



# **PURGING DEMONS**

**A Screenplay by  
Carissa Jean**



# The Haunted House as a Trope

There is nothing new under the sun. When exploring the caverns of ourselves, we often grow dizzy trying to find our way. It's more locked doors than buried treasure. And yet, stories passed around holiday dinner tables suggest we are often not always honest with ourselves and our family. Such awkward skeletons must lie beneath our storm cellars. What would happen to us if the mistakes of our elders were on purpose and deceptively selfish? A haunted house as metaphor can certainly begin to tighten the traps set out for us by previous generations.

Like looking through a stranger's childhood pictures and realizing you share so much in common. That's what *Purging Demons* aims to do—hold up a family photo album as a mirror. Maybe your dad was at January 6th because your grandmother never knew how to love him. Maybe your mother is unraveling into a ghost of herself because society encouraged her to form an identity in her husband. Maybe your unhappiness is due to the religion that raised you, raised your elders, murdered millions. None of this is new. But what should it feel like?



# Carissa Jean's Statement

My mother's birthday is January 5th, 1960. On her 61st birthday, my father waited until the stroke of midnight, when it was no longer her day to celebrate, loaded into a car with trusted friends, and drove six hours to Washington DC. He listened to the then-president give a speech before following the crowd towards violence. I am not exactly sure to what extent he participated in the events of that day, but I do know that he was there. And it felt like a sickness was growing inside my family.

Purging Demons began as a spark, a desire to share in the bone-soaked trauma of losing the idea of a parent, while also trying to solve the mystery of why so many families seem to be crumbling around us. It's never as simple as acknowledging the tradition of trauma in all of our lineages. Everything gets murky and complicated, we all have different memories of the ones who hurt us.

This allows the house at the center of this story to become chaotic and confusing. To swallow whole the eldest sibling, Shelly, as she enters drenched in shame. To maim and nearly murder the middle sister, Beverly, as she fights to be remembered and accepted. To never let the youngest son, Samuel, ever truly spread his wings on his own. It is easy to blame a house for our own shortcomings. Especially when the house embodies the spirit of an ancestor who refuses to let go, the haunted soul of Grandma Kat continuing to torture future generations. And even more so when the house so easily represents a patriarchal religion that has ensnared the head of the house, Arthur, into believing it is his duty to inherit it all—the good, the awful—even if it comes at the cost of losing his wife, Ruth.

I am not trying to communicate an experience or an understanding. With Purging Demons I aim to stick my hands into the guts of the emotions of generational trauma. While this film certainly has deeply unsettling imagery and a disorienting nature, the story is still grounded in a universal feeling. That sickening stomach turn of recognizing the work you have to do to dig yourself out of the sins of your father.



# CONTENTS



## **HAUNTED HOUSE AS A JOURNEY**

A detailed overview of the plot and story elements.

## **HAUNTED HOUSE AS STRUCTURE**

Why exploring the Americana home is more than just setting.

## **HAUNTED HOUSE AS TONE**

The importance of color, contrast, and composition.

## **HAUNTED HOUSE AS FAMILY**

Get to know our characters.

## **HAUNTED HOUSE AS A PLACE**

The inspiration and ideal filming locations.

## **HAUNTED HOUSE AS IMPORTANCE**

Why this story must be told.





## Plot and Story

# The Haunted House as a Journey

A ghost story is supposed to be disorienting. So it's only fitting that we begin in the middle, with a clear and grotesque view of three adult siblings broken and battered. SHELLY (35), the oldest, wailing into a mirror. BEVERLY (29), the middle child, a knife in her stomach and bleeding out. SAMUEL (20), the youngest, rushing in only to realize they are all trapped as the door slams behind him.

This visual is then stripped away as we circle back to a few days prior, as Samuel brings it to the attention of his older sisters that their parents are exhibiting concerning behaviors. The group decides to all spend the weekend in their childhood home, assessing next steps. But as soon as they arrive, the house begins to offer up the apparition of their dead grandmother—GRANDMA KAT—an unruly matriarch who seems to still have her claws in the family.

