

Here's the writeup from our game Saturday. It's long, I'm sorry.

Hotline Hollowpoint

The Era: Late 1980s Miami.

The Mission: A) Kidnap Reiko Morimoto, daughter of yakuza oyabun Mako Morimoto. Use her to draw out her father and B) kill him.

The PCs: PCs were all masked contract assassins sent on various missions by mysterious phone calls. The pay is good and the work discreet. This mission was the first time the PCs are working together, although they'd heard of the others' handiwork.

I slightly altered the 5 questions:

1. You wear a mask to keep your identity secret during jobs. What is it?
2. You don't have a lot of scruples, but you would never do this.
3. You'll use a gun if you have to, but what you really like to do is this.
4. You're a pro and you know you're a pro because you always do this.
5. You took a souvenir from that one time in Tampa. What is it?

"Tire Iron" Tommy Bucks: 325 lb. tire-iron wielding maniac in a white leisure suit with a rubber John Travolta mask. TAKE.

Mazzie Arkansas: 98 lb. porn star by night, assassin by also-night, wears a porcelain mask and the bare minimum amount of clothing required to hide a straight razor. COOL.

Payaso: Cuban psycho in clown makeup and hawaiian shirt. Never leaves a trace. KILL.

Baby Girl: 46-year-old woman with big 80s shoulder pads and a broken doll mask. Favors garrottes. Her complication (the only one we used) is that she used to babysit Reiko and was Mako's mistress before she "got too old". DIG.

"Cold Cuts" Calhoun: A Jason Vorhees-size man wearing a latex cow mask over coveralls and never-washed butcher's apron. Has an alligator. Cold Cuts' player spent the entire game doing a deadpan Buffalo Bill (Silence of the Lambs, not Old West) voice. TERROR (but took KILL at zero, his player wanted to see if he could be just as effective without a seemingly-obvious skill).

Traits took a little while to make, and there was some dithering as a group over skill choices. "Anyone already take DIG at 5? How about KILL?" That sort of thing, but that was fine, and in hindsight I firmly believe it was one of the reasons the players were so incredibly successful. The characters came out pretty fucked up, honestly. I was going for a half-Vice City, half-Hotline Miami vibe with this game and the guys took it to Manhunt levels. Which was awesome - we play a lot of superhero games, so I guess this was sort of a chance for some violent catharsis.

Ironically, their plan for snatching Reiko Morimoto was actually not that violent. As part of the assassins' information packet, mailed to them mysteriously by their benefactors, they learned that Reiko's driver and bodyguards had had their phone calls intercepted and spoofed. They'd be taking Reiko to Blow, a nightclub owned by Cuban drug dealers Bobby and Bobbie Garza. Payaso suggested maybe he'd done work for them in the past and could convince them to turn their heads while the

job went down. Mazzie whipped up some roofiecoladas, Baby Girl did some recon from the bar, and Cold Cuts and Tire Iron were waiting near the women's restroom window and across the street in the front respectively. Mazzie entered the club, rolling COOL to outclass the mere mortals hitting on Reiko and instantly get her interested. Tire Iron burned his hula girl bobblehead that he picked up in Tampa (his player had never read the rulebook and he still came up with a little hula girl), slapping it onto his dash and flipping on the undercover police lights on his Caprice Classic. Reiko's second car full of bodyguards was blocked. Inside, Mazzie had no trouble getting Reiko into the women's bathroom before she completely passed out from the drugs. Then it was out the window and into the waiting arms of (ugh) Cold Cuts and his nasty GMC van.

Mechanically, it was 5 players against a 9-dice opposition with a 3-dice TAKE Catch (1, 6, 6). Baby Girl rolled no sets and I immediately went for her with DIG, except Mazzie took a hit for her. My other sets were ruined by Mazzie and Payaso (burning his "Leave no trace" trait, tying him and this kidnapping to the Garzas), while Tire Iron and Cold Cuts handily (or luckily) rolled more than enough sets to tackle the Catch. It was a one round conflict, a flawless victory, a clean getaway, and Reiko's bodyguards were left completely Outclassed.

Cold Cuts' safehouse was a property ostensibly undergoing fumigation, with the big tent over top to keep out prying eyes. It was a nice house, with an empty indoor pool where Calhoun kept his alligator. Above that, Reiko was chained up while the gang planned how they're lure Mako out of hiding. Did she have a cellphone? No, it's like 1989. But then again, Reiko was the daughter of an overprotective rich yakuza boss. And honestly, did I really want to waste time while they figured out a way to talk to the guy they would have to talk to anyway? So sure, inside Reiko's bag there was a Zach Morris-style brick of a cellphone.

Cutscene! Back at Blow, Mako's henchman, Gaijin Dudikoff, was interrogating the Garzas with some well-placed throwing stars. Remember, Payaso had left a trail when he contacted the Garzas, and Dudikoff figured this was his big chance. Recover the girl, punish the people responsible, and he'd be able to write his own checks with Reiko's father.

