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Girl on Fire

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requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

This thesis consists of practice-led research in the form of a full-length script for a feature film plus a 6000-word essay (exegesis). A summary of the script is as follows:

Life in Silicon Valley for 24-year-old commitment-phobe Tessa is a lot more work than play. Coming home to Hamilton, New Zealand for the first time in six years, Tessa plans to lay low for the holidays in the town where she's known as one half of a notorious trouble-making duo: the Fire Starters. In an attempt to re-connect with her younger sister Ollie, Tessa attends a party and bumps into the last person on Earth she wanted to see: fellow fire starter, Nel. When Ollie gets a threatening text from a stranger, the fire starters join forces to confront their prime suspect, Willy the high school weed dealer turned meth king pin. Sneaking around and flirting with the law reignites dormant feelings between Tessa and Nel, and the girls quickly fall back into a heated romantic affair with one another. Unable to avoid the past for long, things blow up between the fire starters, so Nel turns to Ollie instead. Tessa discovers Nel is the mystery texter, tries to warn her sister, but is in for a fight when Ollie jumps to Nel's defense. When Nel and Ollie's revenge prank ends up with a meth lab on fire, Tessa risks her life to save her sister who's trapped inside, while Nel escapes to save herself and her reputation. Tessa turns her back on the dangerous Nel for good, and returns to the big city with closure and a new found openness to life.

The script is framed by an Exegesis, which is a 6000 word essay on the subject of: (a) the genre of the Thesis (b) the development process from synopsis to 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 institution of higher learning.

Jessica Hannam

Exegesis

Girl on Fire and Extended Adolescence

My Script's Genre

My script *Girl on Fire* falls within the genre of Extended Adolescence. Notable films in this genre include *Laggies* (2014) *Adult Life Skills* (2016) and *Mr. Roosevelt* (2017).

Extended Adolescence

The Extended Adolescence genre highlights the conflicts young adults, between the ages of 19 and 34, face during their transition from teenager to established adult. It explores the tension between holding onto the past, self-discovery and growing up without training wheels. “The 21st century is going to be full of coming-of-age films about 30-year-olds” (Ehrlich, 2017). What defines this genre is the aspect of being stuck between worlds with very different expectations.

In the film *Laggies* (2014) 28-year-old Megan is barely working, coasting along in an unfulfilling relationship with her high school sweetheart, and wasting her days watching TV from her parents couch. Not knowing how to move forward, Megan takes a break from her life and escapes into the teenage world for some much needed perspective. With the film's official logline beginning with “In the throes of a quarter-life crisis” there really is no confusion about the genre. A film reviewer for Detroit News described it as “a film about perpetual adolescence” (Long, 2014).

After the death of her twin brother, 29-year-old Anna from *Adult Life Skills* (2016) secludes herself in her mum's garden shed and spends her days making YouTube videos no-one watches but her. The film logline describes her as “stuck”, with a reviewer from The Guardian dubbing it the “most relatable twenty something” film (Sampson, 2016). As another example, in the film *Mr. Roosevelt* (2017) 25-year-old wannabe comedian Emily is failing to make waves in Los Angeles. Instead of taking it in stride and putting in the hard yards, she becomes intent on holding onto the remnants of her old, comfortable life. The film's logline not only highlights that she's in her 20's, but references Emily's need to make peace with her past to move forward.

“This movie nails millennials so well... exactly what being a young adult is about right now” (Palemieri, 2018).

In my script *Girl on Fire*, 24-year-old Tessa has no life in San Francisco outside of demanding job. Being back in the tree house of her youth, Tessa reverts back into a teenager and gets involved with a wild ex-girlfriend to avoid, and ultimately be confronted with her stalled life. *Laggies* (2014), *Mr. Roosevelt* (2017), *Adult Life Skills* (2016) and *Girl on Fire* all explore what it can look like when a “twenty something who is falling short of her potential” (Elhrich, 2017) struggles to navigate the bumpy path to adulthood.

History of the Genre

The Graduate (1967) is recognized for kick starting the genre of Extended Adolescence. In 1968 a reporter for the *New Yorker* dubbed it “the most anti-adult film ever to come out of Hollywood” (Brackman). In 2018 it’s still part of the restless drifting 20-something conversation. “Benjamin may be a nervous, spirited icon of late-'60s revolt, but he is also, in some respects, a classic proto-millennial hero.” (Chang, 2017).

