

*-The Script Department-*  
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Type of Material:	Script	Title:	CONFIDENTIAL
Number of Pages:	121	Author:	CONFIDENTIAL
Coverage type:	Basic Plus	Circa:	Present day/18 <sup>th</sup> century
Payment type:		Location:	Pennsylvania
Coverage Date:		Genre:	Horror
Analyst:			

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**LOG LINE:** CONFIDENTIAL

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	Excellent	Good	Needs Work	Rethink
Idea			X	
Overall execution			X	
Narrative/Structure			X	
Characters/Dialogue			X	
Effective Scene work			X	
Professional appearance: grammar, spelling, typos		X		
Commercial potential			X	
Readiness for Market			X	

Scouting Recommendation:	
Yes	
Not at this time	X

**COMMENTS:**

Michael, this script has an interesting idea: that a curse put on a family hundreds of years ago could somehow surface in the memory of a modern descendant and unfold a mystery – or feud – that is still active today. The script has a number of issues that prevent it from realizing its potential. They are, in order of importance: genre confusion, premise confusion, narrative/structure, scene work/action lines, character/dialogue and theme. These areas all need work. If you re-examine the logline above, you'll notice that it doesn't entirely make sense. That is because the premise you have executed on these pages confuses as well. Starting from the top of this list, let's look at each problematic element:

**Premise and Genre:**

It is unclear in this script who the main character is. By way of deduction, we must presume Sarah, except that substantial pages in the script are set in the 18th century, so we wonder if our main character is then Hannah. You must decide who the story is about, primarily. The script goes from a modern murder mystery to period horror piece, a genre and tonal shift that is not servicing the story. Is the curse really active? Or is this a family feud? You must iron out the premise and nail down your

trajectory here. Here are the questions you must ask yourself: What is the genre? Horror? Mystery? Period drama? Who is the main character? Which period of time do you wish to dwell in? Does the book come alive as we move through it? What are the rules and qualities of the book? How could Sarah's father have written a "novel" that is a family history, verbatim, even in moments when nobody was there (such as Hannah's rape)? Early in the script, you say that Sarah will be studying whether collective familial memories can be passed down. If this is the center of your story, you need to set it up better and pay it off better. In the end, Jarred seems just plumb crazy. Is he crazy or are these ancestral memories taking him over? If that is true, then it must also be true of the Vaughns and of Olive and of Aunt Jane. What is the jumping off point here? What are the rules for how this works? If Sarah's theory is true, then why is it that it so happens that she begins to have these dreams/memories right when her professor talks to her about doing this study? If Jarred's stalking and threatening the Keith family is a case of ancestral possession, why does he go all the way to LA to kill them? And why doesn't he kill them? He follows them around plenty – but why? A whole lot of disparate ideas and narrative impulses are here but they don't all match up or make sense. When you can answer these most fundamental of questions, you can write down your premise and use it as your Rosetta Stone for the entire script. [See premise notes in SHOCK TX coverage; there I give some specific guidelines]

