

Title: The Happy Man

Writer: David M. O'Neill

Novel: Eric Higgs

Format: Film – Script Available

Genre: Current Day - Suburban Suspense Thriller - Current Day, Chula Vista California

Tone: "Get Out" meets "Hannibal".

Logline: "When Charles Ripley needs a friend, Ruskin Marsh is all too willing to be one."

Sites: [David M O'Neill](#) / [Awards - Reel](#) / [The Happy Man](#)

The Happy Man novel was originally introduced to me by James Waterson of St. Martin's Press in New York City. I read the book and some years later tracked down the author Eric Higgs in Palm Springs California to discuss the possibility of adapting his work for the screen. Eric's descriptions were penetrating in a number of ways; the tight execution of its narrative, and the author's uncompromising execution of a man who had lost his way.

The Story is that of a man's slow and sinister downfall when a magnetic couple buys the empty home next door and moves in. Higgs weaves an enlightening and menacing tale of a contemporary couple's downward spiral as they're introduced to those finer, darker aspects of the American Dream, and, along with the incalculable costs from its vigorous pursuits.

When a handsome and uncompromising **Ruskin Marsh** moves his family in to the house next door, **Charles Ripley**, fatigued by a tired, married-life and that of his own life-long surrender to a grinding 9 to 5, sees in Ruskin a man so supremely alive that for the first time, realizes the extent to which his own passions – for intellectual activity and some basic, simple male companionship, have become deadened under the pressures and stresses of the American Dream.

Ripley sees in Marsh a man (unlike himself) who has not fallen prey to life's pressures and is still very much intoxicated with its discoveries – even if only fed by aggressive and unyielding appetites. Ruskin is a man of rare, unnatural ripeness, a connoisseur of the arts, a high-powered lawyer, perfect husband and father, an effortless seducer of exquisite women wherever he sees them – in other words, everything Charles Ripley is not. Unfortunately, envy can grow ugly in the *field-of-want* and its now Charles who finds himself squarely gazing from his own decaying orchard. What he wants is what Ruskin possesses, and regretfully for Mr. Ripley - he eventually gets it.

The story begins on a particular Wednesday afternoon, when the luckless, Sparklett's Delivery Man finds Ruskin's backyard sliding glass door wide open. He's led inside by a rancorous smell, and is greeted by a pack of satisfied, feral coyotes who step out from behind the velour drapes. Their bloody faces, swinging, and satisfied bellies drag on the rear deck filled with the Marsh's remains. Inside, both Ruskin and wife Sybil Marsh, lie torn apart both by gunfire and the neighboring pack of wild, arroyo dogs.

It's from only next door, Charles looks on through the kitchen window, rinsing the three-day-old, dried and caked blood off his hands, while picking a red, snapped, broken fingernail out of his lower back. With wife gone, and with the neighbor's blood on his hands, Charles' unhinged fall from grace is now all but complete. It seemed like Charles had met a friend in Ruskin Marsh. Ruskin was someone to confide in - a confidant that could be relied on, a wing man to share the weight of middle-age. Ruskin had led the way back for Charles to find himself born again as the sole broker of his life – those youthful, and familiar sweet tastes returning of those things once thought to be lost.

However, as the long, arid-summer had been runs its course, Chula Vista's young-girls begin to vanish, marriages end violently over neighborhood barbeques and nights are split with distant, endless and desperate screams. Charles Ripley too faces his-own upheaval of evolution – from sedate to predatory, from hibernation to the spring hunt, where his own, carefully, crafted suburban order, finds itself in irreversible decline.

Baited by the darker *delicacies* of Ruskin's hostility, Ripley's quiet, predictable world, all but fades. Where the light of reason and the neighborhood's cooperative setting is formally extinguished, and where animal passions gain the upper-hand, poor Charles Ripley is ill-prepared for what is to come - that of his own crowning anointment personified by an unimaginable final banquet feast – the table set by Ruskin of The Antico Usanza - (The Ancient Way). *The partaking of the beauty of life.*

But, as we've seen in the beginning, it's Ruskin and wife Sybil who had somehow met their-own fate – unknowingly to us, at the very hands of Charles himself. Ripley's dormant aggressions over time fully bloom. His own deadened field of sensibilities find for the first time their own brutal renaissance. It's Ruskin who underestimates Charles' own determination to make himself clean from they're friendship, from Ruskin's twisted effect – Ruskin's influence, and it's Charles who actually makes it Ruskin's last meal.

The carnage is accounted for and misunderstood by authorities as probable drug-runners, border killings. Visited by an emissary from the Antico, Charles is given a strict invitation to officially join the dark assembly. "All matters of Ruskin can be put behind". "Join us", the man says. To the visitor's surprise, Charles clings to what little morality he still possesses, overtakes the man and extinguishes the evil. The dead man's phone rings but this time its Charles who takes the call and now it's Charles who knows what must be done.

Escaping Chula Vista to the presidio in San Francisco, Charles locates the underground home-base of the Antico Usanza. There, gathering, those from the upper tiers of society begin to arrive.

Charles lies in wait and watches the broad spectrum of life's winners valet their Royals Royce Shadows and Phantoms. He lights a Molotov cocktail, setting his own car on fire leaving not a trace behind of his work to come - double-checks Ruskin's automatic Sten MK-2 and begins walking towards the underground, homicidal gathering. He considers his last thoughts of this world; "If Ruskin could only see me now, without a hinge of hesitation. A moment to let them drink it in, a moment to let them feel what was about to happen. Time for them to look upon their sin, and time enough to have looked upon mine." A finger trembles as it rests. The people from the room below momentarily look up – just enough to see Charles and to what's coming. His forefinger then finds its place easing inside the Magpul trigger guard – his first unselfish act.

Summary: The Happy Man finds its contemporary relevancy not in the horror in-of-itself, but in the playground of story which examines what it means to be socially vulnerable, living in a world of unrelenting competition, that suffocating feeling of, "Is this it?" "Is this where all the work over time has led me?" Gluttony for the sake of social standing, where the horizon line of day-to-day consumerism mounts and destroys the consumed, the cannibalism fueled by force-upon appetites – the place of America which pits neighbor against neighbor in the myriad of competitive ways, the disposable nature of relationships – the torrid trajectories of where that can lead – ultimately where there is nothing else to consume and then a moral question on one's participation in it, and its way out by the only redemptive thing one can do.