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1/31/2014

Title: THE INNOCENT

Logline: After a jilted employee murders his boss' husband and forces him to choose between his two children, a man and his daughter are haunted by the vengeful spirit of his angry son.

Writer: Barry Jay Stich

Reader: AG

Genre: Horror

Pages: 81

Positive elements in this screenplay:

Featuring extraordinarily strong scare sequences and a ruthlessly efficient sense of mounting dread, THE INNOCENT fits in with the currently popular horror subgenre of haunting films like THE CONJURING. There are legitimately terrifying sequences throughout the piece. The broad character arc of the protagonist could attract top talent to the role. The writing in the piece is efficient and smart, and the project could be produced for a reasonable price. Formatting is clear and easy to follow, and the sense of escalating claustrophobia gets under the reader's skin. The present draft feels like an excellent first draft.

Areas that need improvement:

On a conceptual level, THE INNOCENT's strength could also be a liability: it doesn't add anything new to the haunting genre and feels a bit paint-by-numbers. There are some choppy, inconsistent moments in Rich's character development that make the ending seem rushed. Without many twists and turns in the action, the present draft feels a bit one-note. Several structural elements feel uneven: the first act feels overly long despite the brevity of the script, and the third act feels overheated and rushed. There are a number of typos and presentational irregularities that stand out and slow the pace of the read.

Scores are 1-10 (10 being highest)

Concept: 6

Though in no way a reinvention of the wheel, the haunting story at the core of THE INNOCENT is excellently positioned for the contemporary marketplace. "Haunted house movies" – in the most broadly defined sense – are particularly hot right now because of the success of films like THE CONJURING, the HAUNTING IN... series, and the INSIDIOUS films. This movie fits very well into this oeuvre, and could grab the attention of both talent and production/development executives.

Presentation: 6

THE INNOCENT is a well-written screenplay of professional quality. There are only a handful of mechanical formatting errors and virtually no problems in the grammar. The action is easy to follow and dialogue is clear.

The use of the “CUT TO:” transition is unnecessary in contemporary screenwriting. Simply going from one slugline to another implies a cut unless otherwise stated (a “FADE OUT,” “DISSOLVE TO:” or other unique transition). CUT TOs only take up space and are out of the norm enough in the current environment that they call attention to themselves.

Be mindful of typos when revising the script. It isn't that there are many, but they are frequent enough that I found myself occasionally pulled out of the action of the script by their presence. They are mostly subtle typographical errors along the lines of “CONTINUOS” instead of “CONTINUOUS” (as at the top of pg. 58).

You often refer to Cole and Bryan as “the boys” in the text of the action descriptions. When you have a short scene – such as INT. HALLWAY – CONTINUOUS on pg. 60 – make sure you state both their names in the action text at the top of the description. It's a small production issue, but when scheduling the shoot a line producer will very often only schedule the named characters for a given day. It would be easy in this scene and others to only have the speaking character (Bryan, here) on the set. Naming the characters necessary will alleviate the problem.

Structure: 5

In a purely mechanical sense, it feels like Stephanie's “kidnapping” and the arrival of Cole and Bryan comes about ten pages too late. It feels like this moment – Rich opening the closet door and discovering that his daughter is missing, objectively confirming the existence of the supernatural – should be the spin into the second act and occur somewhere around pp. 25-30. Cole and Bryan should show up in the text on pg. 30 at the latest. They are pivotal characters in the script, especially considering the expository weight they carry. The brothers need to show up earlier so we can define the rules of the supernatural elements of the script.

The way the scares escalate through the body of the script is outstanding. Starting with things like the traditional poltergeist movie – pictures falling from shelves and the like – and moving steadily, inextricably forward to long, epileptic tongue attacks and the protagonist coming to his unwilling murder is a thing of beauty. I found myself cringing as a reader, and that is nothing but a good thing.

All of that noted, the piece goes off the rails a bit once the ghost hunters show up. The sense of escalation slows and the approach to discovering the true nature of the ghosts takes a turn to the

inept. Many of the techniques they use – the cussing/praying combo particularly – feel particularly redundant and familiar in light of THE CONJURING.

Plot: 5

A number of elements feel awkward and inorganic. Rich goes right back to work almost immediately; he and Stephanie continue to live in the house where the brutal, horrific murder of their loved ones took place; Rich begins making Stephanie sleep in her own room alone very quickly. Even the fact that Daniel's angry spirit would follow Rich and Stephanie wherever they went doesn't change the fact that it seems inconceivable that they wouldn't immediately move away from the home where Daniel and Todd died. All of this feels highly improbable and strains the suspension of disbelief to the breaking point.

