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Love for Beginners

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requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

Abstract: The purpose of this exegesis is to ascertain and explore the genre of the screenplay *Love for Beginners*, the emotional truth of the narrative and development of the narrative itself. The main points of the exegesis are defining the genre of the screenplay as a hybrid of the psychological horror/romantic comedy genres, and the development of the screenplay from an initial concept through to the first draft, from the first to the second draft, and finally the second draft through to a polished second draft.

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

John Renowden

Part One: GENRE ANALYSIS

AIM: The aim of this section is to demonstrate your understanding that a film or TV project is designed for an audience who bring expectations based on their perception of that project's genre (or sub-genre).

1. Define the term "genre", including the different ways it is used by the screen industry compared to academics/theorists.

"The way in which the genre term is applied can quite conceivably vary from case to case. Genre notions – except the special case of arbitrary definition – are not critics' classifications made for special purposes; they are sets of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be."¹

The term 'genre' is best defined through the lens of purpose. An academic definition, in fulfilling entirely different requirements than that of an industry practitioner, can utilize a degree of abstractedness that the industry definition cannot. The academic does not have audience as her primary concern, as an industry practitioner must. The purpose of academic film criticism is often one of exploration, in the broadest sense of the word, and as such genre should in this regard be seen as something akin to a lens by which an academic may do so.

"It is for precisely this reason that notions of genre are potentially so interesting – but more for the exploration of the psychological and sociological interplay between filmmaker, film and audience than for the immediate purposes of film criticism."²

While an academic can rely on 'collective beliefs' and can conceivably argue for the existence of a wider variety of narratives that share a collection of these collective beliefs (thus

¹ Tudor, A. *Genre*, 7.

² *Ibid.*

implying a genre), the practitioner is limited to a definition of genre recognized by audience. In terms of defining by purpose, genre is a tool for the audience and any definition must take this into account. While an academic definition is for academics, a practitioners' definition must be for an audience.

An audience uses genre as a tool to interpret the kind of experience that they will have when engaging with the text at hand.

“Genres are not static or rigid, but evolving and flexible, yet firm and stable enough to be identified and worked with.”³

An audience recognizes genre in much the same way that the industry practitioner defines the term. It is an instinctive definition defined by broad shared characteristics between films that they collate into loose groupings. An audience uses genre in an attempt to identify the kind of experience they will have when they engage with the text, in order that they can discern whether or not the text in question is the kind of experience that they wish to engage with or define. An audience, quite simply, has no trouble interpreting a film within the broad categories and expectations that practitioners painstakingly attempt to construct their film within and against.

Genre as defined by industry relies on a broader, more intuitive sense closely aligned with an audience understanding of the term. While technically they too rely on genre as a collection of shared collective beliefs, an industry definition has in addition a relationship with the expectations and constructs that an audience recognizes as an integral part of the genre experience. Conventions play an important role in this definition not necessarily necessitated by the academic definition.

³ McKee, R. *Story*, 86.

Genre is defined by purpose, and while academics utilize a definition that recognizes shared collective beliefs, this definition is for academics themselves and does not fit the more intuitive ‘grouping’ mechanism that an audience recognizes, and therefore the definition by which industry constructs a text.

2. Identify the genre of your screenplay. This will most often mean: the *sub-genre*. Then name three screenplays of produced films or TV projects which are also examples of this genre or sub-genre.

The genre of *Love for Beginners* is romantic-comedy/psychological horror hybrid. Three films that I believe are examples of this genre are *Buffalo '66* (1998), *Vertigo* (1958) and the *Twilight* saga (2008).