## **Narrative/Structure:**

You start off in the present, then have flashbacks that get longer and longer until they take up most of the real estate in the script. This presents genre problems and also makes it difficult to ground ourselves in one period or the other. I will address scene work more specifically up ahead, but tied in with the issue of flashback is the fact that many scenes do not have enough narrative tension and do not move the story ahead. Plus they are flashbacks. Each scene must be justified, and if you are dead set on changing periods back and forth, you have to make the flashbacks, in particular, pretty damn exciting. Perhaps brief, vivid, nightmarish moments viewed in explosive vignettes. Seeing the family making dinner, going to church, etc. is not only not compelling but does not justify existing as flashback at all. As far as structure, you have some issues to deal with there as well. On page one, you go to the trouble of introducing Troy, a figure we will not see again until almost the end of the script. Starting on him, then moving quickly away – far away – confuses. What is the "inciting incident" of the script? Normally it would come page 10-ish. On page 11, Sarah introduces her DNA-memory idea to her students. How does this set things in motion for Sarah? Remember, the "inciting incident" is the thing that sets off a whole chain of events. There is no ignoring it, there is no going back. We know that Sarah's father died two years ago. Why so long ago? Why is the inciting incident not this shocking murder? Just a thought. The page 30 event is generally what kicks us into the second act. Here, we have the scene in which Hannah meets Abraham. Okay, that can work. Except that the scene is far too long and the meeting is uneventful. This should be where the rape is. Place events so that they arrive late, dramatically and with impact. Watching Hannah's life pre-rape is not very compelling and you can set up the Quaker lifestyle, etc. in seconds, not pages. Your premise, as above, is your jumping off point so that you can gain clarity – then once you get that ironed out to a streamlined idea with a trajectory, you can use your structure to deliver these huge moments so that tension builds steadily. You need your page 10 inciting incident, you need a page 30 WOW moment to launch the second act, you need a midpoint on page 50 or so that is a HUGE REVERSAL for your main character and you need a page 90 CLIFFHANGER so that we jump to page 91 and so forth to see how the hell our main character will find safety or the solution as the case may be. I would suggest escalating Hannah's story right alongside the escalation of Sarah's story, for example. So that there is an inciting incident for Sarah that coincides with Hannah's and so forth. This is a creative decision on your part – but as is, your structure is too flat to sustain a dramatic narrative. Your last few pages in the smoke room are the beginnings of an understanding of ratcheting up action for maximum tension, so you're on the right track there; it's just that we don't understand why any of it

is happening. But that falls under premise/genre, as above, and will straighten out when your premise is nailed down.

## **Scene Work/Action Lines:**

This is an area that needs significant work. Let's take action lines first, as they are extremely problematic throughout the script. They slowed me down terribly and would, unfortunately, get your script tossed by page two if it were at a production company. The most fundamental truth about action lines is that the viewer does not see the words in them. I know that sounds silly but let me give you an example on page eight: "This remark pisses Sarah off, considering her personal sacrifice since her mother died eight years earlier." Now, the audience didn't read that. All they saw was Joney say something mouthy and Sarah say she's going to quit smoking. In the line where Joney says that Sarah should worry she'll turn out like mom, *now* we get some kind of hint about their mom. But as far as we know, mom is alive in the bathtub right now. How do we know she's dead? We don't. Or that it's been eight years? We don't. That would have to be intimated in dialogue. Not hit over the head: "Sarah: Mom's been dead eight years and I'm tired of taking care of you." But maybe something more like "Look, ever since mom died, it's been tough on me." Okay now we know mom is dead. How long has she been dead – well, we can work that into the dialogue in another, adjacent scene. It's not important right now. Over and over, throughout the script (and I scribbled on the pages) action lines make statements without the characters enacting the fact. You tell us that Mark used to be involved with Sarah – in an action line. This is a cardinal no-no and really slams the brakes on the whole script. How about if we learn that they used to be involved thru their actions and dialogue? He kisses her. She shrinks back. He likes her perfume, he cups the small of her back – give him familiar gestures or familiar facts about her (the kind of perfume she wears, her favorite restaurant – these things connote familiarity). So remember, action lines do not ever forward the story – they can't – they are just what they say they are – action lines. Sarah spanks her brother. Jaime picks his nose. Joney cannonballs into the pool. But of course, actions sometimes speak louder than words. In scripts – they always speak louder than words.