St. Elmo’s Fire (1985), *Reality Bites* (1994) and *Kicking and Screaming* (1995) are also notable early comers to the genre, painting a picture of a ragtag bunch of post-graduate misfits contemplating what the next chapter of their lives might bring. At the same time, the American TV series *Friends* (1994) was breaking ground, being the first sitcom to center around a group of 20-somethings trying to navigate the adult world the best they can. The pilot episode titled “The One Where Monica Gets a Roommate” begins with the character Rachel Green bursting into a diner wearing a wedding dress, trying to find her childhood best friend Monica Geller. Having just walked away from her father’s wealth and a secure life with a man she doesn’t love, the group of friends surrounds Rachel with their cynical humor and idealism. “Welcome to the real world. It sucks! You’re gonna love it.” (Crane & Kauffman, 1994).

Written and produced over 20 years ago, the characters and storylines of *Friends* (2004) reflect a time when the nuclear family was dissolving, women were flooding

into the workplace, the internet was finding its feet, and MTV filled every house with angst punk and hip-hop. “Gen-Xers did not buy into the ‘job for life’ corporations their parents did, understanding that jobs came and went, as did authority figures... but friends would always be there.” (Ihnat, 2014). *Friends* (2004) paved the way for a tidal wave of 20-something TV sitcoms and comedy-dramas to enter the scene. *How I Met Your Mother* (2005), *New Girl* (2011), *Girls* (2012), *Drifters* (2013), *Broad City* (2014), *Master of None* (2015), *Chewing Gum* (2015), *Please Like Me* (2016), *Insecure* (2016) and *Love* (2016) to name a few.

The same year *Friends* (1994) ended, the first Extended Adolescence film of the millennium *Garden State* (2004) was released. It focuses around 25 year old Andrew, a heavily medicated, struggling actor, who leaves Los Angeles for his hometown in New Jersey upon finding out his quadriplegic mother has died. 14 years later, this film is still the face of the genre, with many Extended Adolescence films either referencing *Garden State* (2004), or being compared directly to it. “Its success taught studios and producers how to market and make money off these films. It’s a lot easier to sell a pitch by saying, “It’s like Garden State but ...” ” (Fox, 2014). The film initially received very mixed reviews, being both being labeled “The film people love to hate” (Simon, 2016) and being praised for giving “bittersweet humor to the inevitable soul searching that takes place in your 20’s” (Sharfman, 2014). Whether *Garden State* (2004) is whiny hipster trash or a cult classic, there’s no denying the attention it garnered played a role in the surge of Extended Adolescence films to follow. Some of these include: *True Adolescents* (2008), *Postgrad* (2009), *Jeff Who Lives at Home* (2011), *Frances Ha* (2012), *Lola Versus* (2012), *Tiny Furniture* (2013), *The Lifeguard* (2013), *Carrie Pilby* (2017), *Landline* (2017) and *Social Animals* (2018).

Extended Adolescence in NZ Film

The Extended Adolescence genre has not yet been explored to the same degree in New Zealand film. Taika Waititi’s debut feature film *Eagle Vs. Shark* (2007) is closest kiwi feature film to fit the bill. It follows the relationship of two oddball 20-somethings who live comically directionless lives in small-town New Zealand. Jarrod and Lily appear mostly content with their underwhelming lot in life, not overly worried about growing up, and therefore not taking any steps to do so. *Eagle Vs.*

Shark (2007) paints a quirky picture of young adults stuck in the lives of teenage slackers without committing to a journey of self-discovery or maturity. Not quite a coming-of-age narrative, the film has one foot in the Extended Adolescence genre, and the rest of its body in cringe nerd comedy, reminiscent of *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) (Robinson, 2007).