3. Make a case that this genre is recognized by the industry. For evidence, you will need to reference: leading film or TV critics, distributors/exhibitors/marketers, filmmakers & production companies, and the audience (for example, texts such as fan-sites)

Given the hybrid nature of the genre of *Love for Beginners* I consider that there are antecedents to the genre rather than the genre itself being recognized by the industry. Stephanie Meyer, in discussing *Twilight*, defined the text as “suspense romance horror comedy”⁴. This hybrid of genres, particularly in the romance-horror-comedy aspect, makes a case for the genre that I believe operates within *Love for Beginners*. While *Love for Beginners* does not itself rely on the supernatural horror of *Twilight*, the horror element is psychological in a similar way to that of *Vertigo*, a film noir psychological horror narrative. Both of these films, along with *Buffalo '66*, blend romance and comedy with elements of different kinds of horror to generate

⁴ <http://ew.com/article/2008/07/05/interview-vampire-writer-stephenie-meyer/>

a kind of love story uncommon in film history but not without precedent. *Buffalo '66*, the film which I would consider to be the strongest tonal precedent, is the story of a “social misfit who is saved from emotional annihilation by the girl he kidnaps”.⁵ This narrative employs very similar elements of blending psychological horror with a comedic and romantic storyline to resolve the childhood issues of the protagonist.

I believe that this hybrid-genre is a development of the contemporary love-story that demands a higher development of psychological complexity from the characters in confronting their compatibility than previous generations of love stories, which have tended to rely on more simplistic differences that provide the conflict that must be overcome to ensure the compatibility of the characters in question. The romantic comedy/psychological horror genre that I consider *Love for Beginners* to be a part of widens the parameters of the contemporary love story. In the same way that *Twilight* can be first and foremost a love story, just as *Buffalo '66* can be, I consider that first and foremost *Love for Beginners* is a love story that relies on different genre elements that arise as a result of the genre blending in order to enhance the psychological complexity of the love story between the principal characters themselves.

4. Summarize the history of that genre (on screen and also in other formats if applicable). (600 words)

The love story in and of itself is one of the oldest stories that human culture has, and for thousands of years have been expressed in a variety of different ways. The basic formula utilized in these stories is still the setup used extensively within the genre: two people meet,

⁵ https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/buffalo_66/

are prevented from being together as a result of a conflict, and eventually reunite, to live in happiness.

The birth of the genre on film came with the emergence of ‘talkies’ in the form of the ‘comedies of manners’. These films generally focussed on the clash of classes, where the conflict keeping the couple apart tended to arise out of the differences between rich and poor. These films – written in the Depression years – told audiences that love could transcend wealth, a message of hope. An example of this era was *It Happened One Night* (1934). Screwball comedies followed from this, with films such as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), where the films aimed to move their stories in unexpected directions and relied heavily on snappy dialogue and slapstick comedy, along with the protagonist often being female. Throughout the 1950’s up until the early 1970’s, romantic-comedy films tended to be focussed on sex (gender) comedy, highlighting the differences between men and woman and utilizing these differences to create and exacerbate the conflict. Typically, these films pitted a man and woman together as professional rivals who, in the process of their professional conflict, develop a romantic connection. An example of these ‘battle of the sexes’ films was *Desk Set* (1957). Societal shifts in the West during this time helped to create this relevance, with Kinsey’s work opening up conversations about female sexuality, the emergence of *Playboy* magazine, and the ending the Hayes code all contributing in this regard. While innuendo and ploys were used frequently throughout earlier romantic-comedies in order to comply with the repressive, puritanical demands of the Hayes code, the sexual revolution of the 1960’s changed the way people saw romantic comedies. With the ability to talk freely about topics previously considered taboo, these films took on a tone of cynicism that defined the era as radical romantic comedies. This cynicism found itself questioning whether or not true love existed, and did not require a happily ever after that was a common up until this point. These films focussed instead on the happiness

of the individuals and their needs, and ultimately the idea that romantic love was not a solution to all problems nor the only path to happiness – with *Annie Hall* (1977) as a prime example.

Contemporary romantic comedies have reverted to a kind of neo-traditionalism. Rather than a focus upon sex or gender differences, these films often deemphasize sex and focus instead on compatibility, with films such as *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). Compromises and change is required from both partners to make the relationship work, and often contain characters whose incompatibility is used to drive the conflict until the character recognize the need to change for the sake of the relationship and tend to lack the cynicism of the radical era, returning instead to emphasize more the romantic element of the romantic-comedy genre.