ARTHUR (70), the stern and foreboding father, is constantly working on something secretive in the crawl spaces of the house. RUTH (60), the disoriented mother, seems to be regressing in her mental state to that of a child. With the discovery that Grandma Kat is still the owner of the house, the siblings are at a loss for next steps.

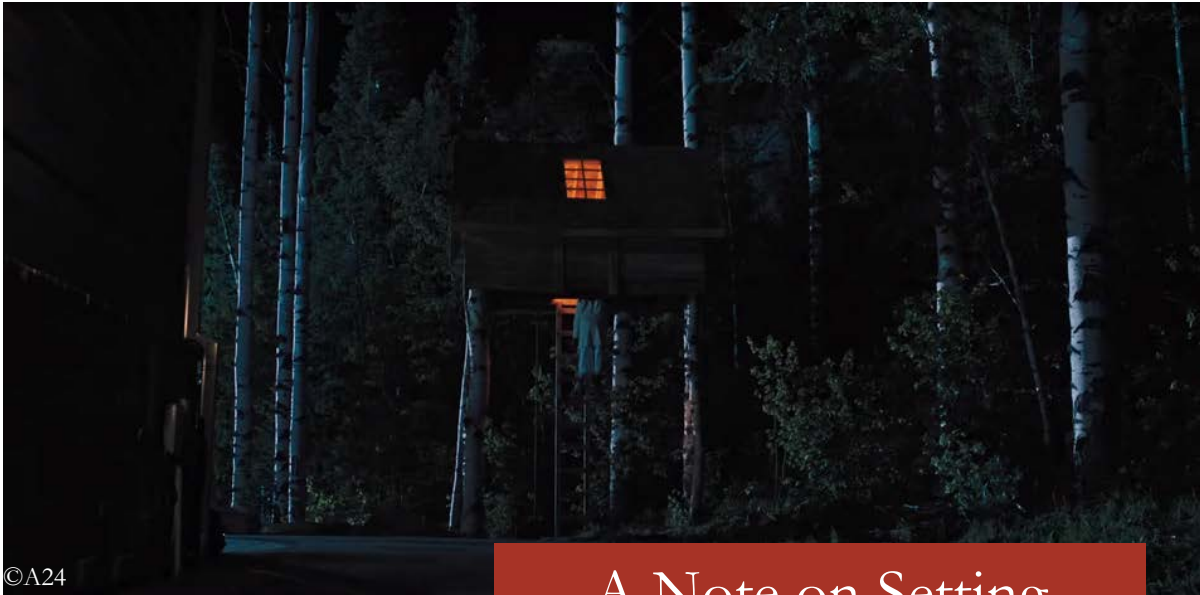
However, the house has other plans in mind.



A sinkhole opens in the backyard. The Family Bible continues to spit out foreboding verses. The skeleton of Grandma Kat is found. Ruth stabs Beverly. Shelly and Samuel confront the grotesque crawl space. A miscarriage buried in the backyard for decades is dug up. Beverly's girlfriend MIRIAM rushes in to rescue her beloved, only to witness the horrors of the house.

Grandma Kat tricks Shelly into murdering Ruth. With her dying breath, Ruth flashes back to when she first moved into the house. Kat and Arthur were horrible to her, especially after she lost her first child during pregnancy. As her blood merges with the house, Ruth becomes a ghost set on the destruction of Arthur and Grandma Kat. The two ghost women consume each other and the house, pulling it apart on top of themselves.

Months later, Shelly and Samuel are cohabitating, getting ready to celebrate Beverly and Miriam inheriting a local bar. Beverly reveals she wants to name it "Ruthie's" after their mother. The ghost of Ruth raises a glass to her children from the back of the bar, a sinister smile on her face.



©A24

## A Note on Setting

# The Haunted House as Structure

Once upon a time, the American dream used to mean a house, a picket fence, and a few kids. However, the only way to own property these days seems to be by way of inheriting it. But what do you receive when you take on the estate of your parents? Is it in good repair? Has it been well-maintained? What on earth do the taxes look like? How many fights did you and your siblings have over who should be the executor of the will? Were your parents coherent leading up to this moment? Have you worked through the trauma of being raised religious? Do you remember the time your father spanked you because he thought you said “oh my God” instead of “oh my gosh” and taking the Lord’s name in vain is a sin? Where does that memory fit into the bones of a house you never asked for?

