

COVERAGE, INK. COVERAGE

TITLE:
LOCALE: Rural Indiana
AUTHOR:
PERIOD: Contemporary
FORM: Screenplay
GENRE: Horror
BUDGET: High
DRAFT DATE:
COVERAGE DATE:
PREPARED BY:

LOGLINE:

When a nurse accepts a job at an isolated hospital she gradually unravels the dark secrets of its hideous experiments.

SYNOPSIS:

Jake Voyles, an adolescent cancer patient, is confined to Hillsville hospital. He expresses a seemingly childish fear of nearby room 437, and compels nurse Sally Myers to look in the room. When Sally enters, she sees a horrifying apparition with a goat's head. She reports this to another nurse, who enters the room and is murdered by an unseen force.

Soon after, two new nurses, Anne Engle and Ellen Flack, arrive in the rural community of Hillsville. A creepy one-eyed man warns them that the hospital is haunted, but upon arriving at the facility they are impressed with its expansiveness and modern features. Ellen is also charmed by Dr. Kevin Hillard. They learn that Hillard's grandfather founded the place as a flu clinic during WWI and the great epidemic.

Shortly after the new nurses' arrival, an out-of-towner (Harold Ambrose) arrives. He asks for directions in a local diner, and a mysterious figure punctures his tires. He has a blow out on a desolate road and is attacked by a strange man. He is then taken to the hospital and Anne observes the ambulance pull up, and Ambrose's terrified screams. In the operating room, a Dr. Owen produces a brutal saw. A ghost appears just before the bizarre experiment begins, and the saw floats into a nurse's neck and kills her. Dr. Hillyard appears and blithely urges Dr. Owen to continue his operation. The next day when Anne inquires about the ambulance, she is told no one was admitted to the hospital the previous night. Her investigation begins.

Anne conducts research at a library. Librarian Susan Goodfellow reveals that the original Dr. Hillard had radical theories, including eugenics, and was rumored to have experimented on the backwoods locals. Anne leaves, and a mysterious woman chokes Susan with a piano string. Back at the hospital, the goat-headed apparition and the ghost of Ambrose appear to Jake and tell him he has nothing to fear, but that he is “the key.” They urge him to tell Anne to “go down.”

Another nurse, Rebecca O’Neil, tells Anne to stop asking questions. They fight, and Rebecca is forced into room 437, where she is attacked by flying debris and rubble. Jake tells Anne to go downstairs, and wraiths urge her on. She is trailed by Dr. Owens—clearly the murderer of Ambrose—and enters a tunnel lined with bones and flesh. The farther she goes into the tunnel, the more hideous it becomes, but Ambrose’s ghost tells her she must not stop now. She finds a bizarre altar on which the librarian, Susan, is murdered.

Dr. Hillyard meanwhile takes Ellen into the catacombs. He explains that his grandfather designed the hospital by divine magic; he believed that the flu epidemic was punishment for the sins of war. Ellen freaks out, and Hillyard commands a mummy to take her to the altar where she is sacrificed. Hillyard is certain that a major breakthrough in his “research” is soon to come.

Various specters, including the ghost of Ellen, materialize to Anne and tell her must save Jake and destroy “the gate.” Anne and Jake hurl Molotov cocktails. Jake’s mother appears and we learn that she was in on the plot to keep him sick but alive. When Anne and the mother tussle, Jake throws a flammable liquid in his mother’s face. One-eyed John appears and hands Jake a lighter; he torches her. As the hospital crumbles in flames, Anne, Jake, and One-eyed John watch countless wraiths emerge, presumably set free from their hellish limbo.

COMMENTS:

This is a reasonably effective horror with an intriguing premise. The implicit connection that is drawn between the great flu epidemic and WWI, and today's worries about the bird flu, is particularly appealing. The author wastes no time getting this story underway, and the pace is consistently brisk with next to no gratuitous detours into subplots. Even between scares there are constant reminders that this is a horror (unsettling ghostly whispers and other intimations of menace or threat). The author is also particularly adept at his transitions between scenes; he makes his cuts with the sensibilities of a good editor. The major points to address are characterization, overall logic, and general style.

CHARACTERIZATION: By far the most vital issue to confront is the portrayal of Anne, the protagonist. There is no question at any point that she is the protagonist, and she takes active and decisive steps to solve the mystery of Hillsville. The problem is that she has absolutely no arc, and we are given no reason why she is so active and decisive and curious. We need to know more about her as a person, and see her change internally as the story progresses. Without getting bogged down in a needless subplot, it would be nice to know why she chose to come work for Hillsville just now. She mentions that she skips around from job to job, but we need something more focused. What about her personality and past contributes to this restless nature, and how does it fuel her curiosity and resolve in the face of terrifying odds? She explains that Jake needs her, and that's a pretty good way to demonstrate why she chooses to stay, but for this to be fully effective, we should see them bond a bit more. It would be satisfying to gradually learn some secret from Anne's past that ties all of her traits together—perhaps she is a nurse because she lost her own son to cancer? Perhaps she lost her last job because she has a strong sense of morality and investigated some sort of fraud or patient abuse even when warned to stop? There are countless other possibilities, but it is crucial that the author delve into some type of backstory that connects directly to the primary story and Anne's involvement.

