

EYES UPON WAKING

Characters

TAREN FOLEY (Teens - 30's / F) Small woman with a shaved head. Coming to terms with two unsuccessful suicide attempts in a matter of days. (LD)

ANGELA KEPLER (50's / F) Psychiatrist assigned to Taren. Has a hidden interest in suicide. (CO)

CARLOS (40's / M) Fellow patient. A loud man with a bandaged head, but sensitive toward Taren. (CO)

MRS. KELLY (70's / F) Frail former teacher who befriends Taren while coping with Alzheimers. (FE)

NURSE JANE (50's / F) Sympathetic caregiver whose attention to Taren is sincere but unwanted. (FE)

DOCTOT FERGUSON (40's / M) ER physician distinctly cold toward Taren after her rescue. (FE)

FATHER (60's /M) Taren's stepfather, the one relative who shows concern for her. (FE)

NURSE SUMMERS (40's /F) Nurse who admits Taren to the observation ward. (FE)

BENNY (20's / M) Amiable attendant at the observation ward.

DENNIS (40's / M) Patient who lost an eye trying to shoot himself. (FE)

VIRGINIA (30's / F) Emaciated patient who tried to die under the wheels of a bus. (FE)

HEATHER (20 / F) Patient who tried to overdose on Ecstasy. (FE)

FERDINAND (40's / M) Patient who slashed his wrists hoping his wife would find him dead. (FE)

SMOKY JOE (30's / M) Introverted patient who tried to incinerate himself but was left with burnt legs. (FE)

SHELLEY (40's / F) Facilitator for group therapy. Annoys Taren by insisting she stick with the program. (FE)

MARIA (20's / F) Spanish patient who initially seems accessible to Taren. (FE)

DRIVER (40's / M) Transports Taren to the observation center.

EMMA (18 / F) Fellow patient. Thin with long stringy hair. (SP)

MR. BLAKE (80's / M) Catatonic patient whose reactions are confined to blinking and tremors. (FE)

DOCTOR LEMIEUX (40's / M) Treats Taren after her first suicide attempt. Has no sympathy. (SP)

BROTHER (Child / M) Taren's sibling, who witnessed her traumatic childhood. (SP)

MOTHER (30's / F) Taren's abusive mother, who threatens her physically during explosions of rage. (SP)

LARRY (30's / M) Attendant at the elder care ward, skeptical of Taren's friendship with Mrs. Kelly. (FE)

EMMA'S MOM (30's / F) Affectionate to her daughter in a way Taren's mother never was. (FE)

SMOKY JOE'S SISTER (30's / F) Seen on a weekly visit trying to understand her brother after his suicide attempt. (FE)

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SYNOPSIS: After two suicide attempts within a week's time, TAREN FOLEY is unhappy to find herself alive in an emergency ward. NURSE JANE is sympathetic toward the young woman, while DOCTOR FOLEY sends her to an Observation Ward for 72 hours.

NURSE SUMMERS and attendant BENNY introduce TAREN to her temporary home. Despite a rebellious attitude, TAREN is frightened by her new surroundings and keeps her distance from FELLOW PATIENTS while remaining skeptical of ANGELA KEPLER, the psychiatrist assigned to her.

CARLOS, a wheelchair-bound patient, points out how ineffective TAREN's suicide attempt had been, which only increases her desire to escape. Slipping into a ward for elder care patients, TAREN encounters MRS. KELLY, an elderly woman disoriented by Alzheimer's.

Stuck in the facility, TAREN begins sessions with KEPLER. We learn TAREN left home as a teenager after psychological abuse at the hands of her unstable MOTHER, only to risk worse treatment in foster care. Only her STEPFATHER shows concern over her. KEPLER talks TAREN into remaining on the ward.

CARLOS tells TAREN he tried to die by jumping off a bridge but only fractured his skull. He introduces her to DENNIS, who lost an eye trying to shoot himself; VIRGINIA, who tried to fall under a bus; EMMA, who took her mother's pills; FERDINAND, who cut his wrists; and SMOKY JOE, who tried to incinerate himself.

CARLOS talks TAREN into attending a session moderated by SHELLEY, but TAREN shows no interest in the other PATIENTS. She returns to MRS. KELLY's ward and wheels the older woman along the corridors while listening to stories of KELLY's late husband Anthony. Upon returning to her own ward, TAREN tells SMOKY JOE she's sorry his suicide attempt failed. DENNIS tries to befriend TAREN, who remains numb.

TAREN walks out on KEPLER when the doctor suggests that TAREN had not really wanted to die. She's disappointed when MRS. KELLY is unable to recognize TAREN a day after their previous conversation, then grows even more hostile

when SHELLEY upbraids her for turning up late for group therapy. TAREN has had more than enough of all of this, but finds that though the observation period is over, she can't leave the ward because KEPLER has not signed her discharge papers.