The truest question to ask is: what are we responsible for? In families, who do we often feel beholden to? As the oldest daughter, I will always feel a sense of duty in protecting my younger siblings—and a sense of regret for every time I have failed. My father continues to enshrine his now-deceased mother, an internal force driving him to remember her as better, warmer, kinder than she was (while hoarding her plates and trinkets and keepsakes and telling his adult children we are not responsible enough to have them). What happens when you lose yourself? If, like my mother, you accept that 'dutiful wife' must be your only personality. Do you wake up one day and realize you don't know who you are or what you want? And if so, do you go out and fix it, or let it consume you? Or maybe you're the lost middle child who struggles with coming out to her parents and forming lasting relationships. Even still, you could be the youngest son, dutiful and diligent, unruly and full of secrets, a longing to set out on your own but a devastating fear of not having a safety net.

All of this is in the walls of the house.





©Paramount Pictures

Color and Style

# The Haunted House as Tone

Within this world, there are many worlds. Some have vibrant, pulsating pops of color. And some are devoid of what makes anything feel inhabitable.

There are tunnels, sheds, basements, lonely apartments, offices, soup kitchens, and bars. All with their own textures and attitudes. What is within the walls of the house is different from that which lives without.



©A24

## Inside the House

The majority of this story unfolds within the walls of a tormented house. It should look and feel distinctly different from the outside world, or any world we are used to. Disorienting and tight, we follow our characters dizzyingly close as they weave around a structure they know, but also know plays tricks on them.

There are both high contrasts and muted tones inside the house. Allowing specific colors to pop and others to just become set dressing. There is a rot to the house. There is a heat to the house.

The backyard, crawl space, and shed are also considered "inside the house," and the same care, consideration, and claustrophobia should apply.







©RLJE Films

There is a haze within the confines of the property—one that gets thicker closer to climax and disappears when we are away from the house.



©Netflix

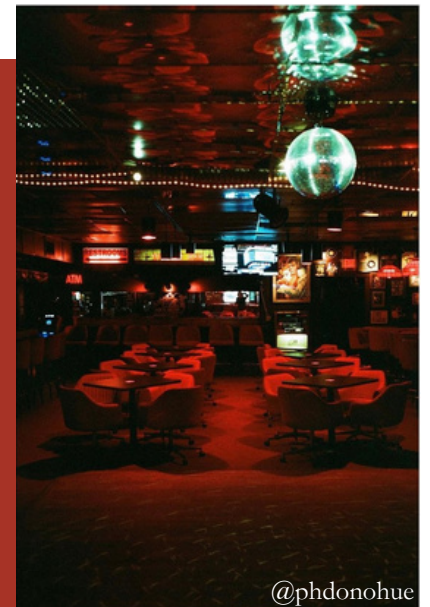


## Outside the House



Everything outside the house is wide and open, but closer to the feeling of walking home alone at the end of the night and realizing there's no one else around you. A desertion lingering at every corner—even when inside other houses.

There is a nostalgic tone to every place we are in. A sepia feeling in older buildings. A cold and blue haze to well-kept yet lonesome apartments. Ocher yellow curtains blowing in an invisible breeze. A warm and inviting dive bar full of rotten teeth regulars.



# The Haunted House as Family



## Character Study

But what haunts a house? One could argue it obviously would be the spirits of those who used to live there and have since passed. I would like to propose that those who still reside within the house possess it. The misdeeds we haven't forgiven, the shame we refuse to confront, the trauma buried under our fingernails, the fights we got into as kids.

The characters that inhabit this particular house are in incredible turmoil. Here is where we can get to know them.





©HBO Max



©20th Century Studios



©HBO Max



©NBC



©Peacock

# SHELLY

As the oldest sister, in her mid 30s, Shelly has an enduring feeling of responsibility for her family that is wasting her away. This pernicious sense of duty gives her permission to never seem to find the time to be there for them, now that she is living her own life.

Returning to her childhood home drags up unresolved trauma buried within her. All the times she failed her siblings. All the times she failed herself. All the shame she wishes would stay beneath, begins to erupt around her.