New Zealand web series, however, are another story. It appears that 20-something stories have found a place where they thrive. *Auckland Love* (2015) and *PSUSY* (2016) are both millennial centric stories, that have introduced the world to a uniquely Kiwi spin on Extended Adolescence. *Auckland Love* (2015) is about “the trials and tribulations of being a 20-something-female in Auckland, the hilarious highs, and those ridiculously familiar lows” (Sayer, 2015). Both web series follow female friends as they navigate dating, relationships, flating, careers, self-discovery, and figuring out what it means to become an adult in a world of overwhelming digital communication and accelerated social change. Although currently thriving in the online platform, Extended Adolescence has only made a somewhat brief appearance on New Zealand television via the show *Go Girls* (2009), which now coincidentally can be found online alongside its web series counterparts.

Extended Adolescence Signifiers

Extended Adolescence films are most commonly indie dramas with a comedic yet emotional tone. On the drama-comedy spectrum, *Garden State* (2004) leans closer to drama, *Mr. Roosevelt* (2017) swings towards the comedy end, and *Adult Life Skills* (2016) sits somewhere in between. A common plot device for Extended Adolescence films is the professionally struggling protagonist coming back home after a crisis. In *The Lifeguard* (2013) Leigh ditches her life as an up-and-coming journalist in New York and moves back in with her town-dwelling parents when her boss who she’s been sleeping with gets engaged to someone else. Andrew from *Garden State* (2004) returns home to attend his mother’s funeral, and Dana from *Landline* (2017) moves back in with her parents after she cheats on her fiancé with her ex, and finds out her parents relationship is on the brink of falling apart. This story trope is a popular not-so-subtle metaphor for the characters inability to move forward in life, and maybe even a reminder that sometimes we need to go backwards to go forwards.

This genre is undeniably female dominated. The most notable male-lead Extended Adolescence films are *Garden State* (2004) *True Adolescents* (2008), and *Jeff Who Lives at Home* (2011). If the genre was broadened to include man-child movies however, the gender imbalance would most likely tip the other way. The protagonists in *Failure to Launch* (2006) and *Grown Ups* (2010) for example, are in their late 30's to mid 40's, have the ability to change their situations, are not conflicted or on a quest of self-discovery, and their immature behavior is used as the punch line of a joke, rather than an obstacle to overcome. A reviewer from The Guardian sums up man-child movies quite aptly as “teenage hedonism on a grown-up salary; being old enough to smoke weed but still having your mum do your laundry” (Rose, 2012). With this trope so popular in joke-a-minute comedies, it's possible that it's harder for a male-centric quarter-life crisis film to be taken seriously. Although these films are sometimes thrown together with extended adolescence films, I don't believe they have enough key signifiers to count.

The protagonists are also predominantly single, white, educated, middle-class, progressive Americans who dream of changing the world with their under appreciated creative gifts. The TV show *Girls* (2012) and the film *Mr. Roosevelt* (2017) are perfect examples of this. “Odds are, she wants to be a comedian. Or a journalist. Or maybe she has no idea what she wants to be” (Elhrich, 2017). These characters are likeable but flawed individuals. They're presented and described as idealistic, disillusioned, stubborn, obsessive, funny, self-absorbed, entitled, intelligent, irresponsible and relatable. (Bernstein, 2017). Throw in a dash of personal tragedy into the mix, and we have the potential for one very on-edge protagonist doomed to make an impressive amount of questionable and downright bad decisions. “She's a mess. Being a mess is extremely human.” (O'Malley, 2017).

The antagonists in these films are most commonly a new love interest, but can also be an ex-love interest, a close family member or a friend. The other characters inhabiting the world tend to include the following: “I've had it up to here” parents (*Adult Life Skills & Tiny Furniture*), the smug, more successful peers or siblings (*Social Animals & Jeff Who Lives at Home*), teenagers, kids or other young adults who inspire them to

rediscover their youth (*Laggies* & *The Lifeguard*), and a bunch of quirky, passionate oddballs that make “all your friends seem boring in comparison” (Sharfman, 2014).

The protagonists are often dealing with some pretty weighty existential questions. “What is my purpose? How does one really measure success? Do I want to have kids or give Wes Anderson a run for his money?” This often results in a scene where the main character attempts to convince anyone that’ll listen, including themselves, that they don’t believe in X, everything’s bullshit and the system is broken anyway. This impassioned speech often follows the marriage, promotion or pregnancy of one of their more successful friends. (*Mr. Roosevelt* & *Laggies*). Internal conflict between values, expectations and pent-up energy is often expressed through heightened emotional reactivity, impulsivity, and hypocritical, contradictory, out of character behavior. “She acts in a way that complicates her circumstances instead of making them easier to solve... making an audience of millennials feel comparatively stable” (Ehrlich, 2017).

