

**SUMMERLAND**

(A one hour drama)

Written by

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OVER BLACK

We hear a woman's voice, deep and silky...

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

They say there is a place called  
Summerland. Though it isn't a place  
you can get to by buggy or steamer.

As the voice continues, we SEE --

EXT. BATTLEFIELD IN FRANCE - 1918

AMERICAN AND BRITISH SOLDIERS charge *in slow motion* across a misty gray field. Tattered and bloody. Terror in their eyes. They SHOUT as rifles EXPLODE across the battlefield...but *all we hear is the voice.*

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Anything you like, you can find it  
there. Factories, houses, even  
whiskey and cigars if that's what  
you're after.

One AMERICAN SOLDIER pauses to gasp for breath. He looks up at the sky. The clouds shift strangely, forming shapes like warriors. With an almost religious awe, he charges forward, newly invigorated.

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Once you go to Summerland, you  
won't be coming back. Well, not  
your body, anyway.

The soldier is CUT DOWN by a bullet to the head.

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

Your body stays behind.

Under the voice, we now SEE --

INT. CITY MORGUE, NEW YORK CITY - 1918

Dead bodies, stacked floor to ceiling, crowding the morgue. Exhausted NURSES wearing gauze face masks wheel even more bodies into the room.

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)

They say it's like our world, only  
beautiful. Always beautiful.

The voice continues as we move out of the morgue and into --

INT. BELLEVUE HOSPITAL, NEW YORK CITY - 1918

A chaotic open ward. INFLUENZA PATIENTS, feverish and panicked, packed three to a bed. They COUGH and GASP for air but *all we hear is the voice*. More NURSES in face masks rush from bed to bed, trying to help whoever they can.

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)  
So much death...so many dead...

FLASH TO:

EXT. TENEMENT APARTMENT, LOWER MANHATTAN - SAME

The dead body of JACOB MACKENBERG (16) lies on the sidewalk. ETHEL MACKENBERG (46) sobs, reaching toward her son. ROSE MACKENBERG (23) eyes wide in terror, holds Ethel back. AARON MACKENBERG (50) stands behind them, stony with shock. All three wear gauze face masks.

A "DEATH CART" -- a horse-drawn cart stacked with dead bodies -- approaches. Ethel collapses in Rose's arms.

FLASH TO:

EXT. GRAVEYARD, QUEENS - SAME

HARRY HOUDINI (42) stares down at his mother's gravestone, wreathed in flowers. He wears a yarmulke. He places a gold coin on the grave, tucking it under the flowers.

FLASH TO:

INT. MORTUARY, LONDON - SAME

The imposing, mustachioed SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE (60) clutches a folded army uniform. He stares at the dead body of his son KINGSLEY DOYLE (25) laid out on a slab.

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)  
One can't help but wonder. Where they all go...

FLASH TO:

## A BEAUTIFUL SUNNY MEADOW

Sunlight streams down. Long grasses sway gently. From over a distant hill, a procession of PEOPLE approaches: the Soldier cut down on the battlefield, Jacob Mackenberg, Kingsley Doyle, CECILIA WEISS (Houdini's mother) -- holding the gold coin -- and many, many more.

They look directly into THE CAMERA, greeting us with warm smiles, and as they come closer we --

SMASH TO:

BLACK

WOMAN'S VOICE (V.O.)  
If they're really gone.

INT. TENEMENT APARTMENT, LOWER MANHATTAN - EARLY EVENING

A cramped dining room. Peeling wallpaper. Rose Mackenberg sits at the table, eating dinner. There's nothing remarkable about her appearance -- she's the kind of person who goes unnoticed. And that's entirely on purpose.

Her father Aaron sits across from her. Firm, uncompromising. Spoons scrape against bowls as they eat in silence.

**Super: One Year Later, New York City, 1919**

Street sounds waft in through the open window. From a nearby room we hear...

ETHEL (O.C.)  
Rose...Rose...