“They died because of you.” When I read that text the hairs on the back of my neck literally stood up. There are truly bone chilling scares throughout THE INNOCENT. From the impotent horror of the decision Rich has to make as his children are held before him to that frightening text message to the awesome body horror of Bob's ghost (or rather, Daniel's projection of him) choking Rich with his tongue, these are moments that stick with the reader long after he puts aside the script.

I wonder if we don't see a bit too much of Daniel's ghost too early. In the scene when Rich awakens in Stephanie's room after reading “The Grinch,” we see the ghost standing behind Rich in the chair when he opens his eyes. The book falls and Rich notices Mary Wilkers with her missing arm. Because we see Daniel in the present and have seen his spirit several times prior to this, there no real sense of mystery to the scene. If exactly the same creepy events occurred – the text, the broken photo, etc. – without us knowing so clearly that it was Daniel's hateful spirit, it feels like you could play a more interesting game with the plot. We never *really* wonder if Sarah is right in her assertion that Rich is suffering from PTSD because we – the audience – *know* Daniel's ghost is involved.

If you played with the ambiguity of the situation a bit more, there are a number of intriguing plot elements that you could exploit. Is Rich really being driven mad by his horrific guilt? If it's a ghost, is it Daniel or Bob (who both have reasons to torment the protagonists)? When Stephanie says Daniel tells her things (like that Rich is romantically interested in Sarah), is it true or is the child making things up? In revising the script, think about how each of the scare sequences would play if you were less definitive in locating Daniel's ghost in the scene through the early part of the script and held the ultimate reveal back until Stephanie sees his wounded ghost on pg. 41.

It feels as though there are some beats missing between Stephanie's disappearance and Rich bringing in Cole and Bryan to spearhead her rescue. His daughter disappears into a magical

closet and Rich never calls the police? This could be a good moment to further emphasize the relationships with Sarah and/or Nicole. As currently written, it just feels like Rich skips half a dozen steps from ripping out the back of the closet's wall to mass interrogations when the text doesn't tell us that is necessary.

When Bryan tells Rich that because Daniel is a spirit, he can torment but "can't do anything about it," this flies in the face of what we have seen. Daniel managed to take Stephanie into – for lack of a better expression – another dimension. He throws physical items around. It's very clear from the action that we've seen up to this point that Daniel can physically impact the real world so this line of reasoning doesn't make sense.

There's an awkward moment on pg. 48 when Bryn tells Rich that he and Cole need his trust and Rich immediately responds that he does. Trust is earned, and Cole & Byan have not.

The larger issue this raises is one of plausibility. It's not that you can't do anything you want with the rules of the supernatural in the world you're creating in THE INNOCENT – you absolutely can. The caveat, though, is that for the piece to work as a whole, you need to make sure that whatever rules there are prove to be consistent.

It's a ruse on Bryan's part, but when he tells Daniel's ghost that Rich should have let Daniel and Stephanie both die (pg. 58), there is a truly horrific moment. My stomach dropped when I read the line and I got a real sense that both Bryan was much more villainous than anticipated and that the choice of a parent in that situation had no good answer. It turns out that Bryan reveals the truth to Rich on the very next page (59), almost immediately undercutting the moment. I wonder if there's not some way for you to place some material *between* Bryan's plot and his reveal that it's a fiction in order to maintain the tension of the scene for a while longer. It feels like the moment pays off too quickly.

Along the same lines, let the moment when Bryan tells Cole that there hasn't been blood before (pg. 60) breathe a bit longer. This is the first moment of vulnerability you've given the boys. Let the audience feel their apprehension, especially since they're going to back out of the case soon.

Given how far Rich goes in his quest to rid himself of Daniel's wrath, this is doubly troubling. The scene when Rich murders Wayne is shocking and scary as it stands, but it doesn't feel as though Rich has been put through the ringer enough to warrant becoming a murderer yet. If he is already predisposed toward violence, we should have seen that in subtle ways. Maybe he's less conflicted and more of a cruel jerk when firing Bob initially; maybe he has more of a temper with Stephanie. Conversely, perhaps Rich is pushed further and becomes crazier through Daniel's manipulations. Either way, it doesn't feel like the moment when he kills Wayne is earned by what we've seen up to this point.

Examining the tropes of contemporary ghost stories, it doesn't feel like there's enough spin on the end of *THE INNOCENT*. Stephanie simply leaves with Nicole after Daniel manipulates Rich into killing himself and the movie ends. I think the biggest problem is that Rich never ends up making the choice. Because Daniel possesses him when he chokes Stephanie and then does it again in the run-up to hanging himself, our protagonist doesn't have any agency of his own. One possible solution would be for Daniel to somehow force Rich to choose in a more visceral way: does he murder Stephanie or commit suicide? As currently written, he *thinks* he killed Stephanie and is then possessed again before killing himself – Daniel has all the power. For the ending to work effectively, Rich needs to make the decision consciously.