Bonus Space: Black hair. Frazzled. Gold Casio watch.





©The Cut

The middle sibling. She is in her late 20s/early 30s and defiantly refusing to grow up. Going through life on the surface, she desires connection, but is still closeted to her parents. All her siblings and chosen family know she is gay, but it still feels like a ribbon she wears around her neck, hoping no one will unravel.

Constantly using humor or dissociation to defer her trauma from bubbling up, she is both easy to shove aside, and someone you desperately want to protect.

Bonus Space: Fat (use an actual fat actress, I am begging you), both femme and butch.

# BEVERLY

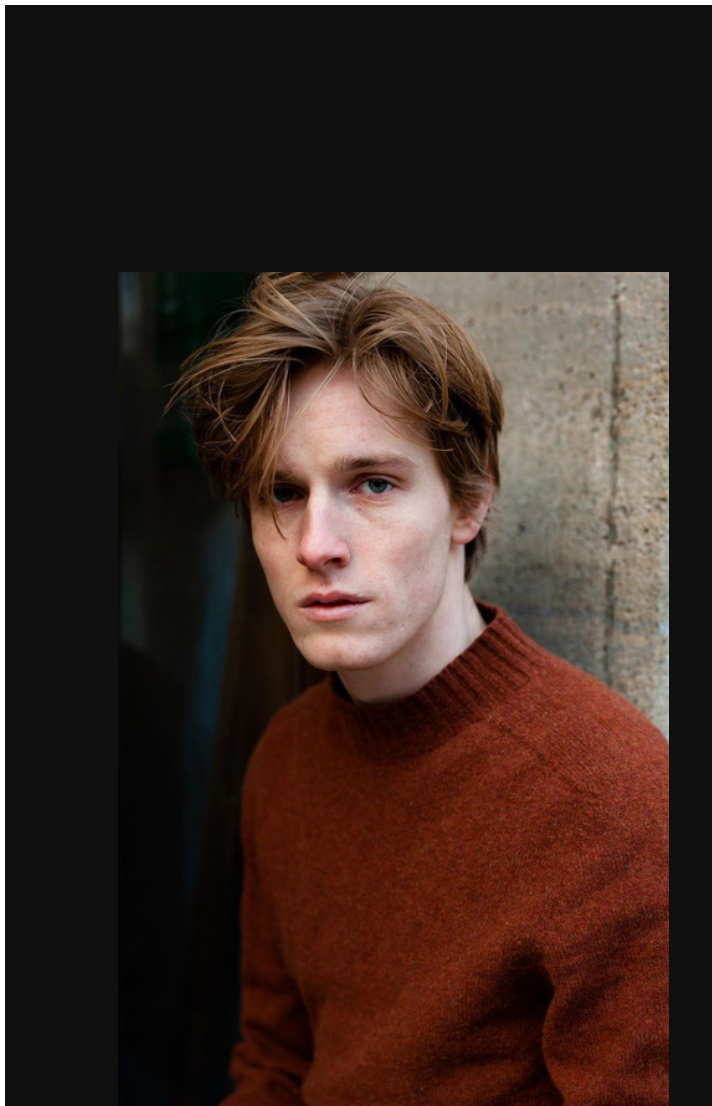


# SAMUEL

The youngest, barely 20. Still living at home, he is both haunted and charming. It truly feels as if his dependence on his parents and their dependence on him won't let him leave.

He feels ignored and often dismissed by Shelly, especially when he voices concerns about the family. Beverly has taken a real shining to him, they have always been organic friends and feel lucky to be siblings.

Bonus Space: Gemini, wholesome, brave.







