

BANSHEE

Adapted from five short stories by Ray Bradbury

Ray Bradbury © 1985, 1988, 1951, 1951, 1962

Screenplay treatment

Joe Fordham © February 1990

A YOUNG SCREENWRITER (unshaven, 29) drives his rental car through the Celtic twilight. He is on his way to meet a white-haired old Ahab of a FILM DIRECTOR (bearded, leonine, 70s), bringing the final pages of a screenplay. He passes a distant lighthouse... a lone walking passerby... and a shuttered crofter's hut. The car pulls up at a crumbling old Irish manor house. The young man climbs out of the car and looks around at the landscape as the light is falling. Far off, he sees a single standing figure watching from a hilltop. The young man heads inside, already nervous at his first major work-for-hire assignment.

The old director has consumed more than half the contents of a large bottle of whiskey. He grills the young writer, flips through the screenplay and then tosses it aside. He wants to warm up before getting down to business. He liked the young man's published short stories, demands a story, improvised, spoken out loud, to get the juices flowing. The writer's eye is drawn to the window where a light is winking out to sea....

(1) *THE FOG HORN* (copyright 1951): The Tillamook County COASTGUARD arrives out of the fog to investigate why old McDUNN has locked himself away out on the Lonesome Bay lighthouse. The eccentric old man's only surviving relative, his daughter ALISHA, has been unable to make radio contact since her father drove off his fellow lighthouse keepers and barricaded himself in, leaving the lighthouse beacon dark with only the fog horn baying out into the Deeps.

The coastguard and Alisha sail out to the rock to find the beacon smashed, a harpoon now fastened to the observation deck, where McDunn is raving. He is convinced that a prehistoric sea serpent is returning to the rock, summoned by

the lightless fog horn. This happened once before, twenty years ago, when the keeper at the time angered the serpent and the giant beast turned its wrath on the local ferry. Many lives were lost, the old keeper one of them. McDunn knows this to be true. His own wife, Alisha's mother, was stationed on the ferry.

Alisha attempts to comfort the old man. The coastguard meanwhile attempts to rig a replacement lamp, but the serpent returns. The monster rears up, transfixed, tilting its head as the fog horn bays. Alisha tries calm McDunn, who is set on attacking the creature with his harpoon. She silences the fog horn. The serpent snaps out of its trance and attacks the lighthouse. McDunn misses his shot. The coastguard drags Alisha to the safety of the basement, but McDunn will not join them, intent on his revenge. The tower falls. A nearby fishing boat passes nearby, heading for the rocks, until its CAPTAIN hears the creature's voice call out, mourning as if for its lost mate. The fishing boat steers clear of the rocks and they do not see the monster slink back out to sea.

By morning, the fog has lifted and the lighthouse has been reduced to rubble. Alisha and the coastguard both have survived; but McDunn, like the serpent, has been lost to the ocean forever.

The director is impressed, but he asks for something different, something more original, more contemporary....

(2) *THE MARTIAN LOVE AFFAIR* (copyright 1988): SIO knew he was perhaps the last surviving Martian, alone now in the caves where his people had once hidden from the new disease from space. Living one-on-one with his native land, Sio whiles away his time carving maquettes of the rockets he has seen taking off

and landing near the busy Earthmen settlements. One day, perched on a rock while gathering water from a subterranean spring, a curious new scent drifts up to Sio from the valley. Sio investigates and finds a small abandoned cabin, once built by the men of earth for an archeological team. Music draws Sio closer, until he sees the cabin's occupant.

An earth woman, REENEE TRENT, has taken residence. She is a nightclub singer come in search of work among the colonies, in the meantime waiting for the return of her rocket pilot boyfriend, BUCK. Sio flees from the white-fleshed alien, terrified at first. He later watches her wandering past his cave. She swims in his canal, nude, later dances naked past her windows in the Martian summer night, and smokes cigarettes. Sio is fascinated, but she is oblivious to the young Martian's attentions. One night while she is sleeping, he steals into her cabin to leave her a gift, his latest wood maquette.

Reenee is disturbed to find the smooth wood rocket the next morning. She telephones her nearest neighbor, JANICE, who assures her all the Martians are dead, wiped out years ago by a mysterious plague. Passing off the carving as a relic of the previous tenants, Janice urges her friend to sleep with a loaded gun until her boyfriend Buck's return.

When Sio next returns, Reenee sees the Martian and panics, until she sees that this time he has brought a gift of food. Sio cannot speak her language and backs out as soon as Reenee drops her guard. She tastes the eats Sio's cakes, but does not mention them to Janice when her neighbor calls with news that their men folk are returning. Reenee sets out in search of Sio.

She finds the Martian ailing, now infected with the plague that he knew he would risk catching in his contact with the Earth woman. Reenee thanks him

for he gifts the only way she knows how. She sets up her music player to soothe him with song, and she dances for him.

Buck returns to the cabin and discovers Sio's carving. When Reenee returns, Buck suspects that something is wrong. Renee takes him out to the Martian's cave, not knowing Buck has brought his gun. Buck does not have a chance to use it. Sio has gone off to die, as is the Martian custom. Buck takes his woman home, baffled by her tears.

The director does not care for way out aliens and space. He prefers his stories closer to home, more personal....

(3) *THE PEDESTRIAN* (copyright 1951): LEONARD MEAD is a strange man, in many people's eyes. He does not own a television. Tonight he does not have to; his neighbors have been providing high volume comprehensive coverage of every TV station through his apartment walls. To escape their noise, Leonard gives up with his writing, puts on his sneakers and jacket, and goes out into the night of L.A. 2052.