Imagery in Extended Adolescence films is often quite on-the-nose, and is used to create feelings of being lost, confused, alone, overwhelmed or frustrated. Popular imagery includes the protagonist remaining still while life buzzes around them (*Garden State* & *The Lifeguard*), running haphazardly away from something (*Mr. Roosevelt* & *Adult World*) screaming into the abyss (*Garden State* & *Adult Life Skills*), and being submerged in water, alone and unmoving (*The Graduate*, *Social Animals*). Interestingly, significant, emotional moments seem to happen in bathrooms. Emily from *Mr. Roosevelt* (2017) gets a glass of water chucked in her face to stop a panic attack, in *Landline* (2017) Dana and her little sister comfort and grieve with their mum about her impending divorce, Jeff from *Jeff Who Lives at Home* (2011) admits he’s not happy and bonds with his brother over their shared pain and disappointment, and in *Social Animals* (2018) the antagonists marriage falls apart over a disagreement on the correct way to hang up the hand towel.

The audience is waiting for the protagonist to face the thing that is holding them back and stop running from their future. We want to see them take a pragmatic step forward, that does the particular character and story justice. Whether this is going back to the big city more equipped to deal with the real world (*The Lifeguard*, *Mr.*

Roosevelt), stepping up and finally acting responsibly (*Jeff Who Lives at Home*, *Landline*), or merely moving out of their parents' garden shed (*Adult Life Skills*). "We just need to know that she'll be okay" (Palemiere, 2018). If the love interest is a new one, the audience expects the protagonist to end up with them (*Garden State*, *Social Animals*, *Laggies*, *Adult World*). If the love interest is an ex-lover or the relationship is clearly unhealthy, it is expected that they move on and leave the past in the past (*Mr. Roosevelt*, *The Lifeguard*).

Genre Expectations

Audience expectations of Extended Adolescence films are constantly changing to reflect the real world's dynamic social landscape. With females writing female stories and directing female characters, it's no surprise that the women we see on screen are becoming progressively body and sex positive. *Girls* (2012) reflects a progressive, empowered view of female sexuality, full of "awkwardness, over sharing and sexual frankness" (Bernstein, 2017), and paints a very unfiltered picture of 20-something female friendships. The main character Hannah confidently owns her sexual agency in a relatable body that has fat, cellulite, hair, and definitely can't be mistaken for a runway model. Following suit, *Broad City* (2014) and *PSUSY* (2016) in particular have really upped the feminist ante, fearlessly tackling traditionally taboo subjects like casual sex, menstruation, masturbation, and abortion. Writer and actor of *PSUSY* (2016) Jaya Beach-Robertson explains "I was bored of the way women were portrayed... we are very flawed and gross." (Moguren, 2017). The films *Laggies* (2014), *Adult Life Skills* (2016) and *Social Animals* (2018) all have complex female protagonists no-one's going to be describing as "pleasant", "cute" or "prudish".

Girls (2012), *Adult World* (2013), *Auckland Love* (2015) *Master of None* (2015), *Bubblegum* (2015), and *Insecure* (2016) all have characters that identify as queer. *Please Like Me* (2016), however, is the only show or film in the Extended Adolescence genre to have a definitively queer protagonist. A reviewer from Vulture praised *Please Like Me* (2016) for being a "different sort of coming-of-age story than most you see on TV" (McHenry, 2017), appreciating that a protagonist can be gay without the character ending up defined or restricted by their sexuality. This is a show

that “break(s) new ground by having a main character who just happens to be queer” (Walsbergerová, 2017).

