

THE SURGEON'S CURSE

SCREENPLAY

DOUGLAS VOLK

FADE IN:

EXT. A BUSY COUNTY FAIR — NIGHT

We are wandering through a crowded summertime fairgrounds. A neon-flashing rollercoaster thunders through the sky. Carnival barkers shout at the strolling crowds and a menacing fire-eater spits blue flame.

The sound track plays Al Green's classic 1972 soul hit: *"Let's Stay Together."* *I'm so in love with you . . . whatever you want me to do is all right with me. 'Cause you make me feel so brand new . . . and I want to spend my life with you.*

We are following two beautiful young people through the swirling crowds. He is tall and handsome, blue-eyed and strong-jawed. The breeze ripples through his lovely companion's soft, blonde hair. But now she shrieks suddenly — Santuzzi the Fire-Eater has just spat a mouthful of blue flame at her! She hugs him . . . shivers a little.

YOUNG WOMAN

That was close, Alan! I'm scared!

ALAN

Don't worry, honey — I've got you!

She's hanging onto him as they approach an

illuminated ice cream stand, The Big Lick. The stand features a huge red tongue licking at a vanilla ice cream cone.

ALAN

What'll it be, sweetie? Strawberry, vanilla or chocolate chip?

YOUNG WOMAN

(beaming happily at him; full of love) You decide!

The two of them approach the stand, where an elderly woman in a white apron and an older man in a red paper hat, marked BIG LICK, are making ice cream treats. Suddenly, however, the old woman is glaring angrily . . . and pointing at Alan's date, with hatred now boiling in her eyes. Amazed, the younger woman recoils with alarm.

YOUNG WOMAN

What is it, ma'am? Is something wrong?

OLD WOMAN

(sneering viciously) What's wrong here is YOU, bitch!

YOUNG WOMAN

(stunned by the attack, instantly terrified) Me? Me? What did I do wrong?

OLD WOMAN

(utterly enraged) Bitch like you doesn't deserve to live!

Badly frightened, the YOUNG WOMAN turns to Alan for comfort . . . and discovers that he's gone. He's nowhere in sight! Her eyes widen with panic - and when she looks back at the ice cream stand, she's amazed to see the OLD WOMAN throwing her apron on the floor and hurrying toward the door.

OLD WOMAN

(Yelling to her partner) That's her, all right. That's HER, Elmer - the dirty cunt I was telling you about! Let's go git her!

Now Elmer grabs the nearest knife from the counter and follows the OLD WOMAN through the door. He's a hideous-looking and obviously senile figure, with an ugly purple growth (a goiter?) hanging from his chin. He shouts at his partner as he runs.

ELMER

I'm gonna git her, Edna - I gonna cut her guts out!

YOUNG WOMAN

(amazed, horrified) No, please!

She turns and begins to run.

EDNA

(in close pursuit, along with Elmer) Chop her to pieces, Elmer! Slash the bitch's throat!

The YOUNG WOMAN runs desperately down the fairway, then stumbles and twists her ankle. She's hobbling now . . . lurching desperately along . . . then ducking into a giant tent which carries a huge black-and-red sign: SUMMER TIME FUNHOUSE! HALL OF MIRRORS! Now she's staggering through the house of horrors. She's sobbing helplessly as she slams into a series of distorting mirrors . . . then watches a huge clown-head with a snake protruding from its mouth dart toward her.

YOUNG WOMAN

Help me! Someone . . . please - please HELP me!

Now a hand shoots out of the wall of the tent - it's ELMER's hand! He's got hold of her blouse . . . he's hanging onto it and waving the knife.

ELMER

I got her, Edna. Gonna slice her gizzard out!

But now the blouse is tearing . . . half of it is torn away, allowing the YOUNG WOMAN to escape. Screaming frantically, she exits the Hall of Mirrors and begins to run down the racetrack that circles one end of the fairgrounds. In the distance is the grandstand, crowded with people . . . if she can just get there before they catch her, she will be safe, safe! Moaning and sobbing . . . screaming from time to time . . . she manages to beat her pursuers to the grandstand - only to discover, just as she reaches safety, that ALL of the racetrack fans are exact copies of ELMER and EDNA. Now they swarm her . . . they begin to tear the rest of her clothing away . . . dozens of hands begin to feel her breasts, her groin . . . their tongues are hanging out . . . saliva is dripping onto her helpless, shuddering body.

YOUNG WOMAN

(screaming desperately, again and again) No! No!
NO!