In terms of arc, Anne needs some flaw or defect that she will overcome by the climax of the story. Perhaps she blames herself for the death of her own child—she feels she didn't do enough to save him? That would be an ideal way to connect Anne to Jake, and to compel her to enter the heart of darkness despite everyone's warnings and her own fears. As we journey through Act II, we need to see her falling apart; we need to see her about to give up due to daunting odds. She needs to hit emotional or physical rock bottom just before the climax. As it stands, her personality is completely consistent throughout the story. She is always a likeable do-gooder. She may briefly pause to question her mission (as in the tunnel) but there is never a serious threat that she will give up or fail. This is the fatal flaw in this screenplay. Fortunately, it is fairly easily remedied.

While Anne is fairly active in her investigation, there are too many instances where others save her or foil the bad guys. Wraiths destroy the antagonist, rather than Anne. Jake and John destroy the boy's mother, not Anne. Susan's ghost saves Jake from Sally, not Anne. Jake slams the vase on Sally's head, not Anne. It's okay if this happens once or twice, but in order to keep the focus on the protagonist, Anne must directly save the day more than she does.

And although Anne's activity in the investigation is desirable, in a way she is too active too soon. There should be a brief period of normalcy in which we see her doing her job as a nurse, starting to fit in with other staffers, and feeling some contentment at Hillsville. She is too suspicious too quickly. If the aberrations at the hospital are so immediately apparent, it defies logic that Hillard could have continued his nefarious schemes undetected or unchallenged, and it kills the general suspense if the mystery does not gradually unfold. As in "Rosemary's Baby," there should be a brief period of normalcy where everything is tranquil and optimistic...only to be gradually undermined.

Other characters need touching up. One-Eyed John is indeed a creepy figure, but it would be helpful if his fears about the hospital were founded in some personal history. His hideous face should be the result of an experiment at the hospital which he escaped from; but his story would be so fantastic that no one would believe him. Perhaps he was even institutionalized for his ranting, thus making him seem even less credible to locals? Instead of getting information on the hospital from the librarian, why not have Anne turn to the first figure who raised suspicions about the place? Anne could seek John out and be invited to his home, where he keeps massive files on the strange history of the hospital. This would better connect John to the story rather than offering him as just an obligatory creepy figure without clear connection to the plot, and it would better justify his return at the end of the story. It is a general rule that characters that serve duplicative functions should be consolidated; Susan's role in providing clues can be rolled into John's.

Jake's mother needs to be better integrated with the plot. We don't see much of her, we never really get to know her, and she is inconsistently portrayed. At times she seems to simply poo-poo her sons fears of ghosts; at other times it is suggested that she is a religious nut; at the end she is revealed as complicit in the plot to keep Jake ill. None of these traits is necessarily contradictory, but they could be better streamlined. A fantastic model for the mother could be the nanny in "The Omen"—she at first seems to have Damien's interests at heart and seems to be an ally to his parents. But gradually her nefarious traits creep out, and she becomes an obstacle for the protagonist.

It is a big mistake to have Jake torch his mother. Even if she was a heinous figure, a son killing his mom is not sympathetic. Far better if the wraiths destroy her while Anne and Jake watch (and because we will have one instance of the

ghosts gaining revenge on one of the conspirators, we should see Anne destroy the antagonist, rather than the ghosts doing it).

STRUCTURE: The general act structure is on the money. There is a strong hook up front to whet our interest (the entire first scene), and this is immediately followed by a decisive inciting incident (Anne's arrival in Hillsville). The only structural flaw with Act I is that too much is given away; the presence of evil should be more ambiguous. The voiceover in the beginning leaves no doubt about the nature of the hospital, whereas we should only gradually learn that Hillsville is a gateway. The newspaper clippings under the credits likewise spoil opportunities for gradually unfolding suspense and revelations.

Act II is premised on a strong plot point (the murder of Ambrose and Anne's witnessing of the ambulance). We instantly enter new emotional territory as Anne begins her investigation. The problem here is that, as suggested above, Anne is instantly suspicious. Her sense of foreboding should unfold much more slowly; she should resist the idea that the place is evil, even if her inner voice tells her it is.

Act III begins around the time Anne enters the tunnel. Given the length of the script, this occurs around the "right time." She is now fully convinced of the evil of the place, and is committed to her mission. She enters the heart of darkness to complete her quest. This is all textbook screenwriting. The only considerations derive from story weaknesses that would be improved through better utilization of various characters, as discussed above.

The final note about structure concerns the conclusion. Things are actually wrapped up too neatly. In a horror, it is preferable to be left with a sense of doom—some sort of shocking twist that suggests the story isn't over, that evil continues. This happens in both "The Omen" and "Rosemary's Baby" (and a zillion other lesser horrors). A random suggestion: In a denouement we could see firemen on the scene the next day; nothing is left but rubble and ashes. They find the catacombs, which now merely look like normal tunnels...but then one fireman sees the remains of the intact altar. As he races to tell his boss he found some sort of archaeological relic, the altar can begin to reform with evidence of bones and skin, perhaps even the spectral face of Dr. Hillard. Whatever path the author takes, it is imperative to leave the audience with an unsettling feeling.