The genre of extended adolescence is historically white, but things appear to be changing. The lack of racial diversity in this genre was particularly noted in regards to Lena Dunham’s TV series *Girls* (2012). “Her characters existed in an all-Caucasian version of New York” (Bernstein, 2017). Ironically, the controversial success of this all-female 20 -something sitcom has paved way for shows with non-white main characters, like *Broad City* (2014), *Bubblegum* (2015), *PSUSY* (2016) and *Insecure* (2016). Films in this genre are comparatively behind the times on the racial diversity aspect, however if TV shows and web series are any indication, we can expect that to change soon. Other relevant issues modern audiences expect to be explored in Extended Adolescence films: the housing crisis, mental health, disabilities and the effects of social media.

My script *Girl on Fire* meets the contemporary audience expectations of the Extended Adolescence genre in a number of ways. My female protagonist Tessa is lesbian, Nel, the antagonist, is bisexual. They both act with agency, and would definitely not be described using the word ‘pleasant’. Both Tessa and Nel have come out and embraced their sexuality, not making this a “coming out” narrative. Tessa’s sexuality is not the story; rather it’s just one aspect of her life. I want to address racial diversity in my script by writing the majority of characters in a way that a Kiwi actor of any cultural or ethnic heritage can play them. I also have at least one character that is definitely Maori, and their non-stereotypical characterization is important to me.

My script definitely addresses the current economic climate. Tessa works 50-hour weeks just to keep her head above water and establish herself in her industry. Nel works a multiple minimum wage job, still lives in her parent’s home, and doesn’t seem in a rush to change any of that. Tessa’s mother Susan has rented out her childhood bedroom to create a second income. Ollie is 18 and already stressed out about the pressure to choose a career path.

My Script's Fresh Perspective

While still sharing themes, elements and imagery with other Extended Adolescence films, my script brings a fresh perspective to the genre. *Girl on Fire* is set in Hamilton, New Zealand. This means I am able to present uniquely Kiwi characters, language, comedy, culture, geography, and young adult realities. Not only is the story set at Christmas time, which in itself is new to the genre, but particularly a summery New Zealand Christmas. This gives me the opportunity to delve into both the emotional tension of holiday season with the family, and the boundary-less possibilities of the longest, sunniest days of the year.

The main relationship in my script is a queer romance. To my knowledge this hasn't been done before in my genre of film, especially paired with the reigniting of an old flame. I made this decision because I wanted to see a queer protagonist in a romantic relationship without their sexuality being the main focus or obstacle to overcome. I believe this is a positive step forward for representation of LGBT people in film. Costume play (cosplay) is an element that exists throughout the film, particularly in the party scenes. I am using this to represent the nature of how people can hide behind masks when they haven't fully accepted who they are. Cosplay is also a way for young adults to escape their current realities and justify acting like teenagers. The different types of costumes are also used to represent the hierarchal nature of social cliques in high school.

My protagonist isn't a frustrated creative. Tessa works as a computer programmer in Silicon Valley. I wanted to show a woman who was intelligent, working in a traditionally male dominated field, who is trying to make her mark on the world the way she knows best. It was also important to me that the film is not centered around Tessa struggling to get ahead in her job, or looking for a new one. Although struggling career wise is very extended adolescent, I find job-hunting in movies extremely un compelling, and wanted to find a different way to illustrate my protagonist's stuck-ness.

Girl of Fire Synopsis

Life in Silicon Valley for 24-year-old commitment-phobe Tessa is a lot more work than play. Traveling 6000 miles home for the first time in six years, Tessa plans to lay low for the holidays in the town where she's known as half of a notorious trouble-making duo: the Fire Starters. Discovering her mum has rented out her old bedroom, Tessa moves into her childhood tree house on the front lawn. In an attempt to reconnect with recent high school graduate and future world leader sister Ollie, Tessa attends a dress-up party as an alien. Her cover is blown when she bumps into the last person on Earth she wanted to see again, fellow fire starter, Nel Dekker. When Ollie gets a weirdly threatening text from a stranger, the fire starters unenthusiastically join forces to confront their prime suspect, Willy the high school weed dealer turned meth king pin. Sneaking around and flirting with the law reignites dormant feelings between Tessa and Nel, and the girls quickly fall back into a heated romantic affair with one another. Things quickly get heated between Tessa and Nel when the high school fire, the event that earned the Fire Starters their nickname, is brought up. With Tessa stuck sulking in her past, Ollie has no one to turn to but Nel when things go south with her boyfriend Farrell. While attempting to clear the air with Nel, Tessa discovers Nel is in the possession of the mystery texter phone, and has been pulling all kinds of strings since the day Tessa got back in town. Tessa tries to warn her sister of Nel's true nature, but realizes she's in for a fight when Ollie jumps to Nel's defense. Tessa gatecrashes Nel and Ollie's revenge prank on their nemesis, Willy, and things quickly go south when the drug dealer's meth lab catches on fire. When Ollie gets trapped in the fire, Tessa risks her life to save her sister, while Nel escapes to save herself and her reputation. Injured but alive, the sisters' bond becomes stronger than ever. Tessa turns her back on the dangerous Nel for good, and returns to the big city with closure and a new found openness to love in the form of a cute bartender.