Meanwhile, Baby Girl and Cold Cuts were running up against Baby Girl's complication. She didn't want Reiko hurt, while Cold Cuts was all too eager to make sure Mako took them seriously. It went around in a circle for a while. Tire Iron and Payaso mostly stayed out of it, Mazzie offered that they could always try the hard way later, but you only ever get the first chance at a soft touch. The drama started turning a little sour, so I asked if either Baby Girl or Calhoun were willing to Move On for what they wanted, go NPC, and go to a conflict. I admit I was mostly asking Baby Girl's player, since it was his complication and the need to avoid hurting the hostage was more an impediment to the mission than Calhoun's ruthlessness (and when you look at it that way, it kind of sums up Hollowpoint perfectly). Baby's player said no, so Cold Cuts proceeded to saw Reiko's foot off and feed it to the alligator.

"Call him now. He'll know we're serious when he hears her screaming in the background."

Mazzie called Mako up and simply told him "1 million dollars. We'll call you again with the where and when." She let Reiko's cries hang there for a second before hanging up.

Meanwhile, Gaijin Dudikoff and his ninja hit team had tracked down the fumigated house. The assassins were surprised by smoke bombs whumping their way into the house! Dark shapes padded softly and quickly through the drywall stacks and corpse freezers. Payaso and Cold Cuts reacted quickly - the cow-faced madman grabbed a chainsaw and herded (heh) the yakuza towards Payaso, who had gone full Scarface with an M16/M203. Tire Iron grabbed Reiko as a human shield. Mazzie strode through the gunfire and screaming yakuza running from Cold Cuts, casually nicking jugulars, brachials, femorals with her razor. Baby Girl spotted Gaijin narrowly avoiding a fusillade of rounds from Payaso, came up behind him, and got her garrote around him! He got a knife in the way just in time, cut the cord, and smashed Baby Girl in the mask with an elbow. The aging killer kicked at the american ninja's knee, bashed his knife away, felled the bemulleted shinobi and slammed punch after punch into his ribs, face, junk. A vicious kick threw Baby Girl off, then Gaijin was off and running. His men were in disarray, the survivors just barely holding Payaso and Cold Cuts at bay. Tire Iron had Reiko out the back and off to God knows where. A terrified Gaijin Dudikoff escaped the bungled assault but his men didn't, not once Baby Girl and Mazzie flanked them.

This was not strictly speaking supposed to be a retaliation, but it did involve a Principal (Dudikoff) and was, narratively, an opposition-instigated assault, so, yeah, it was a retaliation. 16 dice split between Dudikoff (KILL) and the yakuza (TAKE). Payaso asked Cold Cuts for help and got it and just tore into the mooks. Tire Iron's TERROR tactic of using Reiko as a shield was what actually finished off the principal, and he ran for it. The second round was cleanup, honestly. Mazzie got help from Cold Cuts and they wiped the floor with the yaks. Cold Cuts' player didn't take KILL but as a TERRORfying teammate, he was still incredibly effective at narration involving murder.

The killers informed Mako that the price doubled when they called him back to give him a location for the trade - the wharfs, near a flotilla of chained-up garbage barges. I asked the group which time they wanted to do this thing - Michael Mann dead of night or Michael Bay sunset. Tire Iron's player said he was thinking more like high noon, but I informed him that there were only two times showdowns happen in Miami. They opted for the Michael Bay sunset. Payaso climbed one of the cargo cranes with a duffel bag full of weapons. Baby Girl wanted the kill, so she stayed close by, concealing herself in one of the junk piles on a barge. Cold Cuts had Reiko up in a tugboat cabin (as always, with his alligator). Tire Iron took the controls of a great electromagnet crane and readied a junked car like some titanic flail. Mazzie Arkansas stood calmly alone in far too short a fur-lined jacket and a strip of a skirt, her junkie ribs showing white against the golden sunset, and waited for the yakuza in the spacious open parking lot.

They came in fast and rolled hard. Cigarette boats roared close to the barges, leaving roiling wakes behind them. A luxurious yacht motored closer to the docks, no doubt carrying Mako Morimoto and (hopefully) their money. Above it all, a helicopter's stuttering blades cut through the boat engines as it slowly circled the wharf. Morimoto disembarked from the yacht and strode across the open lot to meet Mazzie. He was flanked by several black-suited yakuza carrying large bags. After the usual assurances that Reiko was alive and the money was there, things got a little weird. Baby Girl left her hiding place, stripping off her mask (an attempt to get close enough to kill Mako) and saying "All we want is you. I kill you and Reiko goes free." Mako was understandably distraught by this proposal, but before I got bogged down in how he would react, I luckily remembered that 1) he would

definitely be at odds with this plan so 2) we go to the dice.