The hybrid nature of the genre at play demands an acknowledgement of the history of the blending between the psychological horror and the romantic-comedy. I consider that the antecedents to this blending began with the Greeks, with *Oedipus Rex* in particular where the ‘love-story’ is complicated by elements of psychological horror. Supernatural horror came into play with *Dracula* (1897) and continued with *Twilight. Buffalo '66* successfully blended elements of both genres (psychological horror and romantic-comedy) and allows for the growth of psychological complexity within more contemporary love stories and for the elements of psychological horror to aid in the conflict that keeps the romantic partners apart throughout the narrative.

5. Identify the key signifiers of this genre in story and screenplay.

In terms of the love story, Billy Mernit⁶ identifies seven key structural signifiers.

⁶ Mernit, B. *Writing the Romantic Comedy*, 2000.

1. The 'chemical equation': we meet the main character/characters, and find out 'what's wrong with this picture'; i.e. what is stopping the character from finding love.
2. The 'cute-meet': usually occurring at the same point and operating as the inciting incident, this is the first meeting between the two people whose relationship will develop.
3. The 'sexy complication' turning point: occurring usually at the end of the first act, the couple has by this point been revealed to be perfect for each other, but there's a catch, a complication, that is going to keep them apart. Will their love survive this complication?
4. The mid-point: operating in many ways like a traditional midpoint, in the romantic comedy this point of no return usually tweaks sexual tensions and puts the relationship on a crash course with the antagonist, or at least binds the protagonist to the antagonist in some way.
5. Swivel/second act turning point: occurring at the end of the second act, a decision is made that results in the romantic relationship being jeopardized. Their love has not survived the complication.
6. 'Dark crisis' climax: the consequences of the swivel decision are faced, usually with particular motivations being revealed.
7. Joyful resolution: an ending that implies some kind of enduring happiness, usually in the form of a long-term commitment or 'happily-ever-after', which occurs at some cost to one or both of the characters.

With regards to the structural signifiers of the psychological horror I refer to Blake Snyder's structural analysis of the 'Monster in the House' genre. In his analysis, he regards three key elements as essential:

- 1) A "monster", supernatural in its powers – even if its strength derives from insanity – and "evil" at its core.
- 2) A "house," meaning an enclosed space that can include a family unit, and entire town, or the "world."
- 3) A "sin." Someone is guilty of bringing the monster into the house... A transgression that can include ignorance.⁷

6. Explain the expectations of this genre's contemporary audience.

The demand for psychological complexity is perhaps the most important expectation of the contemporary audience of the love story. The expectations tend to focus on neo-traditional issues of compatibility, which allows for the genre of contemporary love story to be broadened out to include hybrid genres that include the genre explored in *Love for Beginners* (psychological horror/romantic-comedy). The genre hybrid in this regard allows for exploration of psychological complexity demanded by the contemporary audience. The contemporary audience expects both internal and external conflicts to provide obstacles to the compatibility in a psychologically complex manner.

7. Explain how your screenplay fulfils those expectations.

⁷ Snyder, B. *Save the Cat! Goes to the Movies*, 2007.

Love for Beginners fulfils these expectations in several ways.

- 1) Neo-traditional issues of compatibility and psychological complexity: Peter and Erica intimacy issues initially prevent them from achieving compatibility, and these issues are not only caused (on Peter's part) by Ingrid's previous but exacerbated by her ongoing behaviour until eventually Peter kills her in order that, in part, he can attain intimacy with Erica. These issues are the result of psychological complexity that escalates the narrative towards a very particular resolution. Furthermore, even though Peter and Erica end the film living wild in the Coromandel Ranges seemingly in conflict with the more traditional love story ending, their bond implies a commitment consistent with traditional expectations of the genre.
- 2) Internal and external conflicts providing obstacles: The internal conflicts to the attainment of intimacy between Peter and Erica are the elements that are most consistent with the expectations of the contemporary audience of the love story. The psychological complexity of their inner conflicts that prevent Peter and Erica from simply falling in love and walking away provide the justification for this being a story at all. The external conflict with Ingrid that provides such a strong external conflict to their love in a way that is more often fulfilled by a rival but is however consistent with the genre

8. Explain how your screenplay provides the audience for this genre a fresh perspective on the genre.

I believe that *Love for Beginners* provides the audience for this genre with a fresh perspective on the genre in several ways.