My Theme

I wrote this story because I wanted a kiwi take on the quarter life crisis. I am a 29-year-old living in my parent's home, struggling to finish my master's degree, unsure what I'm going to do next with my life once this goal is met. I am an extended adolescent, and I am a millennial. There are thousands of people in New Zealand, let

alone millions of people worldwide that can relate to feeling stuck between teenage hood and adulthood, yet the limited films in this genre tend to be American, underrated, and unoriginal. Seeing yourself and your struggles represented on screen is an invaluable experience. New Zealand has a unique history, ethnic make-up, and awkward humor which I long to see expressed more on the big screen. I felt that the extended adolescence genre was a perfect place to capture everyday kiwi humor, with dramatic social situations working perfectly to heighten the ridiculous of the casualness in which New Zealanders deal with life. Also, as a queer woman myself, I was highly motivated to write a queer romantic relationship surrounding two women. The most common portrayals of queer female characters I see in film are teenagers discovering their sexuality for the first time, college students falling in love with their much older teacher, or a curious career woman getting stuck in love triangle with her long time male partner and an alluring mystery girl who doesn't follow the rules. I don't see myself in any of those stories. There seems no better place to change up the queer narrative than in an extended adolescence film set in New Zealand. I can take advantage of a genre that lends itself to young, progressive, curious, tenacious characters, and set the story in a country that is notably forward when it comes to women's and gay rights.

The main point I want the audience to take away from my script is that being a young adult can actually be really hard. The term millennial has become a catchall for spoiled, loud, ungrateful young person, where in reality it literally refers to anyone between the age of 22 and 36 years old. Millennials currently find themselves in a world where traditional paths of success no longer work, yet are expected to not only reach but also surpass the previous generation's level of productivity and stability. I want the audience to see that millennials can be just as thoughtful, passionate, kind, driven and hard working as any other age group. We are all people and want a lot of the same things: To fall in love, discover what makes us truly happy, be financially independent, find our clan, and change the world for the better.

I believe the image in my script that best captures the theme of extended adolescence is Nel standing on the roof of a building, wearing the same uniform she's worn for eight years, arms outstretched wide towards the city, eyes closed, and Tessa handing her an iced coffee. I believe this symbolizes both the feeling of being stuck in one's

childhood, and yearning to fly out into the world, a fully realized individual. Iced coffee has been used repetitively in pop culture as a critique of millennials tendency to splurge of short-lasting comforts.

I also want the audience to have to a sneak peak into the brain of the victim of a toxic relationship, and gain a more empathetic perspective. Tessa is a smart, cautious and confident person, yet she ends up falling back into a relationship with a person who consistently manipulates her and the people around her to get whatever outcome serves her the best. It's easy to stand on the outside and judge the practical implications of someone else's decisions, but when your heart and ego are on the line and you know the person you love is capable of great things, it's amazing the amount of red flags that can be explained away or downright ignored.