INT. A MODERN "SLEEP LABORATORY" (FOR 1986) - NIGHT.

The sleep-research lab is full of flickering computer screens, beeping medical testing equipment, heart monitors, etc. Now the young blonde woman from the previous scene is stretched out on a lab table which has been converted to a bed. She's in the middle of a brutal nightmare, and she's terrified. Her limbs are thrashing and she's moaning and whimpering. Looming above her are three worried-looking people. They are ALIX CASSIDY the veteran sleep scientist who's directing this "sleep study" at her Atlanta-based research center; assisting RN Cindy Taylor, who's wiping perspiration from the sleeper's brow, and an attending psychiatrist, Dr. Russell Kidder, who's watching the proceedings carefully.

Superimposed on the screen: Atlanta Sleep Disorders
Center, Main Research Laboratory – May, 1986.

SLEEPING WOMAN

(opening her bloodshot eyes, awakening from her
nightmare and staring at them for a moment) You must
. . . make them . . . STOP!

ALIX CASSIDY

(bending over her sleep subject, alarmed) It's
okay, Sandra. You're awake now. It's okay, honey.

WOMAN ON BED

(not hearing Alix, eyes still huge with
terror) I'll kill you, all of you, you dirty
mother-fuckers! (now she's kicking frantically
and doing her best to sit up. Flailing, she
lands a blow with one fist on Alix's shoulder.)

CASSIDY

(struggling to hold the patient down,
while also soothing her) Sandra, hang on, it's
me. It's Alix, Sandra! Everything is okay.
You're gonna be okay!

YOUNG WOMAN ON BED

(Still crazed with fear, she isn't
listening) She's fighting to get off the bed –
and nearly succeeds, with one foot already on the
floor.) Hey, fuck you, all of you! They were
going to kill me. Don't you get it? They were
going to KILL me! Dozens of them . . . they tore
my clothes off, and they were going to cut me to
pieces!

CASSIDY

(battling to keep her on the bed, and
shouting back over one shoulder) Dr. Kidder, we
need help over here, now!

DR. KIDDER

Nodding thoughtfully, the psychiatrist holds up a hypodermic needle full of a bright blue liquid. Moving quickly, he steps forward and shoots it into one of the deranged young woman's flailing arms. Ten seconds pass, while she continues to kick and thrash. Ten more seconds, and then she gradually relaxes and sinks back into sleep.

CINDY TAYLOR

(To Alix, while shaking her head with amazement) Wow – that was a nasty one, Alix.

Now the camera returns to the sleeper's face for a few seconds. Her eyes are closed; she is smiling a little; she is once again the beautiful blonde young woman who was strolling around the country fair.

INT. ALIX'S OFFICE AT THE SLEEP LAB – NIGHT

CASSIDY is updating her sleep subject's file with a description of the nightmare she just observed. Now she looks up as DR. KIDDER walks into the room.

CASSIDY

Oh, it's you. Come on in. (He settles into a nearby chair.)

Thanks for your assistance back there in the lab, Russ. You got that sedative into her just in the nick of time. She should sleep for several hours now.

DR. KIDDER

No problem, glad to help. (He removes his heavy, black-rimmed glasses and rubs his eyes, then puts the specs back on.) I think we just got a look at how manic depression can trigger violent

nightmares.

CASSIDY

(nodding, thoughtful) Yeah, she's been having them almost every night for the past two weeks. Too bad . . . it's been pretty hard for her.

DR. KIDDER

Her post-sleep behavior is also troubling. Just now when she woke up, she seemed only half-conscious . . . almost as if her nightmare was continuing and had somehow invaded her cognitive functioning. (He sends CASSIDY a cheerful smile.) That's a real puzzle - but also very helpful for your research on the neurobiology of nightmares, I would imagine?

CASSIDY

(returning his smile) That's for sure, Russ. Although I must say, I don't think we've even scratched the surface, when it comes to understanding the links between nightmares and mental illness.

DR. KIDDER

You're right . . . which is why I'm very glad you're working on it, Alix! But speaking as her psychiatrist, I'm just hoping this patient's nightmares won't lead to another round of psychotic episodes.

CASSIDY

Same here. Still, I don't think I'm as troubled by her panic-reaction to that nightmare as you seem to be.

DR. KIDDER

(watching her carefully) Why not?

CASSIDY

(musing, reflective) Well . . . I've spent a lot of nights in this sleep lab watching people wake up from nightmares - and there's always some panic involved, even if it's only transitory. In Sandra's case, I'm not convinced her anxiety was any worse than what most people experience after a terrifying dream.