Firstly, *Love for Beginners* blends genre elements not usually present in the love story genre. To my knowledge, the protagonist of no other love story murders his own mother in

his/her path to intimacy. The genre hybrid allows for the escalation of stakes beyond what is commonly found in the romantic comedy and forces the characters to go above and beyond to attain intimacy. The arc of the protagonist is, as a result, significantly escalated.

Secondly, there is a tonal difference between this and other love stories that makes the story unique. The elements of black comedy, a dark tone and dark narrative events combine to ensure that the film rides an edginess not commonly found in traditional love stories.

Thirdly, the scale and consequences of the choices at stake within the narrative are significantly more consequential than traditionally explored within the romantic comedy. The traditional romantic comedy usually operates with lower stakes. While the consequences for the protagonist in another romantic-comedy may be ending up with the wrong romantic partner, loneliness or 'spiritual death', the stakes at play within *Love for Beginners* are literal death, and the only way that love can be attained (in the mind of the protagonist) is through the act of murder. These are not stakes usually explored within the traditional love story.

Part Two A: EMOTIONAL TRUTH

AIM: The overall aim of this section is to demonstrate your understanding of how a script develops, from concept through to polished second draft.

a) Emotional truth

(i) Describe the ‘emotional truth’ you intend the audience to recognize in this screenplay.

The emotional truth that I intend the audience to recognize in this screenplay is that we all must eventually push our parents away in order to achieve intimacy, and it will be painful for all involved. Peter – like most people – seeks love, but as his mother, Ingrid, blames him for ruining her life, she has chipped away at him piece by piece to the point where he would not be able to attain it even if he were to try with her in the picture. And it is only as a result of pushing her away – though the act is committed tenderly, he still kills her – that he is able to attain the love that he seeks. The power of love is enough to transform Peter himself, so that he may walk away, but when Ingrid refuses to allow him to do so, he is forced to take more drastic measures to free himself from her.

(ii) What makes this a powerful emotional truth to dramatize? Your answer could refer to psychology, history, another film that tried to articulate the same thing, or any number of external (as opposed to personal) reference points.

I believe that this is a powerful emotional truth to dramatize as the consequences of living in a world without an objective moral law requires all human beings to make decisions that are essentially teleological suspensions of the ethical – much the same as that faced by Abraham atop Mount Moriah – albeit, without God, justified only in terms of the life of the individual and according to their own subjectivity. Comparable to Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, who commits an act wholly condemned by moral

standards, Peter has to push away his mother, potentially the most difficult act a son can comprehend, for the sake of intimacy – but this emotional truth is one that we all must confront not just in drama, but in our own lives.

Given the non-mainstream tone of *Love for Beginners*, I would acknowledge that it is the audience who is capable of accepting and resolving the tonal extremes of the narrative that will be able to acknowledge and accept this emotional truth.

Part Two B: DEVELOPMENT

1) From Initial Synopsis to First Draft

Synopsis of First Draft: Peter Young, a thirty-year-old door-to-door salesman, lives with his mother Ingrid, a nasty, overbearing woman who despises his existence. In spite of this, Peter pursues her approval more than anything else, unable to recognize the deep psychological abuse she has inflicted upon that have rendered him incapable of sustaining normal human relationships – which he supplicates by taking voyeuristic photos of strangers enjoying intimate relationships and keeping them in his attic. One day, Peter breaks his mother's washing machine and convinces her to let him get it fixed. But due to his inability to make social connections (therefore, rendering him terrible at his job) he is unable to afford to get it fixed, and though he tries everything he is forced to head back home in the rain with his broken washing machine. However, he crosses the road with the washing machine, walking out in front of Erica, a brash fine arts student currently living in her van. Though initially mad, they end up spending the night together, where Peter fails sexually with her, though he does take a voyeuristic nude photo of her as a souvenir of their night together against her knowledge. To get themselves both out of a hole, they decide to run a scam with the broken washing machine, converting it into a sculpture that they sell to a naïve buyer. Their involvement develops into a

relationship, and when Peter's mother discovers this, she embarks on a mission to tear them apart. But when this escalates to the point where she plans to murder Erica, Peter is forced to take matters into his own hands and he pushes her out of the window of their attic, killing her. With their scam backfiring and Erica in the firing line, the pair flee the county together.