Characters: 5

Rich displays a curious lack of amazement at the supernatural events he sees. He's almost blasé at the fact that his daughter literally disappears into a closet and is subsequently returned. Later in the script, his reactions continue to be counterintuitive. For example, when he's with Stephanie and she tells him that Daniel wants him to leave the room as it starts to shake, he simply backs out (pg. 64). It feels like any father would sweep his child up in his arms to whisk her away. As a cumulative matter, his series of cowardly decisions make it very hard to sympathize with the man who is essentially the protagonist of the entire film. This is Rich's descent-into-madness – let us feel his fall from sanity.

I feel like Nicole's relationship with the family needs to be further developed. Given what we know from the text, it seems like she should just get the hell out of Dodge as soon as Rich returns home on pg. 74. Instead, she says that Rich and Stephanie (and by extension, Todd and Daniel) are like her other family. Because we haven't actually witnessed the depth of this relationship, it's difficult to believe in the character here which calls the remainder of the third act and the end of the movie into question.

The supporting characters all come in a bit flat. This is particularly problematic with Cole and Bryan, who we never get to go. One prays, the other insults, and otherwise, Rich is left without any kind of a rudder. I'd like to see them read more clearly as individuals in the next draft. The crew who come to help the family in *POLTERGEIST* is wildly unique – we should feel that way about Cole & Bryan.

Sarah seems underdeveloped. It's clear that Daniel has a chip on his shoulder about the woman his father works with, but beyond some benign flirtation we don't see the source of the aggression. When Daniel tells Stephanie that Rich has designs on Sarah, we should have more of a sense of what their relationship is. There should also be some kind of payoff to Rich and Sarah's relationship – does Rich have feelings for her? What are her designs on him? This feels like an area you can dig into more.

Pacing: 5

The pace of THE INNOCENT works well as currently written, but it never excels. Small problems like the overlong first act – Cole and Bryan’s later arrival, described above – and a series of missing facts that could provide us with further wisdom as to the characters and their motivations. At the end of the day, the action of this script moves inconsistently. Sometimes it feels like we’re moving as a breathless rush, while there are also periods where the script meanders. In the next pass, one thing to focus on is making sure that the script’s pace escalates more consistently.

Dialogue: 5

While generally competent, the dialogue is sometimes very on the nose and expository. It lacks subtlety. After the scare with Sarah’s text, Rich essentially repeats the line to her and they talk about post-traumatic guilt. There’s no nuance in the text – the characters go right to the core of the issue without and sense hesitancy. That Sarah almost immediately asks, “You okay otherwise?” is really befuddling. This is a close colleague who just told her he’s having what amount to visual hallucinations, and she all but glosses over the issue. The exchange doesn’t have any sense of emotional authenticity.

A corollary of the notes above about characters feeling underdeveloped, there’s no real sense of individuality in the way people speak to each other. The way they speak is efficient in relating plot points, but there’s no real sense the Rich speaks any differently from Bryan. It’s not that you need crazy accents or colloquialism, but people have a certain rhythm to the way they speak.

Theme: 7

The ethical decision that serves as the source of THE INNOCENT’s narrative strength is profoundly disturbing and excellently drawn. The notion of having to choose between your children will grab the throat of any parent reading this script (or watching the film), and the horrific guilt it engenders is universal in its strength. This is a movie about a haunting, but in a lot of ways the haunting isn’t necessary – it’s the emotional impact upon the characters that is front and center in this screenplay.

Tone: 8

Arguably the best aspect of the script, the world THE INNOCENT exists within is fully realized. This is an excellent limited-location thriller. The house feels like a whole universe, but as the action unfolds, it almost contracts in a physical way around Stephanie and Rich. There’s a constant sense of escalating tension here that serves the script well. As a reader, I believed in the

world of this script – it drew me in and I felt like a part of the action instead of a disinterested observer.

Commercial Potential: 5

Though there are several problems with the script outlined above, it nonetheless has even odds of finding a home with a studio or producer. The scares in the text of THE INNOCENT are so profoundly affecting that it is easy to imagine that the right development executive would accept the project for future development based on the power of the script alone. Another pass focusing on structure and other shakier elements could make THE INNOCENT a sure thing.

Advice for executives would be:

RECOMMEND

CONSIDER

PASS_

Additional suggestions / ways to improve this project:

In the present draft, THE INNOCENT is one of those scripts that is right on the line between pass and consider. There are a number of problems with the piece: plot holes, structural elements, and all the rest. All of that noted, though, this is already an exceptionally strong first draft with even odds on getting picked up for further development by a reputable production company or studio. A careful revision focused on the mechanical problems above could push this script over the top.