Rose looks up sharply. Aaron keeps his eyes on his dinner.

AARON  
Go on, then. Help your mother.

ROSE  
But father, can't you? I have to meet Lucy at the theater.

He makes no indication that he's heard her. Rose pushes away from the table in frustration and walks into...

INT. BEDROOM, TENEMENT APARTMENT - SAME

Her parents' small, unpleasant bedroom. She tiptoes to the bed where Ethel -- hair now shockingly white -- lies. Moaning, thrashing. The air is rank. Rose bites back a gag.

ROSE

Mother?

Rose reaches out a tentative hand and touches Ethel's cheek.

ETHEL

Ohhh...fetch me my medicine, won't you?

ROSE

How about a bowl of soup?

ETHEL

Ohhhh it hurts, it all hurts...

ROSE

(carefully)

Doctor Scheffel says there's nothing wrong with you.

Ethel's thrashing becomes more violent. Her face twists into a look of savage fear. She grabs Rose's collar.

ETHEL

It's not right! It's unnatural, it's not right, it's not right!

ROSE

(voice rising in panic)

Mother, please--

ETHEL

Where is he? My sweet boy? Why should I get better while he suffers?

ROSE

He's not suffering anymore--

Ethel's grip on Rose's collar tightens, her eyes wild.

ETHEL

It should be me, it should be, ME, ME, I SHOULD BE DEAD!

Terrified, Rose grabs a bottle of laudanum from the bedside table. She measures out the bitter brown liquid and pours it into her mother's open mouth. Decaying teeth. Gray tongue.

Ethel swallows the laudanum and relaxes, slumping back calmly. She looks at Rose with a childlike serenity.

ETHEL (CONT'D)

Lie down next to me. Let me stroke  
your hair, there's a good girl.

Rose stands roughly.

ROSE

I have to go.

EXT. DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN - SAME

Rose rushes through the bustling streets of downtown Manhattan. Storefronts. Tenement buildings. Horse-drawn carriages and Model T Fords. A steady stream of PEOPLE of many ages and races move past, their clothes reflecting all manner of occupations. BEGGARS sit in doorways. CHILDREN scamper underfoot. The air is thick with soot and sound.

A laughing LITTLE BOY runs toward Rose. She stops in her tracks, staring at him, and as he gets closer we --

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDING, MANHATTAN - TEN YEARS EARLIER

YOUNG ROSE (now 15) walks down a silent corridor in a public school, peering into empty classrooms. Looking for something. Late afternoon sunlight streams in.

Something catches her eye through a door at the end of the hall. She walks into --

A CLASSROOM

Bright and sunny, crowded with wooden desks and empty chairs. She crouches down under a desk where YOUNG JACOB (6 years old) is huddled. His knees pulled up to his chest, his head buried in his knees.

YOUNG ROSE

Jacob? What a good hiding spot you  
found.

Jacob lifts his tear-streaked face and looks at Rose like she's the only thing in the world.

YOUNG ROSE (CONT'D)

Were the other boys being mean to  
you again?

*He nods.*

YOUNG ROSE (CONT'D)  
*Well, they're all gone now.*

*She gently pulls him to his feet and extends her hand.*

YOUNG JACOB  
*(a whisper)*  
*How did you find me?*

YOUNG ROSE  
*(a whisper)*  
*I'll always find you, silly. It's my magical power.*

*He grins up at her and as he grabs her hand we're --*

*BACK TO:*

THE STREET

The little boy races past Rose, catching up with his FRIENDS. Rose leans against a pharmacy window, heart racing. She examines her reflection then closes her eyes. Takes a deep breath. When she opens her eyes again her expression has transformed her into a different person: carefree, confident, head held high. Back in control, she walks.

EXT. WINTER GARDEN THEATER, TIMES SQUARE - LATER

Rose rushes up to the theater, scanning the buzzing CROWD. On the side of the building are posters for "The Great Houdini."