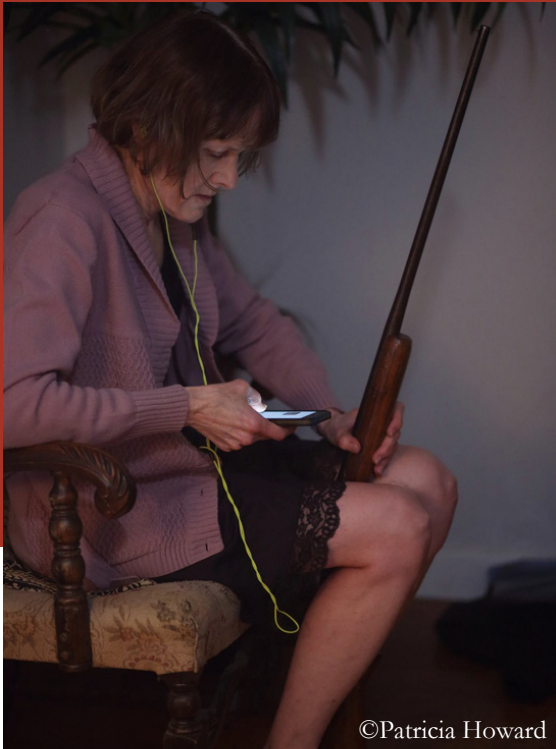
# MIRIAM

A tight-knit woman in her 40s who falls in love with Beverly almost by accident. With a bit of an age difference, Miriam has lived a quiet and battened down life, but there's something about Beverly that breathes excitement into it. However, Miriam goes to the same church as Ruth and Arthur and is terrified of either of them finding out she is queer.

Bonus Space: Elegant and horny.







©Patricia Howard



©Patricia Howard

# RUTH

The matriarch fading away like the pattern on her favorite dress. In her 60s, she is stoic and cold at times, happy and unhinged at others. Her warmth waffling as she gives up on her dreams.

She's spent too much time in the house and it's starting to show. Her rhythm feels off to the real world, but makes sense to the world she lives in.

Bonus Space: I have worked with actress Patricia Howard before and think she would be a revelation in this role!



©Patricia Howard

# ARTHUR



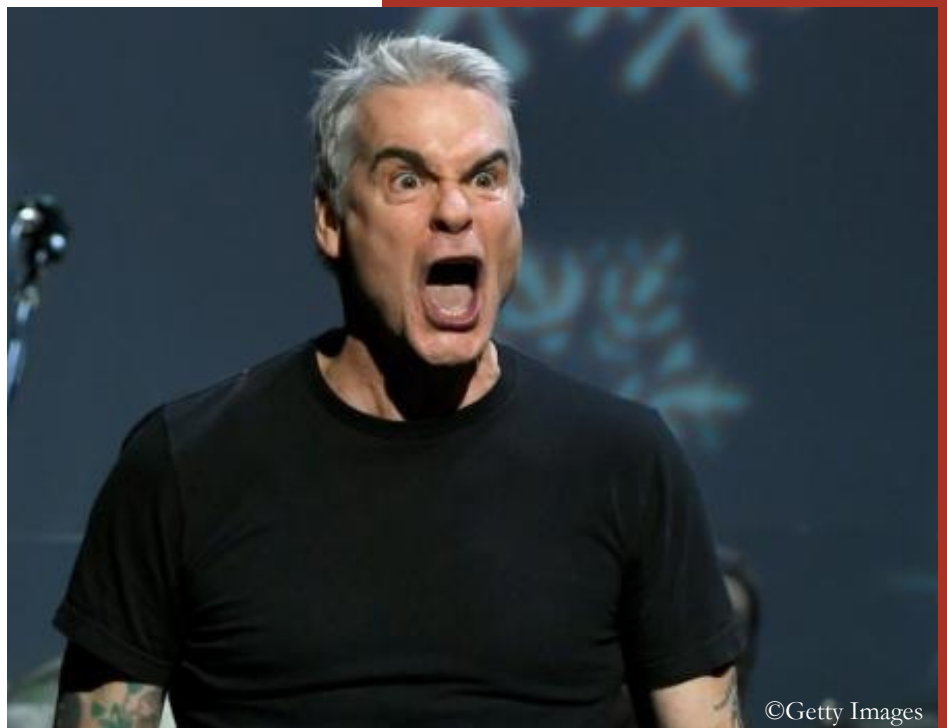
©Getty Images

The father of the bunch. A deeply religious man in his 70s, used to hard labor and few emotions. Growing up he was bullied for not being masculine enough and has gone out of his way to prove his dominance in his family.

Expects a higher power to reward him for years of servitude.

Bonus Space: Cotton from King of the Hill.