The streets as usual are deserted; the pavements overgrown. Nobody now walks. The crime rates have fallen; people are content in their air-conditioned homes, with their air-conditioned lives. Leonard stops to enjoy the night, when a cruising COP CAR pins him in its searchlight.

Speaking from behind their blazing lights, the cops cannot understand why Leonard is out walking, why he has no TV, and why he very obviously resents answering authority. When they learn that he is a writer, they invite him to step into their car. Leonard protests, but he has no choice, the cop car is armed.

A passenger door pops open. Leonard approaches the car and peers inside. There is no driver, just lights and machinery. A voice orders him to sit. He complies and the door closes automatically. They drive off through the night until they arrive at the police station

It s unlike any station Leonard has ever seen. More machines and voices instruct and then threaten him if he disobeys. Interrogation follows, but Leonard will not continue. He wants to see a lawyer. A console is provided, an automated legal representative. Leonard cannot stand it any longer. What crime has he committed? A voice explains that he has been tagged for entry into the Psychiatric Center for Research on Regressive Tendencies. They direct him to a waiting room, where he sits and sees a TV has been provided.

The old director laughs, now accusing the writer of self-pity. 'I want to see some balls, man! Let's have some meat and bone!'....

(4) *TYRANNOSAURUS REX* (copyright 1962): Dinosaurs had been HARRY RAYMOND's bread and butter since his first garage-built creations aped the great god Kong. Now aged twenty-five, he has graduated to latex and aluminum thunder lizards that blunder through his showreel with enough primeval hellfire to silence any Hollywood executive in 1948.

The trouble is JOE CLARENCE cannot appreciate true genius when it roars him in the face. He gives young Harry a break, his first since the war, but expects to see his money transformed into instant prehistoric terror in less than four days. Harry complains to his long-suffering wife, CLAIRE, about the broken stop-frame camera that he rebuilt from scratch, about the long hours bent over

miniature jungles pounded by hot lights; but she knows he loves it. Yes, he tells her back, but he hates Joe Clarence.

The first rough cut is projected and once more brings hushed silence in the screening room – until Joe Clarence calls a halt. He declares the work a shambles. Not frightening enough. It just lacks the crucial goombah. Needs more mazash. Harry wants to quit. This was his finest work! His wife sends him back to his workshop. She knows he has it in him to give Clarence what he wants.

A new sculpture takes form under Harry's fingers with more 'goombah' and 'mazash' than even Harry could have hoped. It is soon before the camera, and brought to life on film. Clarence this time is ecstatic. The monster is perfect! The others in the screening room are shocked at what they see. Harry has created an, albeit unintentional, dinosaur translation of Joe Clarence: the same twisted snarl, the same manic twitch and carnivorous reptile smile. When Clarence confers with his personal secretary, MR. GLASS, he sees this too and he orders Harry fired. Harry drinks himself sick and spends the night with his sculpture in the shadow of a giant plaster mammoth at the La Brea Natural History Museum.

Time passes and, with Claire's encouragement, Harry is soon working again, creating science fiction nightmares in miniature for low budget independent studio and traversing an equally impossible tightrope between madness and monsters. Claire stops him cold one evening by presenting him with an invitation from Joe Clarence Productions to the premier screening of *Monsters from the Stone Age*.

The screening is a smash, Harry's footage included. Clarence blusters up to Harry and offers money to buy the monster sculpture from him. Harry refuses. He cannot understand this sudden change of heart, until Mr. Glass

explains. After the first preview, a little girl approached Clarence and asked him for an autograph for the first time in his career. Since then, Clarence has been a changed man. Glass explains the little girl was a stooge, his youngest niece, but that does not matter. At Claire's urging, Harry breaks a rule, visits Clarence the next morning and hands him his sculpture, refusing any money. They drink a toast to their creation: Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The old director admits the writer has passed the test. The writer sits, shaking, exhausted, and pours himself another glass of whiskey as the director reads his screenplay pages, and the wind rises outside....

(5) *BANSHEE* (copyright 1985): As the evening has progressed, the wind has carried with it the sound of a distant woman's voice, crying in the night -- a banshee, perhaps? The director sees the writer looking pale and laughs, enjoying the obvious chill this word brings: the ancient Gaelic name for a female spirit, very popular with the locals, said to warn of approaching death. The director invites the writer to investigate by stepping outside.

Suspecting another test, the writer calls the old man's bluff and goes to the door. The director leaps to his feet: 'Don't be foolish, man! Can't you tell I'm joking? Get to bed with you!' The writer smiles, picks up his whiskey and heads out the door, promising to be back by the time he has finished his drink.

The night outside is chill and dark. The writer walks and, as he suspected, he sees a *YOUNG WOMAN* standing out beneath a tree. He approaches the woman, but the closer he gets the less confident he becomes that this is a prank.

The woman is pale-skinned and fragile-looking, clutching a shawl around her in the breeze. The writer stops a few yards away. She speaks in a Gaelic brogue and warns the writer that the old man in the manor has taken many souls. He drains his victims' lives in order to replenish his own. She warns the writer not to fall prey to him as she did. The writer invites her to come back into the house with him. She refuses. She wants the old man to come out to her. She has a score to settle.

The writer hurries back to the house and finds the director seated by the fire, full of praise for his screenplay. Shaken, the writer tells the old man about the girl outside. She wants to see him. The director laughs it off, sends the writer up to bed. The writer heads upstairs, but pauses. He hears the front door open. He does not hear it close.

The next morning, as dawn breaks, the writer wakes and dresses quickly. The director's bedroom door is closed. The study is empty. The front door is still open. Without further hesitation, the writer leaves the house, jumps into his car, and drives away as quickly as he can.

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