The Protagonist

Arriving in Hamilton, New Zealand, for the summer holidays, my script's protagonist 24 year old Tessa Knox has one goal: lay low and enjoy time with her family, then disappear back to her cozy apartment and all-consuming job in San Francisco. When she arrives home she finds her mother has rented out her childhood bedroom to a middle-aged hippy. To avoid finding accommodation elsewhere, Tessa moves into the tree house on the front lawn. In an attempt to bond with her younger sister Ollie, Tessa allows herself to be dragged to a dress-up party. As laying low and attending parties don't exactly mix, Tessa quickly abandons hiding her return after having her cover blown at the dress up party, and bumping into her arch nemesis ex-lover and ex-best friend rolled into one, Nel. At this point, Tessa's focus becomes divided between exploring the remnants of a romantic relationship with Nel, and connecting with Ollie. When Nel's true, manipulative and malicious nature starts to surface, Tessa's goal shifts to opening Ollie's eyes to the truth and breaking up Nel and Ollie's burgeoning friendship. Tessa does this by trying to steal Nel's burner phone, telling the police about Nel's dangerous behavior, telling Ollie the truth about Nel's actions on multiple occasions, and crashing Nel and Ollie's revenge prank mission. When Ollie's life is in danger, Tessa's only goal is saving her sister's life. Once she achieves this by pulling Ollie out of a house fire, Tessa's goal shifts to healing and moving on

from this chaotic and trying chapter in her life. She travels back to San Francisco and let's her walls down by hanging out with co-workers outside of work and flirting with the cute bartender.

When Tessa returns to her hometown, the most pressing thing at stake is her reputation. She hasn't been seen in her hometown since she was responsible for a building at her school burning down. As a self-proclaimed introvert and a textbook commitment-phobe with a quick wit, Tessa can easily come off as a confident person who doesn't care what people think, when in truth she sometimes cares way too much. Once she starts opening back up to her old flame Nel, this becomes a relationship at stake for Tessa. Not only are all the odds stacked against them with a sordid, murky past and red flags galore, but it is revealed that Nel has been actively spinning a web of deceit from the get go, proving herself to be an unsafe person for Tessa to let in her inner circle.

When Nel's behavior threatens Tessa's relationship with her sister Ollie, Tessa puts aside any care for her own reputation or hope of getting back together with Nel, to protect her sister and heal any rift Nel has caused between the sisters.

The stakes escalate to the climax when Ollie nearly dies. Tessa puts all her hang-ups aside, risking her life to save her sister. Tessa now has to cut Nel out of her life for good in order to stop the destructive cycle repeating itself.

Tessa's character is changed significantly by her holiday back home. At the beginning of the script Tessa is a lonely workaholic, cynical in love and practiced in avoiding the messy truth of the past. She's so averse to romantic relationships she wears a fake wedding ring to ward off unwanted attention from interested parties. Tessa avoids intimacy with people because of major heartbreak she suffered in the past at the hands of the first love of her life, Nel. At the climax of the film, Tessa's eyes are opened to both the true horrors Nel is capable of, and the strength inside herself. With no unfinished business holding her hostage, a stronger relationship with her family and proof that she can stand up and fight when all hope seems lost, by the end of the film Tessa is ready to tackle her new life in San Francisco head first as a more whole and balanced person.

The Antagonist

My script's antagonist Nel Dekker disrupts Tessa's plans to have a low-key summer holiday by confronting her at the dress-up party and creating the piggy text mystery, forcing her and Tessa to spend time together. This quickly leads to a romantic relationship between the two of them. Nel also creates multiple dangerous situations that Tessa is uncomfortable with, for example the bridge jumping and firework beast lighting, that force Tessa to either go deeper into her denial or fight against. Being in a romantic relationship and taking part in dangerous spontaneous activities is the exact opposite of what commitment-phobe and creature of comfort Tessa would be doing back in California. This puts Tessa very much on edge and forces her to deal with her underlying issues: fear of intimacy and the need to control her environment.

The rekindling of Tessa's relationship with Nel is a catalyst for Tessa to be confronted with her unresolved feelings for Nel, un-dealt with heartbreak, and lack of confidence in her ability to stand up for herself. Because Nel puts Tessa's sister Ollie under threat, Tessa is able to see Nel without the rose-colored glasses and is forced to stand up to her, rather than run away like she did last time. This is paramount in Tessa's character development, as the closure and confidence this brings her, helps her unstick her stalled extended adolescent life.