In terms of scene work, even a very very significant scene should never last more than four pages TOPS. Look at each scene in DISOWNED AND DISMEMBERED for whether it is absolutely necessary and if so ask yourself this: How is the scene moving the story forward? What is the objective of the main character in the scene? Have you jumped in as late as possible? Have you jumped out just a bit early? One good screenwriting exercise is to go in and cut out the first couple of lines of dialogue in a scene and the last couple as well. See what's left. And don't let your scenes go on for more than a page or two and four max if the scene is absolutely pivotal. In this script, we find overlong scenes with little payoff over and over. In the beginning of the script when Joney and Jaime are in the pool the scene goes on for fully four-and-a-half pages and the only information that we get is: Sarah is over-parenting her siblings. Sarah should quit smoking. Sarah has memories of her father. This is not enough information to justify a scene this long, much less the scene itself. Cut it way way back. Choose words that are "juicier," i.e., more evocative so that you have to use fewer words. Look for "mosaic" work – scenes in which action lines interrupt lines of dialogue. Page 38 is but one example of too many. Keep your scenes clean, short, to the point and evocative as possible. Deliver information about the plot and the characters. Make sure each scene is absolutely necessary to move the story forward. Be ruthless.

## **Character/Dialogue:**

Each significant character in the script needs to have an arc. I am going to assume that Sarah is the main character. How does Sarah change by the end of the story? Why does the story start precisely when it does for Sarah? What is it that Sarah has sacrificed in order to come to the story's

conclusion? What is her “flaw” as a human being as the script starts? From the perspective of the read, Sarah has no visible arc; she just survives not being machete’d up. This is not good enough. How does she come to terms with her father’s death, with her identity as a human being, with her relationship with Mark, with her professional life, with her relationship with her siblings? These questions all need to be answered and to answer them, you need to identify a central flaw that Sarah has. It is the overcoming of this flaw that will radiate out into all of the above questions and relationships for Sarah.

Joney and Jaime do not earn their real estate on the pages. They are ancillary and we don’t get to know them beyond slightly spoiled brats. There are opportunities here to flesh them out and give them more active roles emotionally. Or – they may not be necessary. It seems as if the story revolves around Sarah and Hannah, so what is the function of Joney and Jaime, aside from set dressing? From a creative standpoint, they are not adding value to the story right now. You may find a way to do this. Similarly, Mark is a tabula rasa. He’s cute, he works at the university and....what else? He wants to marry Sarah. Okay. What else? Is he really necessary to the story? Does he pull his weight?

Your antagonist is not clearly defined. The antag here is Jarred, I am assuming. We see him early on and seemingly following Sarah but his agenda is unclear. Antagonists do not change, generally. They have a goal and they will do anything to achieve that goal. You have the beginnings of that in Jarred but he’s not present consistently enough to be a full fledged antagonist. He wants Sarah not to besmirch his family name. Okay. And he shows up in LA because...why? Is he supernatural? Is he crazy? How did he know that Sarah was reading the book her father wrote? Why does he follow Sarah around? Why does he attack Joney at the nightclub? For what purpose? Did he kill Sarah’s dad? Where? When? Why do we not see that?

Dialogue throughout is serviceable but not spectacular. At times, in fact, it’s so obtuse I got completely confused as to what the characters were taking about. Sometimes it’s helpful to write dialogue absolutely on the nose and then go back and soften it. Ask yourself what each character wants in the scene at hand. Dialogue reveals so much about a character. Jaime and Joney sound interchangeable, they are so similar in sound and tone. Sarah is the most fully realized character and her dialogue generally reflects that but even she (as above) has a long way to go.

## **Theme:**

Theme is that elusive quality every script must have – meaning, what was the script really about? That it’s bad to dismember people? We know you have something much deeper in mind than that but it’s not jumping out right now. Theme is expressed on every page, through every character in every scene. Everything connects, thematically. Why did you choose that Sarah is working on a doctorate, for example? Maybe she works at the zoo. Maybe she is a manicurist. What job or occupation thematically lends itself to this idea that your very genes can overcome you? Maybe she’s a runway model, a person who puts on a certain face and personality for a part of each day when they are not really themselves. Maybe she’s an actress and ditto. A student going for her doctorate can be just fine; it gives you a reason to explore the genealogy, but you must decide what the theme is. How is everything related, in other words? What are you saying that nobody has ever said before? Sometimes when people think about theme, they think things like: True love will out. Or - beauty is on the inside. Or - we don’t have to grow up to be like our parents. These are not themes, they are truisms. Sometimes you can think about theme in the form of a question. So say for this script, the question might be: Does heritage control your fate? Now you are starting to go into an interesting area. If that is in fact your theme, how can it be expressed on every page, through every character in every scene? How does everything connect and radiate from that theme?