Development of First Draft: In the development from the synopsis to the beat-sheet, I made several key changes. Firstly, in the synopsis I had the plot of the film carried out with Peter attending the wedding of his estranged ex-wife, with whom his mother was still in a toxic relationship with, and where Peter – finally pushed too far – decides to blow the wedding party to smithereens in a fiery explosion, but at the last moment decides to pursue Erica instead – only to discover that she did it for him. Tonally this played more comedic than I had initially envisioned and aside from numerous action line issues I found that the device of having their relationship play out over the course of a single weekend too compact for the character of Peter. I felt that given the scope of the arc I was trying to design him through, a single weekend was too short of a time for this to occur. Secondly, as I was struggling to figure out the relationship line between Erica and Peter, in the beat-sheet I decided to play with the idea of having them carry out a 'caper' in order to draw them together in an experience of shared hardship in order to create for them a vehicle to intimacy. Thirdly, I tried to pull away somewhat from what I felt was an excessive comedic tone by avoiding the killing of the Peter's entire friend and family group, and having him instead turn away from the act of murder as an act of character growth instead.

The direction that development took then had one bold change in particular, along with several other key changes that helped move relationship lines forward in their development even though they failed spectacularly in their execution. I made the decision to remove the character of Nina, the estranged ex-wife of Peter, and instead focus on the triangulation between Peter, his mother Ingrid, and Erica. I felt that having both Nina and Ingrid in the story

was redundant as they both represented two sides of the same coin and what I wanted to achieve could be done more effectively with a single character. It was in this grappling with the narrative that I ascertained the action that would need to be taken in order to take Peter ‘to the end of the line’ in terms of his narrative: Ingrid had to die. This decision was instinctual at this point but I felt in my bones that if I could discover the narrative that would result in this being the only option left for Peter the audience would accept it and the ending would be both satisfying and shocking, something I had aspired to from the outset of the process. In this version of the narrative I decided to experiment with infusing the plot with more and more surreal elements; for example, where Peter and Erica row a boat across the floor of a large sound stage. The surreal elements were able to be massaged reasonably effectively with the caper action line. But the most important discovery of this version of the narrative was that of the establishment of the dramatic question AND the ending that would answer it: will Peter be able to push his mother away enough to attain an intimate relationship with Erica? Yes, but only by killing her.

Pushing forward into the writing of the first draft involved an almost complete rewrite of the story once again, given the spectacular failure of the surreal elements to tell the story that I was trying to tell. By forcing the story back towards realism, I was able to consider several action line options for the characters that allowed me to figure out more appropriate arcs. It was in this that I began to have Peter take photos of intimate moments between people then hiding the printed Polaroids within hidden shoeboxes. I felt that this allowed me to use Peter’s behaviour to inform the audience of his incompleteness – his need for intimacy – far better than the previous attempts to do so, which had been vague and had never really been noticed by readers, leading to confusion. By distilling his problem into action that involved decisions, I felt would in turn allow me to use this in behaviour in key turning points within the story. Furthermore, with particular reference to a scene at the end of the first act, the photo that Peter

takes of Erica was a symbol that I felt could be used throughout the film, gaining power as it changed meaning to Peter and to the audience as his growth determined. This draft still grappled with the idea of using a caper to drive the plot, but with the surreal aspects removed I was able to begin experimenting with the use of beats that truly escalated the tension rather than watching the changes in the characters occur all too easily in vague surrealism. This draft was also the first in which we saw on screen Peter responsible for his mother's death in order to attain Erica's love, with all other attempts up until this point either somewhat removed, excessively comedic, overly symbolic, or avoided entirely.