The conflict started off as Baby Girl opened up into a full sprint, trying to catch Morimoto as he ran for the tugboat where his daughter was held captive. Tire Iron wrestled the crane controls and flung the junked car he had readied through the air in a lazy arc - right into the yacht! The vessel died amidst a thundering, cracking cacophony of splintering hull and crashing metal. Payaso wasted no time, shouldering an RPG and sending the helicopter back to hell. Mазzie went for the money. She just walked up, cool as you like, while things exploded behind her and the thugs before her shrank back, not sure what to do. Cold Cuts held Reiko still and made sure her father could see she was still alive, could see that maybe there was still a chance-

UUURK! Baby Girl tackled the huge oyabun but the garrote didn't take. Mako was on his feet again. He made it to the tug and clambered onto the steps. Baby Girl hit him again, knocked him sprawling down the metal staircase. The oyabun hammered a meaty fist at Baby Girl's head, but she slipped it. Mako's knuckles crunched and metal dented. She was on him now, jumping off the steps like a rodeo clown, garrote whipping round the huge man's beefy neck. He got his hand up in time. Blood oozed from the wire cutting into his fingers but he started walking step by step up to the tug's cabin. Payaso aimed and put a Dragunov round straight through the yakuza boss sideways. More blood splattered on the grimy white hull. Still he walked on, with Baby Girl riding him, knees in his back, pulling on that damn wire with all she had.

Payaso started in on the other yakuza now, taking his time, taking aim. BOOM! Headshot. BOOM! Headshot. Mазzie walked through the corpses to get the money. Over on the tugboat's steps, Baby Girl garrote popped Mako's fingers off like fat sausages and found lethal purchase in his neck. The oyabun stumbled at the top of the stairs, mere feet from his terrified daughter. Cold Cuts' face was a staring blank latex cow. Reiko's was a Munchian portrait of absolute terror. Baby Girl crunched a knee down between Mako's shoulder blades and nearly bent over backwards, working her hands back and forth like a lumberjack sawing at a mighty redwood.

"Daddy!" Reiko wailed.

Blood oozed, geysered, then cascaded from Old Man Morimoto's neck.

"Daddy!" she screamed.

Mako's head came off.

"NOOOOOOOO Daddyydaddydon'tbedeaddon'tleavemewiththemnonnononodaddy..." The hope drained out of Reiko's face but she recognized Baby Girl. Confused, she managed to blubber, "M-Mrs. _____?" (I said "beeeep" like when they say the Bride's name in Kill Bill)

Below, Tire Iron and Mазzie recovered the money while the surviving yakuza, outclassed and outgunned, ran for their lives.

The mission was over. The team accomplished their objectives without taking so much as a first-stage

effect, but it was clear they wouldn't all be working together again. Some were different people by the end of this job. Baby Girl, in particular. Cold Cuts Calhoun didn't let Reiko go to the last remaining familiar face she knew in the US. He kept her held, alligator at the ready.

"Baby Girl, I will give you my entire cut from this job if you kill Reiko. Right now. You don't have the use the reciprocating saw. I have a gun. It can be quick and clean. If you do not, then... I will kill and eat her. It will not be quick."

Baby Girl's only remaining trait at this point I think was "never hurt a kid", and despite Reiko being legal, the woman had been her babysitter. Reiko had seen too much. She'd seen some of their faces. She was a loose end. Additionally, Cold Cuts was pushing Baby Girl, trying to get her to free herself from attachments. Attachments were bad for this line of work. Thirdly, this was Baby Girl's player's going-away-to-college gaming weekend, and we were half-spotlighting him, half-hazing him on his way out.

Baby Girl had three choices, none of them good. Kill the kid and give up on her own humanity. Walk away and know Reiko's death would be worse? Try to save her and probably get them both killed?

Baby Girl picked up the saw.

The last battle was 18 dice split between Mako as a principal and his yakuza opposition. Cold Cuts refused a request for help from Payaso, who took a reasonable (and probably tactically sound) 5 dice from the pool. People burned lots of traits. And sure, I rolled a lot of sets but against 5 players all with multiple sets sitting there on the table? It was a blowout. It was glorious to get everyone narrating the crazy stuff they were doing and respond to it all but I never felt like I was challenging them. Were they just that good at picking up on the game's meta-level tactics? Did they roll crazy good? Are five players one or two too many for Hollowpoint's sweet spot? Should I have forced conflicts in other places, maybe not given out the expository information but made them work for it? Was their simple plan simply that effective, their skill choices shoring up any deficiencies?

Regardless, we all had a great time. It was that kind of game with the kind of characters that you'll remember, but won't really want to play again, though. By the end there was definitely a dirty feeling going on. We'll totally try it again in a different genre or era, though.

The only denouement we had was that in 20 years or so, "Tire Iron" Tommy Bucks loses a lot of weight and ends up getting shot by Raylan Givens. Oh, and the killers' mysterious phone-line benefactors were COBRA Tele-Vipers destabilizing crime families so the terrorist organization could easily move in and take over their cash flow. Because 1980s.