Unable to sleep, TAREN cleans the tables and chairs in the cafeteria. The next day she seems less hostile toward the others at lunch time and feel comfortable with MARIA, a new patient who seems much more normal than the rest. When CARLOS tries stunts on his wheelchair, TAREN is inspired to race KELLY with him and SMOKY JOE. LARRY, an attendant in the elder care ward, warns TAREN that KELLY doesn't actually remember her from day to day.

TAREN returns to her own ward and begins listening to the others there. She's astonished to learn the amount of medication many have been on and are currently taking. Life at the ward comes to an abrupt halt as the patients receive their pills for the night.

The next morning, MARIA leads TAREN and the others in an aerobics session. Even BENNY joins in. RELATIVES of the patients arrive for visiting day, but TAREN's FATHER doesn't show up. CARLOS is also on his own and draws TAREN out about her childhood by sharing his own pain with her.

TAREN confesses her fears and doubts to MRS. KELLY, who forgets where she is in the middle of the conversation. As TAREN returns to her own ward, she's horrified to find MARIA in a hysterical rage, being restrained by BENNY and LARRY. MARIA is sent to another ward.

KEPLER returns to the ward and promises to fill out TAREN's dismissal forms. The two face off for what promises to be their last session. As TAREN defends suicide once more, KEPLER reveals that her own son killed himself. TAREN reveals that her own goal is to finally escape her MOTHER, and expresses regret for KEPLER's loss. KEPLER prescribes lettuce, not medication, for TAREN. MRS. KELLY is lucid and remembers TAREN as the younger woman says farewell to her. NURSE SUMMERS gives TAREN an address for volunteer work. TAREN and CARLOS leave the ward at the same time, both facing uncertain futures but motivated to try life again.

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Notes

This is a strong low-budget effort with winning characters and sound psychological understanding extending beyond the extremes the patients have been driven toward.

Autobiographical spec screenplays typically focus on someone trying to settle a grudge against a parent or former romantic partner. The solution to all life's problems is generally presented as writing a screenplay about the matter, which becomes a hit film and makes the public instantly side with the writer while the object of their scorn is publicly shunned. The problem is that such writers seem to expect the audience to unconditionally accept such a self-serving view while denying any responsibility on the part of the lead itself.

By comparison, this screenplay asks the viewer to go through a full process with the lead, who changes significantly over the course of the story. Just as Taren rejects any sympathy or support from others at the beginning of the film, the authors refuse to soften her nature to draw the audience to her side. It is only when Taren begins to develop empathy for others that the viewers can develop empathy of their own for the character, creating a mutual learning curve that becomes the true spine of the narrative.

As we learn about the patients on the ward, their varied suicide efforts come more and more to resemble different roads toward the same destination. Death is sought as an escape from pain, and the source of such turmoil inevitably comes down to unbearable memories of family discord. The medical solution for all this, for better and generally worse, is to bring these wounded individuals together as a pseudo family who may be able to give one another the understanding that has eluded them in the outside world.

In Taren's case, the combination of family and memory find a balance in Mrs. Kelly, a loving maternal figure who is increasingly trapped in the present moment. She offers Taren the validation the young woman so desperately needs, yet also demonstrates how insubstantial the past can become within the mind, a powerful lesson for a woman who has

decided that death is preferable to dealing with the consequences of her parents' failings.

Accepting Mrs. Kelly creates a broader need in Taren that draws her to reverse her initial rage, the older woman becoming something of a role model in both her general kindness as well as an example of a life that has endured both tragedy and joy. Basically, as Taren begins to accept her own vulnerability, she finds herself perceiving the vulnerability in others and seeking to give them the support she has needed for so long.

This seems obvious when we view Taren's interaction with the other patients, but the ultimate test comes in the final session with Kepler. If Taren views Kelly as a "good mother," for her kindness, she is equally mistrustful of "bad mother" Kepler, who represents the authority and control Taren's own mother had abused so terribly. Taren is able to break this division by getting beneath Kepler's professional façade so that the two can connect momentarily as human beings.

While this connection is not going to extend to Taren's own mother, it breaks the spell of power that Taren had created in her mind concerning the past. What had seemed overwhelming about her mother can now be placed in context. The memories remain painful, but are no longer the core of Taren's perception.

The other patients provide a sliding scale of individual awareness. Carlos is the most-self aware, while Maria presents the most stable façade (though maintaining this act may cause her to melt down faster than any of the others). Near the end, Heather begins to regard Taren almost as Taren had regarded Maria, but Taren avoid repeating history by refusing to be anything other than her own self, still in the process of recovery.

Thus the observation ward here becomes less an exception to ordinary life than a laboratory carefully exaggerating the basics of human interaction that everyone has to learn to deal with. In following Taren's progress, a sensitive viewer will come face to face with their own issues concerning others and leave the story with the insights the authors have gained through these experiences. Far from becoming a self-serving account, the story offers universal

understanding, presenting a variety of characters ultimately contributing to the wisdom of not only Taren but everyone who accompanies her on the journey she begins here.