LOGIC: Many elements in the story could be better explained or integrated with the plot. The most immediate question is, if there have been so many deaths at the hospital, to the point that it's been featured in newspapers, why hasn't the AMA investigated? Even if the hospital could cover up the deaths, there would be an inordinate number of missing persons in the area, which would spark investigations. Indeed, when Anne begins to suspect problems, why doesn't she report to the AMA? Such an investigation—and how the hospital covers its

collective butt, could beef up the second act (at 92 pages, there is plenty of room to expand this script).

Why do the ghosts have animal-like forms? How does this connect to the rituals conducted by the hospital? In fact, we encounter ghosts, animal-figures, winged ghosts, and mummies. There should be one general type of apparition that is emblematic of the “research” the hospital conducts. Since the tunnel is lined with skin, perhaps the experiments can involve stripping the flesh from living patients (as with Ambrose?). Moreover, we must know a little about the logic of the experiments, and how they could possibly lead to overcoming death. Perhaps the intense pain of being stripped of flesh channels a type of collective energy that can be harnessed? In other words, we need a more focused discussion of the m.o. of the hospital and the logic of its supernatural world.

In every way, “the gate” must be clarified. The initial voiceover tells us that the hospital is a gate, and we later learn that Jake is the “wedge” between worlds. How does Jake lose his status as the gate and what is different about him as we near the climax? Why does Rebecca assume the role as wedge or gate? She appears late in the story as a random nurse, and she is killed by ghosts, but how does that transform her into the wedge or gate? Something distinctive must happen—perhaps Rebecca is in a coma, so they just don’t need Jake anymore?

Anne is constantly urged to destroy the gate, and she is constantly baffled by what that means. She needs to be explicitly told or have a clear revelation that the entire hospital is the gate. This is implicit, but it needs to be completely apparent to the audience just before she begins to torch the facility. Perhaps Anne’s ghost can tell her outright that she must destroy the hospital to close the gate and free the tortured souls.

It is never clear why room 437 is so important. There is a brief discussion of a patient who died in there, but with such a high number of disappearances and ghosts, it would seem that the whole hospital would be full of such rooms. We need to go a bit deeper into the significance of room 437. Since Jake is the wedge, it would seem that his room, rather than 437, would be the key room where ghosts appear.

STYLE: Overall style is generally good, if not always memorable. As noted, transitions between scenes are particularly well done. Dialogue is generally good, albeit some of the dialect of the local folks is stereotypical and not particularly authentic (“I’ll dern better try”); a favorite example of good dialogue: “Cancer. You’re a brave little boy.” “I have to be. I’m all my mom has left.”

The author also does a good job showing rather than telling—this is not always done, but overall we learn that people are afraid or concerned through their actions or gestures, rather than being bluntly told how they feel. An example of not doing this: “Sally GASPS, becomes upset.” The gasp is a very weak way to

show feeling, and the “becomes upset” is an example of telling; what does becoming upset look like?

The most noticeable stylistic error is that the language used to describe scares is often flat. The author has done a great job in trying to create uniquely visual apparitions; for the most part he has succeeded. But the language used to describe each appearance could be more thrilling. “Harold Ambrose appears suddenly behind the desk. His skin is gone. He’s a walking model of the muscular system. He is in agonizing pain.” This is not terrible, but it could be far more distinctive and exciting. Let’s really feel him, inches from Anne, fluids coursing through his hideously exposed veins, his labored breath practically steaming on her neck, his eyeballs bursting with that agonizing pain.

This is a spec script, so there is no justification for giving camera direction. The author frequently instructs POVs and close-ups, etc. There is not a single instance in this screenplay where the same information could be conveyed without such direction. Every director will know how to frame or compose his shots if the author simply tells his story. For example:

4TH FLOOR HALLWAY

Kevin opens the stairwell door and looks in.

KEVIN POV

The wraiths swirl and fly through the stairwell.

BACK TO SCENE

Kevin shuts the door and looks at Sally.

This could be written:

4TH FLOOR HALLWAY

Kevin opens the door and looks at the:

BOTTOM OF THE STAIRWELL

Wraiths swirl through the air.

4TH FLOOR HALLWAY

Kevin shuts the door and looks at Sally.

CONCLUSION: The author clearly has a firm grasp on the essentials of screenwriting. The basic premise is good, the story has fantastic pace, and the

screenplay fulfills all the structural requirements for a commercially viable film. But to make the entire story distinctive, we need to go much deeper into the person of Anne.

Good luck!



	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Very Good</u>	<u>Good</u>	<u>So-So</u>	<u>Not Good</u>
Artistically			X		
Commercial			X		
Premise		X			
Story			X		
Main Characters				X	
Minor Characters				X	
Dialogue			X		
Visual Elements			X		
Title			X		

SCRIPT: PASS
WRITER: PASS