## Page Notes:

Pg 2: Description of TALL DARK MAN should not include his other visages; let us figure that out.

Pg 4: Joney's attack: she seems way too casual about it. This moment is not working in a major way. Scene work and action lines will help.

Pg 5: Sarah runs to the end of the driveway....sounds like she just ran down the driveway and that's it.

Pg 7: Sarah enters and has heard their conversation. Kill this. Just have her dialogue. Now we know she heard it. See?

Pg 10: Mark, once romantically involved with Sarah...this does not belong in a parenthetical and as above should be intimated in his words and actions, not an action line.

Pg 11: Every guy in the class is in love with her...same note. SHOW it don't SAY it. Are they staring? Drooling? What do you mean they are in love with her?

Pg 12: Classroom scene is way too long and cluttered. The cell phone/money thing is not necessary. It does not move the story forward and is not particularly illustrative of Sarah's character, either. Lose it or get a "two-fer" for it. Everything in every scene has to matter.

Pg 14: No need to keep repeating Sarah's name three times in an action line.

Pg 15: Description of Sarah's bedroom: see earlier notes about action lines. She loves music, huh? How do we know this? Just tell us she has a huge CD collection. Show us a poster. A framed Rolling Stone cover. SHOW IT DON'T SAY IT.

Pg 16: Why does Sarah run into her parents' bedroom and start to pack it up? What caused this sudden emotional moment? Her character is so thinly developed here that the moment loses significance.

Pg 19: (And on pg 1, in the V.O.) Please, please – dismemberment would of course cause horrible blood loss. You can't die of dismemberment and blood loss – it's redundant. If you are dismembered, you pretty much die. It's almost funny and it shouldn't be, it should be horrifying. Also, we see a long list of other Keith's who were dismembered but never hear about the circumstances. Is this a horror movie? In any event, what the heck happened there? We can't skip over that juicy fact. Give us the details! Make it matter!

Pg 23: Re: action lines: Abraham Buxton is disowned, huh? How do we know that as he stands there?

Pg 29: Why is Joney making all these presumptions about Sarah's trip back east? Unclear, confusing.

Pg 31: Again, can't introduce Dorthea as Olive in the same action line on the same page. We haven't yet met Olive so don't bring her into it here. This is very confusing.

Pg 33: All three lie down and fall asleep. Wow, that was quick. Can you use this moment as an opportunity to show us more texture of place? Is it hot? Are they in the shade? The sun? Why does this moment matter?

Pg 34: All these introductions happen too fast and too pell mell. The characters are here and evermore a total blur. Slow down, probably lose a few of them, honestly, and make each unique enough that we will remember them. Who is really important to introduce here? Ella is. Also, just a quibble but neither Ella nor Christopher sound like names of the era. Wouldn't they be more likely John and Chastity or something more biblical or puritanical?

Pg 44: We do not understand Abraham. Why does he rape Hannah? Is he crazy? Possessed? What did he do in the other town that got him disowned? This moment comes out of nowhere and just makes no sense. It needs context and character work.

Pg 48: Ella's shame in this moment is not coming across at all. Have you seen THE CRUCIBLE?

Pg 53: Who the heck is Evelyn Wood? What does that mean? Don't understand.

Pg 55: It seems like Hannah's been in bed for weeks. Has she? Indicate time here.

Pg 57: A squall is a storm. Or a baby can squall. Women do not squall. They might weep loudly. They might "keen" or "wail" but squall does not work here.