©Getty Images



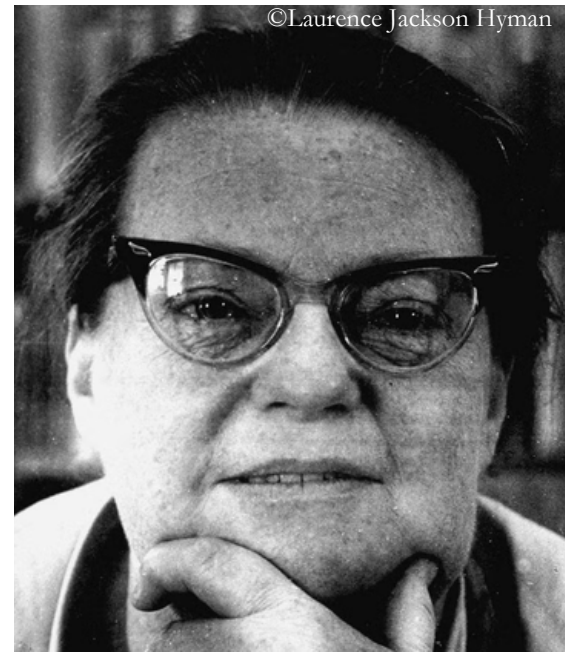
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# GRANDMA KAT

The apparition of family trauma that haunts the halls. At different times she is different ages, decomposing, put together, disgusting, holy, beautiful. She is a harrowing anomaly that is terrifying to encounter. Memories of her are often cruel and there seems to be no way to please her.

Bonus Space: I think of her as timeless, in a way only a Millennial can (a ghost of a generation we barely missed).



©Farrar, Straus and Giroux



©Floyd Jillson Collection



# JOE



©Getty Images

The lovable bartender who cares very much for Beverly and her siblings. In his 70s, he is gruff yet sweet.

He will eventually gift his business to Beverly—ensuring she has stability and responsibility well into the future.

# SHANNON

©20th Century Studios

Shelly's boss at the bank. He begins as an antagonist and ends as a co-conspirator in her getting to the bottom of a family mystery. He is a brief character, but I do want him to be bigger, sweatier, and nervous.



# The Haunted House as a Place

## Location

This is set in a “timeless era,” somewhere between the late 80s and early 90s. No cell phones, most phones still have cords, and computers aren’t widely available. There is something spooky about not knowing what day, time, year, era it is. It feels familiar, but also new. Like somewhere you should not have been.

The small town of forgotten industry it’s set in is modeled after North Adams, Massachusetts. North Adams is the landscape of my family.

Full of giant falling apart homes on hills, businesses and people quickly abandoning a failing town and the stubborn few refusing to give up. Incredibly insular, possibly uninviting, I’ve literally been asked who my grandma is there (threatening). A rural environment, the hills are impossibly steep, yet you can still walk from downtown to your home should you need to. The textures and tones of my memories include abandoned graveyards and factories turned into art museums.





# The Haunted House as Importance

## Why This Story

During the time it took me to write this, I moved across the country twice in as many years, had a mental breakdown, got better, moved to one of the most beautiful places on earth, all in time to witness my parents finally separate after nearly forty years of marriage. This story feels like a mutable astrological sign—able to adapt and take on new information in stride. It's been with me during unbelievably hard bits as the light at the end of my tunnel. But this story is not just for me.

I don't think we need to be beaten over the head with something obvious about the state of politics today. Even the horror genre can be incredibly unforgiving with these things. Sometimes we just want a story to wash over us and smother us in the feelings of it all. A tone poem that holds us and bathes us and tells us we are understood. That's why this story must be told.

I am not the only person to have called their therapist in a panic on 1/7/21, realizing a family member (or two) had been part of an insurrection. There are many of us, and we all see the world differently, but we also all know what it feels like to go into our childhood home and realize something isn't right. The feeling of our parents slipping through our fingers is a universal one. Not being sure how to clean up the mess left for us (or if we want to at all) is a sentiment many of us resonate with. What do you have buried in your backyard? And who would you feel comfortable digging it up in front of?

Dear friend, let me go get my shovel.





**Thank you**

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