LUCY (O.C.)  
*Rose! Over here!*

Rose spots her friend LUCY (22) an earnest Midwesterner with a bright, innocent face, waving excitedly.

INT. WINTER GARDEN THEATER - MOMENTS LATER

Rose and Lucy file in to their seats in the lavish theater. Lucy looks around in wonder.

LUCY  
*Six months in this city and I still see things I've never seen before. We must remember to thank Mr. Perry for the tickets.*

Rose's expression hardens.

ROSE

You didn't say the tickets were from him.

LUCY

Oh, Rose, don't start with that again. He's harmless.

ROSE

You don't need to put up with him, you know. Just because he's our boss doesn't mean he has license to do as he pleases with you.

LUCY

A bit of flirting is expected. Honestly, if you want to keep your job, you could afford to play along.

ROSE

But Lucy...

Just then, the lights dim. The crowd erupts in applause.

LUCY

(squealing)

Oh, shhh, it's starting! I can't believe it's really *him*. Everyone back home will be so jealous.

ROSE

I don't see what the fuss is about. It's all parlor tricks.

Lucy swats at Rose, who rolls her eyes and turns to --

THE STAGE

Harry Houdini, wrapped in chains, surveys the audience. He's short and muscular and somehow distant -- one foot in the here and now, the other somewhere else.

HOUDINI

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. You will see no magic tonight, nor anything supernatural. All that you will see this evening can be explained by the rules of our physical world.

ANGLE ON -- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the front row. Hanging on every word.

Houdini gestures to his assistant FANNIE (24) wearing a glittering skimpy outfit, face heavy with makeup.

HOUDINI (CONT'D)  
Fannie will be helping me this evening. Fannie, say hello.

She blows a generous kiss. The audience HOOTS with glee.

ANGLE ON -- Rose staring at Fannie. Mesmerized.

BACK ONSTAGE

Houdini raises his chains.

HOUDINI  
Let us begin.

An explosion of sound and light, and suddenly Houdini is free from his chains, holding them aloft in victory.

We FLASH between the stage and the rows around Rose and Lucy in the audience. We see bits and pieces of Houdini's hour-long performance -- never a complete trick, only the set-up of one, the follow-through of another. Sound propels us forward: chains CLATTERING, a box being SLAMMED shut, a thundering DRUM ROLL -- and throughout, the delighted GASPS of the crowd.

We're most focused on the REACTIONS of the audience. We PUSH tighter in on Rose, watching carefully and silently.

ONSTAGE

The finale. Houdini -- wrapped again in even more chains -- plunges into an enormous tank of water with a great SPLASH.

IN THE AUDIENCE

Everyone looks away in shock. Except Rose. She leans forward, extreme focus on her face. Bites her nails thoughtfully.

CLOSE ON her eyes. A ROAR of APPLAUSE erupts and we --

SMASH TO:

EXT. WINTER GARDEN THEATER - LATER

Rose and Lucy are pushed along with the crowd as they walk out of the theater and onto the city streets. Lucy's cheeks are flushed with exhilaration.

LUCY

...upside down in all that water, I mean can you imagine? How terrifying that must have been, my heart was pounding, it's still pounding! To think he does that every night.

Rose is deep in thought.

ROSE

How do you think he did it?

LUCY

Oh but that would spoil it! I don't even *want* to know.

ROSE

There was a sadness about him. Didn't you think so?

Lucy tosses her head back and laughs.

LUCY

Sometimes, Rose, I really don't understand you.

We linger on Rose's thoughtful face and then FLY up and back toward the theater, moving in the opposite direction from the crowd, continuing over their heads and then PUSHING INTO --

THE THEATER

We FLY over the auditorium where CREW MEMBERS sweep the aisles, and on toward the STAGE where more CREW MEMBERS re-set Houdini's equipment.