DR. KIDDER

(grinning at her as he sips his coffee) That's what I like about you, Alix - you're the eternal optimist. Anyway, please send me your latest lab observations on the patient, so I can try to weave them into her treatment.

CASSIDY

(rising from her chair, ready to leave the lab) You got it, doc - will do!

DR. KIDDER

(also rising to his feet now) So today's the big day, huh?

CASSIDY

Sure is. I'm leaving . . . leaving on a jet plane - don't know when I'll be coming back again! I'm flying out of Hartsfield at two o'clock . . . non-stop, all the way from Atlanta to Portland, Maine. Big Pine Research Center, here I come!

DR. KIDDER

(laughing good-naturedly) Alix Cassidy, you never cease to amaze me. How did you wangle this assignment, anyway? I can only imagine what it will be like - spending eight weeks of the long, hot summer at a center for paranormal research in the wilds of rural Maine. Eight weeks of paddling canoes and hiking forest trails . . . while also exploring the far frontiers of the paranormal.

(chuckling out loud) Actually, it sounds like a lot of fun - except for the paranormal part, that is. But I guess you must enjoy living on the edge of the weird and the terrifying - is that the idea?

CASSIDY

(laughing, waving him away) Come on, the paranormal isn't terrifying Russ - it's just a little different, a little stranger than your everyday reality, that's all. I guess I just like pushing the envelope a little, you know?

And I also like hanging out on the frontier of neurobiology - it's why I became a sleep researcher in the first place.

(giving him a friendly but challenging look) As for those "paranormal" aspects . . . what's wrong with venturing into the unknown a little bit?

DR. KIDDER

(smiling, teasing) I heard you're going to be giving a series of lectures on "Somnambulistic Telepathy" up there. Have I got it right?

CASSIDY

You do. (They've begun walking down a long, ceiling-lit hallway.) I've spent the past twelve years gathering data to prove my often-maligned theory that a few, strangely gifted people are able to travel into the nightmares of other sleepers . . . and now I'm finally going to get a chance to present my findings at Big Pine.

They have reached the big glass doors at the front of the Sleep Disorders Center now. After pushing on through, they stand together talking on the sidewalk.

DR. KIDDER

(still laughing and pretending to be astonished) Amazing! Will I be reading about you on the New York Times Science Page later this summer? I can see the headline now: PARANORMAL RESEARCHER CLAIMS SOME SLEEPERS CAN CONTROL NIGHTMARES OF OTHERS!

CASSIDY

(laughing, imitating old-fashioned "newsboy" on the street) Hurry, hurry, read all about it! ST is real . . . read all about it! (but then, growing more serious) Actually, there *is* a scientific basis for ST - although it hasn't made any of the major academic journals yet.

DR. KIDDER

(intrigued in spite of himself) Really?

CASSIDY

Yup. There isn't a lot of data - it's too early for that - but what we do have suggests that some dreamers undergo a kind of "biochemical cascade" during REM sleep, which is when most nightmares take place. At the level of brain cells, it's a huge eruption of electrochemical energy . . . what we call a "REM explosion," if you will.

DR. KIDDER

(totally serious now, no more joking) Very interesting, Alix, to say the least. And I really do hope you'll break some new ground on ST up there in the Maine woods. (giving her a big smile) But don't forget that I'll be around in case you run into any unexpected problems . . . or maybe just need a friend to talk on the phone with. Okay?

CASSIDY

(beaming and giving him a quick hug) Absolutely! Russ, I can't thank you enough.

INT. ALIX CASSIDY'S TINY, CLUTTERED APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sitting at her kitchen table while a teapot steams nearby, CASSIDY holds her roommate PUDDY in her arms. PUDDY is a big Maine Coon cat, fluffy-furred and gazing at his owner with huge green eyes.

CASSIDY

(stroking the purring cat gently) I hate to leave you, Puddy, but I gotta go! I just hope you understand, old pal. Don't worry . . . my friend Jan is going to take very good care of you, and I'll be back before you know it.

The steam kettle begins to whistle.

Oops . . . my tea is ready. (Setting PUDDY on the floor, she steps over to the tea kettle.)

Now the camera settles on PUDDY's face, then goes to one of the cat's green eyes. The black pupil expands. THREATENING MUSIC OVER. Now we're looking at Alix's face inside the cat's eye - and for a flashing instant, that face is distorted with fear. She's screaming in terror!

End of Screenplay Excerpt