2) From First Draft to Second Draft

Synopsis of Second Draft: Peter Young, an aspiring marathon runner, is in the week leading up to the biggest race of his life, his last-ditch attempt at qualifying for the Olympic Games. Under the tutelage of his coach Michael, who doesn't have the heart to tell him that he's never going to make it, and with the constant presence of his cruel, overbearing mother Ingrid, all hopes and dreams of happiness for Peter lie in his qualification, which Peter believes would gain him the approval of his mother, a lifelong pursuit that has eluded him. But what Peter truly wants is love, even though he knows that he is too emotionally disturbed to ever have this as an ambition. Besides, his mother would never allow it. That is until Erica, a free-spirited, brash young woman living in her van crashes into his life. As Peter falls in love with her, he tries to pull away from his mother; until he realizes that she will not allow him to do so, and he is forced to try harder and harder to push her away. When Ingrid jeopardizes his relationship with Erica, Peter must push her away indefinitely; for Peter to find love, Ingrid must pay the ultimate price. This is a story about how we must all push our parents away in order to achieve intimacy, and it will be painful for all involved. At heart, it is a love story, where two young nihilists each struggle towards that which is most difficult for each of them, intimacy. It is about how our past shapes not only our present, but our future, and how confronting the truth of our past

allows each of us to resolve the unresolved conflicts that lay at the heart of our neuroses. It is about the transformative power of love, and how it allows us to change, and the dizzying power of choice, where we are frighteningly free to choose the life that we lead, overwhelmingly aware of the cost of our choices.

Development of Second Draft: The first major change between the first and second draft was that of a major shift in the action line of the film. While Peter maintains his job as a door-to-door salesman, I decided that the ambition that Ingrid invoked in Peter in pursuit of her approval – bourgeois, vague and shapeless – would be better served if it was an unattainable yet very tangible goal – that of running at the Olympics. By making this shift I felt that Peter had more to lose in the action line of the film if it was something more directly related to what he himself was more invested in, rather than – in the first draft – a plan that he came up with in conjunction with someone he had just met in an area where he was, while completely out of his comfort zone and ill-equipped to deal with the task at hand, less invested in its outcome. Furthermore, it allowed Ingrid a legitimate purpose and method of pulling him back under her control as Erica became more and more of an influence within his life and as a result, he pulled further and further away.

The second major change was that of a major upheaval of the second act turning point. In the first draft, the lead I had taken in this regard was from *Buffalo '66*, where at the end of the second act Billy leaves Layla in a motel room, with their relationship – though not consummated – on good terms, and in this regard I had had the same structure in my own story, with the third act following how Peter confronted this relationship (with Erica) with his mother, where he had to make choices that favoured Erica, and ultimately choose to pursue his romantic relationship in favour of his maternal relationship – in much the same way that the third act of *Buffalo '66* focussed on Billy's confrontation with Scott Norwood. However, I felt that the stakes could be escalated if the romantic relationship was genuinely in jeopardy and hung in

the balance over whether or not he actually did manage to push Ingrid away. At the second act turning point, where Erica has invited Peter over for dinner with her parents and has told him that if he doesn't turn up, their relationship is over, and Ingrid, to stop him leaving, chops off her own fingers to force him to take her to the hospital, the relationship is seemingly dead in the water, with Peter then faced with the decision of having to make drastic and consequential changes in order to attain her love. Having resisted change so strongly throughout this second draft, attempting instead to maintain both his relationship with Ingrid and his budding relationship with Erica, it now stood that he would have to choose, with the drastic consequences that would follow from this choice. I felt that this greatly enhanced the story as – in my opinion, the most important question raised throughout the film -will Peter and Erica end up together – is kept alive most perilously throughout this structure, maintaining a much higher degree of interest in the third act.

The third major change was that of the ending of the film – specifically, the manner in which Ingrid was to die. While I was settled early on the idea of her dying as a result of her attempting to keep Peter from intimacy with Erica, in the first draft this death occurred as the result of an accident – she slipped and fell to her death in an attempt to stop Peter from leaving. However, I considered that this did not sufficiently take Peter's arc to 'the end of the line', where I felt it was not simply enough for Peter to pull away from Ingrid, but that he had to push her away. Killing her – if this could be crafted as the absolute last resort, and absolutely necessary – would be the appropriate course of action to be taken by Peter in order to most effectively and permanently push her away. This decision – perhaps understandably – was the most difficult to make, as there was the grave concern that this would alienate the audience: the act of murdering one's mother – particularly a widow, and one who has done so much for her child – is a difficult action to demand as necessary, particularly within a love story – not a genre commonly associated with matricide, and throughout plot outlines that followed

throughout the process between first and second draft, several versions erred back on the side of caution with regards to this action. However, it was my firm belief at the end of writing the second draft that although my execution left a lot to be desired, it was the most appropriate course of action for the story that I wish to tell.