We keep pushing BACKSTAGE and through the snaking hallways, arriving finally at a DRESSING ROOM door labeled "H.H." and we push into --

HOUDINI'S DRESSING ROOM

Houdini, his shirt half-buttoned, shakes hands with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, mid-conversation.

DOYLE  
(conspiratorially,  
w/Scottish accent)  
Now one thing I must know...how is  
it that your hair isn't even wet?

HOUDINI  
(chuckling)  
I assure you there is a completely  
rational explanation, Sir Doyle.

DOYLE  
Please. Call me Arthur. After all  
our letters, I feel as though we  
have known each other for years.  
Though I must say, I thought you  
would be taller.

Houdini laughs good-naturedly.

HOUDINI  
And you, Arthur, are quite tall  
enough for the both of us.

Doyle puts a hand on Houdini's shoulder, suddenly serious.

DOYLE  
Now, I know you received the  
invitation to my lecture at  
Carnegie Hall tomorrow evening. But  
I still have not heard if you'll be  
in attendance.

Houdini buttons up his shirt, uncomfortable.

HOUDINI  
I've told you I'm not convinced,  
Arthur.

DOYLE  
Yes, yes, you know a great deal  
about the negative side of  
Spiritualism. I hope you will  
remain open to the positive side.

HOUDINI  
It must be a wonderful feeling, to  
converse with your son as you say  
you do.

DOYLE  
It is.  
(after a beat)  
(MORE)

DOYLE (CONT'D)

I understand you have been trying  
to speak with your mother.

HOUDINI

Trying, yes...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. SEANCE PARLOR - A WEEK EARLIER

A dark parlor lit only by candles. A MEDIUM (late 30's) draped in flowing black scarves sits at one end of the room, her hands by her sides, a silver trumpet in her lap.

MEDIUM

(moaning theatrically)

Spirits...if you are present, give  
us a sign!

Among the dozen MOURNERS is a MAN with blonde hair and a blonde mustache. It's Houdini, in disguise. Watching carefully.

BACK ON -- the Medium. The trumpet in her lap begins to levitate.

As the audience GASPS in astonishment, Houdini's eyes rove around the room, landing on a BUTLER standing inconspicuously behind the mourners. There's something in the Butler's hands, but it's too dark to tell what it is. Houdini sighs, then strides over to push aside a heavy curtain blocking out a window.

Bright sunlight floods the parlor, revealing a pulley system the Butler is operating to make the trumpet "levitate." The Medium looks panicked as the mourners erupt in protest. Houdini leaves, ripping off his mustache and wig as he goes.

BACK TO:

HOUDINI'S DRESSING ROOM

Houdini shakes his head.

HOUDINI

I'm becoming quite convinced that  
Spiritualism is entirely a sham,  
Arthur. A scheme to prey upon the  
grief of the masses.

DOYLE

You and I both are invested in doing away with the charlatans who abuse the movement. The only difference is that I have met a real medium, and you have not. Yet. Come to my lecture tomorrow. Bring an open mind. That's all I ask.

With that, Doyle walks out, leaving the door open.

HOUDINI (V.O.)

*Hold out your apron, mother.*

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. HOTEL ROOM - TEN YEARS EARLIER

*An expensive hotel room. Houdini, dressed in fine clothes, holds a heavy cloth sack. His mother Cecilia sits on the bed. She looks uncomfortable around so much finery.*

*She holds out her apron. With a manic energy, Houdini starts pouring the contents of the sack into her apron: a steady stream of heavy gold coins. Cecilia stares at the coins, then at her son, in disbelief. Even fear.*

CECILIA

*(Hungarian w/English subtitles)*

*Ehrich...I don't want this...*

BACK TO:

HOUDINI'S DRESSING ROOM

Houdini SLAMS the door to his dressing room shut.

SMASH TO:

INT. IRT SUBWAY CAR - THE NEXT MORNING

Rose perches on a wooden bench in a crowded subway car, reading "The Return of Sherlock Holmes" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Her eyes are glued to the page, devouring every word.