

Deadline

Treatment by Robert Sarkanen

An up-and-coming screenwriter finds that his new spree killer script is becoming reality with himself as the lead suspect. He attempts to find out the truth before his own writing kills more.

A blank flickering computer screen. The lonely stripe of a cursor beating against white like a heartbeat. A man sitting by his laptop, waiting for something. He is ANDREW, a lonely 20-something screenwriter locked away in his bare hotel room at night. His voiceover tells us he's waiting for inspiration, as he has been night after night for weeks now. Status quo. Around him are piles of pizza boxes, take-out bags of food, stacks of receipts neatly ordered on his desk, the bottom ones already frayed and yellow. Books and more books on screenwriting. His voiceover introduces us to him, explaining that he's a TV writer for a studio going downhill, writing reality shows and interviews for a fashion channel bordering on softcore porn, putting his own eloquence into the mouths of vapid supermodels to be admired by no one but perverts and fashion victims, desperate to find a new gig outside of the studio. He's agoraphobic.

Montage of his daily routine, waking up at sunset, working his way into the night, calling for takeout breakfast, lunch and dinner, calling housekeeping to take care of his laundry, emailing spec scripts to studios everywhere, sitting on the phone trying to get through to producers about it, having his only friend HOWARD, a sound guy living down the hall, go downstairs to the water dispenser to mix him instant decaf every night, going to bed at sunrise.

Back to the blank screen. Sick of waiting, he starts going through the trades, flipping through to a list of production houses. He finds an email for a company new in the business looking for TV scripts, A.P. House, and emails them with an attachment "Spec Scripts". A knock on the door startles him suddenly, it's a delivery boy with another bag of junk for the day. No sooner does Andrew pay for the food when the phone rings. It's a lawyer, LIEBERMAN at Lieberman, Gamble & Houseman, representing the A.P. House. Lieberman's voice is crackly and noisy, but he explains that the A.P. House just went through the spec scripts Andrew sent and loved it. They're producing a new show that just got picked up but the lead writer bailed so they're looking for a new writing staff. It's an anthology show inspired by true crimes, ripped from the headlines, "that Law & Order sorta thing". He's wondering if Andrew could write something for it. Andrew is hesitant as he notes he's no crime writer, but asks if there's a story. Lieberman says he read about a serial killer who stalked and killed three people in his building in different ways, pushing one down a flight of stairs, another by stabbing and the last in a shooting. Lieberman asks Andrew to just write act one and two for it, to see if he can do it. Andrew accepts, Lieberman abruptly hangs up.

Perplexed, Andrew sits back down to face his laptop. After a moment of thought, he starts typing. His voiceover narrates what's shown – a taxi pulling up to an apartment building a late night, a MAN hurriedly paying off the driver and stepping out with a suitcase, looking around himself, clearly paranoid. He checks in at the front desk, the CLERK welcoming him back from his vacation. Without responding, the man rushes inside, passing drunken people laughing and smiling walking down the stairs. He opts for the back staircase instead. As the drunken people exit and the hallway turns eerily quiet, he looks behind

him. A DARK HOODED FIGURE standing down the hall. Suddenly, the man panics, running up the stairs. The figure running up the other stairwell. The man stops at the second floor, fumbling with his keys at a door, looking toward the other stairwell, panicking. He then stops and looks at the room number – 201. The wrong floor. He curses himself and runs back up the stairs another floor only to face the figure who pushes him down. He tumbles down two flights of stairs and crashes down on the floor, dead. His head spun around unnaturally.

Back to Andrew who hears a commotion outside. Somebody screams. He quickly drops everything and peeks out the crack of the door, startled. Some people running down the hall. He cautiously steps out and sees – the MAN, dead, down the hall by the stairs, as real as can be. Several TENANTS gathered around. Andrew gasps. He sees Howard by the body and calls him over to ask him what happened. Howard says it's one of the execs at the studio, DAN, who apparently fell down the stairs after returning from his two-week vacation tonight, snapping his neck. A horrible accident it seems, but no one liked Dan anyway, Howard asks if it wasn't Dan that nearly fired him for not delivering on the deadline. Andrew nods.

At the front desk, a couple of detectives, JONES and CARRIGAN enter, introducing themselves to the clerk. The clerk tells them they should talk to Andrew, "the weirdo in 213".

Andrew is being questioned by the detectives, Carrigan doing most of the talking. They ask if Andrew knew anything about the death threats Dan has been receiving, specifically a newspaper clipping of "TV WRITER KILLS FOUR" with the bottom torn out. Carrigan notes that the newspaper clipping is a work of fiction, not a real story and asks about Andrew's current projects. Andrew, clearly confused and scared reading the article, says he's just working on some reality shows for the studio when Carrigan starts looking at the screen. Andrew quickly slams his laptop shut, saying it's a work in progress, a spec script, just like the ten other writers working for the studio, looking for a way out of there. Carrigan seems suspicious, but the detectives leave nonetheless.

Andrew checks his phone log, seeing the last call being from an unknown number. He goes online, searching for A.P. House, finding nothing. He searches for Lieberman, Finch, Gamble & Houseman and finds a newspaper article dated 10 years ago. "ENTERTAINMENT LAWYERS FOUND DEAD", saying that Lieberman was pushed down a flight of stairs, Gamble stabbed and Houseman shot. All within a single night.

Suddenly a knock on the door. Andrew asks who's there. No reply. An envelope is slid under the door. He asks again. Nothing. Scared, Andrew musters up his courage and quickly opens the door. No one there. He checks the envelope, "WRITE IT" written on it. He opens it. The torn-out article of "TV WRITER KILLS FOUR" inside, with the words "OR YOU'RE NEXT" written on it. Andrew looks terrified, hyperventilating. Suddenly, outside the door, a figure passes. He looks down the hall, seeing no one, yelling out to no response. Andrew slams the door shut, terrified and turns back to his laptop "this has to be some kind of joke". He starts deleting everything he's written so far when his phone suddenly rings. Unknown number. He listens in, hearing nothing. Then beep after beep as he starts receiving messages, dozens of them, all coming in a row -- "STOP IT".

Even on the screen, what he deleted starts retyping itself. The cursor beating against white for more. Andrew shakes his head no. Then a heavy pounding on the door. Another envelope. And another and another. Andrew is getting more and more agitated until he finally yells out "OKAY, I'LL DO IT JUST LEAVE ME ALONE". He turns back to his laptop hesitantly.

His narration trembles as he describes the events following. The lonely clerk nearly falling asleep by the front desk. Footsteps down the hall wake him up, coming closer and closer. Then stopping abruptly. He looks confused but shrugs it off. The dark figure passes behind him. The clerk walks into the nearby bathroom to take a piss. As he's standing there, the dark figure enters quietly behind him, a knife going up in the air and coming down hard. Blood sprays.

Andrew hears something in his closet, opens it and finds the bloody knife. He collapses, crying. Over this, we hear Andrew call the police, turning himself in.

Andrew is sitting in a police station interrogation room.

Andrew stops typing instantly, gets up and walks out the door, coming face to face with the dark figure. Andrew, frightened, staggers back. The figure mimics his motion. Andrew, confused, takes a step to his left. The figure again mimics him. A step to the right, same result. Andrew, scared and hyperventilating, turns his back toward him. The figure doesn't move, breathing just as heavily behind him, pulling out a knife. Andrew makes a run for it, the figure chases after him down the long dark hallway, down the stairs. The figure takes the opposite stairs, mirroring him.