3) From Second Draft to Polished Second Draft

Synopsis of Polished Second Draft: Twelve days out from the race where he will attempt to qualify for the Olympics, Peter Young suffers an exercise-induced heart attack. Although a cardiologist tells Peter that he may die if he races, he leaves the hospital against their advice and hides this information from his overbearing mother, whose obsession with his pursuit of qualifying borders on madness and is at striking odds with her tendency to get drunk and blame Peter for ruining her life. Faced with this inability to tell his mother about the heart attack, Peter pursues a romantic relationship with Erica, an outspoken, ridiculous woman whose fear of intimacy is as strong as his own desperate need to be loved. In an attempt to prove to Erica that he does not need her (a condition that would destroy any hope of a relationship with her) Peter moves out of home – however, he is unable to tell Ingrid, his mother, about the heart attack, out of fear that his inability to qualify would prevent him from attaining her approval. Having told Erica that he did tell his mother, when the lie is revealed the relationship is seemingly lost, but Peter is more devastated by the knowledge that his mother would prefer that he would risk his life by running than to seize her chance to be the mother he always thought she was. But when Peter chooses to pull out of the race, Ingrid blames Erica and seeks to kill her – but Peter kills Ingrid first, with the help of Erica. They flee to the wilderness.

The story is about how we must all push away our parents in order to achieve intimacy and how it will be painful for all involved. Furthermore, it is about the ability to let go of the

decisions and desires that destroy us, the freedom to make different choices, and the courage to pursue those choices no matter what the consequences.

Development of Polished Second Draft: The changes made in the development from second draft to a polished version were again significant and focussed predominantly on four key changes: 1) the decision to focus the A-story of the film upon the relationship between Peter and Ingrid; 2) the decision to make Ingrid initially unaware of the heart condition; 3) shifting the relationship between Peter and Erica to a bond that balances out the darkness of the A-story and 4) how the character of Erica leads to the ending.

In the previous drafts, the film was structured as a traditional love story, with the beats in the romantic line essentially lining up as the beats in the A-story. However, through this structure I was constantly perplexed by the problem that Peter would essentially be replacing the one woman in his life with another. By shifting the relationship with Erica to the B-story, I was able to focus more accurately on the story beats that were necessary to occur in the character arc of Peter as Peter made the changes necessary to his path of growth. Rather than Ingrid responding directly just to the presence of another woman, I felt that Ingrid resenting his growth was a far more emotionally-engaging path for the film to follow and one that avoids the problem of replacement. Rather, Peter is able to love and be loved as a result of his growth. However, I felt that this structural change in no way forced me to change the genre of the film itself, and simply allowed me to manipulate the story to my own ends.

By making Ingrid initially unaware of the heart condition, suspense was the key reward. I was able to play with the idea of the secret and use decisions around this to create mystery and intrigue – for example, Peter’s decision not to tell Ingrid, his decision to tell Erica, his decision to lie to Erica about telling Ingrid. By making this choice I opened up more decisions that Peter could make in his growth arc and allowing the story to have more dramatic action

that had been present in the previous draft. Furthermore, I was able to use this at the second act turning point – with Ingrid reacting completely differently when she learnt of the heart attack than what Peter expected, exacerbating the problems Peter was already experiencing at the time.

Another problem I struggled with was that the relationship of between Peter and Erica failed to balance out the darkness of the relationship between Peter and Ingrid. I felt that this was important for several reasons, but predominantly the issue was that Erica herself had very little motivation to pursue their relationship given the nature of it. By making their relationship more passionate, worthy and pleasant (albeit retaining an off-beat edge) I felt that this contributed greatly to the overall balance of the film.

One last issue was that of the character of Erica. From the very beginning I wanted Erica's character to make the decision to help Peter kill Ingrid (or at least collaborate in some way) as she felt that this proved that he did not need her. Shaping then the story to fit this beat proved difficult until I began to push Erica's character further and further outside of the box from where I had her in earlier drafts. By pushing her further and further to the fringes while still retaining a realistic edge allowed me to craft her arc to attain the ending that I desired.

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