Pg 62: Whose movie is this? The 1720s are taking over the modern story. Which era is it set in? I would be hard-pressed to describe this story to an exec.

Pg 64: Because it is only later that Christopher saying he wants to leave the Friends makes sense, that tells you the pages up until this point have not worked. The rape and the Friends seem like two different things and we don't follow the story line here.

Pg 65: The poster getting older as a way to indicate time passing is not working. Why not just cut to a harvest festival and some person puts a sign for the festival up over it? Bada bing, bada boom and you'd give us some flavor of the Quakers and their rituals and celebrations.

Pg 67: For real this would happen. Again, who's story is this? If your answer is Sarah AND Hannah's because they are the same person, you must explain how that can be. Is Sarah reincarnated? If she's "remembering" her genetic past, logically why this memory not say the memory of a peat moss harvest in Ireland in 1612? You must sort out this logic in a really big way.

Pg 74: How can we say in an action line that Hannah is in a coma? That is a medical term. Keep it real, keep it in the moment of understanding for the people in the room. She's unresponsive is fine.

Pg 75: Medically could be true but I absolutely do not buy that this hematoma festered for five years. Compression of events can be your best friend here. Why wait five years to kill her off? Wouldn't the whole rape thing be more horrible if she died in childbirth and the baby was deformed? I mean, that's extreme but you need to compress events and give them more narrative tension. Plus believability. This buy is simply too big.

Pg 76: Major logic question. So dad wrote this book about the family history? Who wrote it? If anyone wrote it at all, how can stuff have happened that no one was around to record? Is it truth or fiction? What is the deal with this book? Thoroughly confusing. You must sort out the book. How can the rape scene with Abraham be accurate, in other words? We know Hannah dies later. We know Abraham wouldn't record that event. Whose POV is the book? How does that work, logically?

Pg 80: Abraham's second cousin. How do we know this in an action line? Please don't have her say "Well, hello, second cousin!" Find a clever way to tell us this information. "Greetings, cousin," may be fine. Find a way.

Pg 81: So this is another huge buy, that a gypsy can enact a curse. So you are saying that magic is real? Okay, so let's go there. Wouldn't she need a hair or article of clothing? This moment does not work; it feels convenient and dropped into place as a device. Which it is. Also, 250 pounds, as I note on the page, was, at that time, probably worth what we'd think of as \$20,000 dollars. How on earth can Abraham afford that? Don't buy it. Plus, the cost is not important, the big buy you have to convince people of is this curse. That one is tricky.

Pg 81: Do not use supers to tell us what the date is. This is lazy, ineffective and generally not done. Find another way to indicate time has passed. It's not that hard.

Pg 82: You have robbed us of a significant scene!! Christopher telling his grandson exactly what the deal is with his father!! Why just smooth that over? Scripts are not life – they are life's most intense moments. So be intense!

Pg 83: Where has Jarred been this whole time? His appearance looks and feels coincidental in the extreme.

Pg 86: "Proprietress" is not a description. How old is she? Blonde? Redhead? Fat? Thin? Give us a proper description here. Jobs are generally not going to be in that description.

Pg 88: Who the heck is Olive? Totally confused.

Pg 91: So Olive is Dorthea? How? Why? You've lost me but good by now.

## **In Summary**

You have potentially a very interesting idea but the execution is not doing it any favors. Study these notes carefully and first thing – revisit that premise and revisit it good. Read produced scripts. Think about what it was, exactly, that made you want to write this story. Then rewrite. And rewrite again. And again. It's tough being a writer! M. Night Shyamalan said that it wasn't until the fifth draft of THE SIXTH SENSE that he realized that the Bruce Willis character should be dead! Isn't that amazing? So maybe there is something with this script that hasn't quite risen to the surface for you

yet. Have fun discovering what it is! This is a unique idea, it really is. Whip it into shape and good luck!