulty, but in extreme cases the passengers will be thrown to the front of the car as if it is hanging 90 degrees off the end of a bridge for what seems like two hours before gravity rights itself. They'll have to make a roll or suffer damage to their Corpus. This reputation has made the car both a curiosity, and one that is rarely filled to capacity (unless the other cars are crowded).

The only inhabitant of this car is a confused 64 year old man calling himself Lloyd or sometimes Wilbur. He doesn't seem to know where he's going or how he wound up on the train, and often appears as an 'absent-minded professor'. Whilst neither a help nor hindrance, Lloyd is a regular to the car and seems not to mind the gravitational anomalies (in fact sometimes it seems as though he doesn't notice them at all). In times of stress (such as when he is pestered with too many questions, or needs to concentrate on social interaction for too long) there is a subtle change as Wilbur takes over to protect the elderly gentleman.

Playing notes: You remember you were doing something important and going somewhere. Your trusty friend Pete was there with you and you don't know why he's gone now. You feel at ease on the train and not inclined to leave the car you're in. You feel you belong here somehow. When you try to remember anything, it starts to hurt like you can't breathe. Clutch your chest in pain before your Shadow takes over. Pete failed you, he abandoned you and that's why he's not with you now. He was supposed to be responsible for making sure everything ran right and because he failed, you ended up here. It's all his fault. You're tied to this train car and you can't leave it, even if you wanted to. You deserve to be here and Wilbur is the only one that you can truly trust to 'do the right thing'.

The Balham Cars, from the Underground

They had gone to the Tubes for safety, instead they found worse than bombs; they found the unknown, terror. Women and children, small babes in arms, locked beneath the ground. I can only visualize their feelings, I can only write how it has been told to me, but it must have been hell. On top of this there came a cloud of gas. People not killed outright were suffocated, the rest drowned, drowned like rats in a cage.
Boy in the blitz: the 1940 diary of Colin Perry

On 14 October 1940, during World War II, a 1400 kilogram semi-armouring piercing bomb fell in the road above Balham Tube Station, with sufficient explosive force to penetrate the tunnel over nine metres below. Until this point, the underground had been used extensively by Londoners, who felt that this form of transport was the safest in wartime Britain. The point of impact was at the intersection of two tunnels, and the resulting crater also claimed a double-decker bus that was travelling the street under blackout.



The water mains, sewage pipes, and gas lines were ruptured, causing flooding and the loss of 68 lives - 64 shelterers and 4 railway staff. Rescue attempts were delayed by the gas which caused suffocation and fears of a larger conflagration. While the main damage was to the station, several cars were flooded and ruined as well. What had been a safe place; offering protection from the nightly bombings (the "Blitz") became instead a concentrated area of fear and destruction that brought the station and more than a few cars to the other side.

Images of the crater and crashed bus became widespread and copies are still used in contemporary historical texts as they are considered part of the 'iconic imagery' of the Blitz. Photos of the resulting rescue efforts were likewise archived and preserved as the excavation of the bodies continued until after Christmas that year.

Aboard the Midnight Express the Ballham cars appear much more modern when compared to their above ground companions. Usually brightly lit, there is often loose dirt that seems to be tracked all over the floor along with small chunks of concrete and ammo casings. Some windows have cracks which causes the wind to whistle through with shrieks that sound like falling bombs.

Passengers:

We must develop a deeper interest and greater understanding of the people we meet here or abroad. Like us, they are passengers on board that mysterious ship called life.

Ella Maillart

The huddled woman inside this car is in her early 20's dressed in 1940's fashion covered in a large, warm coat. She's often in the corner of the car or near a door with her legs tucked up on the seat and her arms and coat around them, and spends most of her time gazing out the window with a teary expression. When spoken to she will admit to 'waiting for her sweetheart' who was to return from the War soon. Under the coat, characters may notice an armband that would identify her as a volunteer bunker warden (someone responsible for assisting civilians into the shelters and looking after them until an 'all clear' was given). Her Shadow brutally reminds her of how she failed in that duty, and she has constructed the 'sweet heart' as a shield against its depredations. If she were to every admit that her love is only a construct of her mind, she would probably fall swiftly to oblivion, unprotected from a merciless Shadow.

The soldier is very clearly an infantryman from world war II his uniform is dirt and grease stained. His expression is tired, yet paranoid. He can be often found standing in the car, leaning on his rifle, for support. He tells the others, he's just there to take a bit of a rest, but will be right after 'a quick kip'. He seems to be constantly on the verge of nodding off, but keeps jerking awake to look intently about at the other people in the car, especially whenever the tempest catches in the cracks of the windows. The only other thing he'll mention is having a lovely young woman waiting for him back home. The soldier spends some of his time in the



Shadowlands cursed to relive his final moments. On sentry duty in the trenches, he tried valiantly to stay awake in the freezing mud after a two-day march only to nod off. When he awoke, his trench was over-run and he lived long enough through his wounds to see his unit killed. His Shadow, much like the young ladies' seems to delight in reminding him of failure.

Strangely, no-one has ever seen the the soldier and the woman in the same Ballham car at the same time, though they will probably not notice this unless asked directly.

The Lincoln Special

Do you ever find yourself talking with the dead? Since Willie's death, I catch myself every day, involuntarily talking with him, as if he were here.

Abraham Lincoln, upon the death of his son.

Few presidents have been as iconic as Mr. Abraham Lincoln. While his fate post-mortem is unknown, the event of his passing and funeral marked a heavy-hearted period of mourning for the nation. Lincoln's ghost has been reported in the White House Library, a place considered dear to the former President and witnesses to the apparition include President Calvin Coolidge's wife and Winston Churchill.

As such, the train that carried the casket of Mr Lincoln from Washington D.C. to Springfield, Illinois was a special affair. The main rail companies of the time provided eight of the cars, while the Ninth was the President's very own luxury car that had a sitting room, parlour and sleeping compartment. On this journey it became the Hearse Car, draped in mourning black and carrying the coffins of Mr. Lincoln and his youngest son who had died some years earlier from illness. The train's slow procession ran along nearly the same route he took from his home state of Illinois on his presidential campaign.

Thousands of people lined either side of the tracks to sing hymns, leave tributes and bear witness to the president's passing. Ultimately the procession arrived in Springfield and Mr. Lincoln and his son was laid to rest in Oak Ridge Cemetery. Yet, this was not the end of his funerary car. The Lincoln Special Funeral car and its furnishings passed through many hands and sellers over the years, but was never returned to service. It was even cosmetically restored by one owner in order to preserve it as a museum exhibit. Finally, the car was destroyed on March 18, 1911 after a fire swept through a portion of a Minnesota warehouse. It's mournful presence and history provided the necessary emotional fuel to usher it across the Shroud where it was immediately made a part of the Midnight Express.

Wraiths who lived in the Civil War era feel inexplicably drawn to the car, despite which side of the war they were on. Either to mourn or celebrate the death of the President, they can feel the power of that day, seeped into the essence of the train car itself. They can obtain a strong Pathos standing at attention for their entire trip. Those soldiers who succumb and sit, gain Angst instead.

The impact of the funeral train left such an indelible mark upon the Skinlands and Shadowlands both, that on the anniversary of the funeral train's departure and slow travel from Washington DC to Springfield Illinois, all clocks near the tracks of that funeral route stop at the very time the train would have passed by. So complete is this phenomenon that it even occurs in areas where the tracks no longer exist. On the anniversary of the procession, two caskets draped with flowers appear in the parlour of the black bunted Lincoln Special.

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Abraham Lincoln's Funeral Car, Getty Images

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