The Dramatic Question

The first dramatic question of the script is "Will the fire starters get back together?" This is asked on page 15 in Tessa and Nel's first scene together, when it is revealed to the audience that they're the infamous lesbian fire starters, and there is clear unresolved tension between the two of them. This is also the point where the set up of my story ends, and the real story begins. The porn room, rooftop and pool scenes that follow are charged with sexual tension, from arms grazing, sexual innuendos, hair play, play fighting and almost kissing. The question of them getting together is properly answered on page 31 where they have sex in Tessa's tree house and then wake up in bed together the next day. At this point the dramatic question shifts to "Are the fire starters going to stay together?" The middle of the story is page 51 when

Tessa and Nel have a big fight in front of their friends on the creek bridge. This fight brings up a lot about their past, and it becomes more clear than ever that their relationship is both complicated and very heated. When Tessa discovers Nel is the mystery piggy texter on page 60 she goes from trying to fix her relationship with Nel, to trying to get justice for betrayal, and protecting her younger sister from falling for Nel's charm. The question of whether they get back together is not answered until page 89 when Tessa throws her friendship bracelet at Nel in the hospital and walks away. Tessa and Nel not ending up together is reconfirmed when Tessa flies back to her home in San Francisco and proceeds to flirt with Shiloh, the cute bartender.

Story Structure

The first main turning point for Tessa is agreeing to help Nel dust the video store. Although maybe a small gesture, this is the first time Tessa made a decision to actively spend time with Nel. In the party where they first met, Tessa did what she could to avoid interacting with Nel, and even ducked to hide from her when she first entered the video store. Tessa's guard dropped slightly when she accepted the duster from Nel, and after it she could no longer go back to pretending Nel didn't exist.

The second turning point for Tessa is when her and Nel have sex. Tessa can no longer avoid the feelings she has for Nel, nor hide their existence from Nel anymore. After both girls have made themselves vulnerable and expressed desire for one another, they cannot turn the clock back to small talk and awkward run-ins at social events. Because Tessa has such a strong sexual attraction and emotional draw to Nel and she now knows Nel has at least some level of feelings for her, Tessa is now paying close attention to what this means for their friendship.

The third turning point for Tessa is when her and Nel have the fight on the bridge. Up until this point Tessa has been able to play down her romantic feelings for Nel as mere sexual attraction and a complex history of friendship. But when Nel rejects her in front of their friends, Tessa is overwhelmed by hurt and anger, and lashes out at Nel. As soon as this happens it is clear it has forever affecting the trajectory of their relationship. This is also a point of no return because for the first time ever, Tessa

puts voice to the heartbreak Nel caused her six years prior. For someone who avoids intimacy, this is huge.

The fourth turning point for Tessa is when she finds out that the girl Nel pushed off the creek bridge is in hospital suffering broken bones, and then Tessa finds the mystery piggy texter burner phone in Nel's desk at the video store. Putting two and two together, Tessa realizes that Nel's manipulative, selfish behavior has crossed the line and someone could get seriously hurt by it. This when it stops becoming about Tessa's own hurt feelings, and Tessa becomes focused on finding out the extent of Nel's web of lies, and getting the truth out there. To do this, Tessa attempts to steal the phone, gets arrested by the cops instead, and finds out more troubling information about Nel that makes her even more concerned for her sister Ollie's safety. From here on out, Ollie's safety and her knowing the truth about Nel becomes Tessa's main agenda.

By the end of the script, Tessa has to choose to put everything on the line for the person she loves, and not run away when things get messy. This person is her sister Ollie, not Nel, and she does this by essentially stalking Ollie at the new years eve party, doing everything she can to get the truth through to her sister, and ultimately, just being there for when the 'proverbial' hits the fan. Tessa performs the most selfless act of love and sacrifice for her sister when she runs into a burning meth lab and saves Ollie's life.

When Tessa sees Nel in hospital on page 89, Tessa is able to calmly confront her and tell her to get away from Ollie. When Tessa tells Nel how she pulled Ollie from the house fire, it dawns on her: she didn't run away this time, Nel did. In this moment Tessa realizes she is no longer controlled by Nel and has the strength to walk away from her for good. The audience knows has happened because Tessa takes off her friendship bracelet, gives it back to Nel, and tells her to give it to her next victim. We know this experience has changed Tessa when she approaches the cute bartender at her local bar in San Francisco, realizes she has the 'don't talk to me I'm married' ring on her finger, and quickly takes it off.

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