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Casting Off

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A Thesis and Exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing.

ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a full-length screenplay for a feature film called Casting Off. A summary of the screenplay is as follows:

For the last 25 years, Kiwi Elle has half slumbered through Asian Capitals, setting up house for the family wherever her mercurial, corporate husband Tom's stellar career led. Tom flourished, while Elle withered, yearning for her homeland and a tribe to call her own.

Tom finally takes the promised retirement and, they are 'home' at last. Their story begins as a visual love letter to the Hauraki Gulf, a retirement trip aboard Elle's old family boat, Aroha. All should be perfect; a healthy couple in their early 50s, in their financial prime with options galore and, their grown kids off enjoying the world. All looks perfect until it isn't. Tom has brought along a little surprise that will blow this boat out of the water. When it does, Elle is finally jolted wide awake. She leaves Aroha and her husband behind in her wake as she makes for shore on Great Barrier Island in the dinghy.

Shore landings are not always easy, and the obstacles awaiting a now castaway Elle on the Island turn out to be more than physical. Elle has old history with the place. A long-buried connection with Great Barrier Island surfaces and Elle is forced to confront just how far she has travelled from the woman she once aspired to be. When her two worlds finally and chaotically collide, Elle must choose.

The thesis 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 AUTHORITY

“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 institute of higher learning.”

Signed.....

22 February 2019

Dated.....

EXEGESIS FOR SCRIPTWRITERS

PARTS ONE AND TWO

Exegesis for Scriptwriters: Part One

Genre Analysis

By Sue Lees

GENRE

Casting Off belongs in the genre categorization: Drama/Comedy/Romance and in the sub-genre: Female Midlife Fresh Start. This Exegesis will examine the emergence of the sub-genre and specifically focus on three films that contain key signifying elements. The examples of the sub-genre featured in this analysis are; *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Getchell, 1974), *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013), *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013).

SUB-GENRE

To consider how the 'Fresh Start' component of the sub-genre: Female Midlife Fresh Start evolved it is useful to look back at early films specifically targeting the female audience. As women's voices and experiences grew during the second half of the 20th century, the films they were interested in watching were evolving as well. The tradition of female melodrama so popular during the 1930s and 40s was developing in parallel with these broadening life experiences. Delineations of sub-genres began to emerge to satisfy female audiences seeking relatability in their increasingly diversified lives.

In 1945, two quite diverse films featuring female protagonists were released. One set (and written) just before the war in 1938 and one released as the war ended. *Brief Encounter* (Coward, 1945) with its accepted adherence to traditional female 'home and hearth' centered values contrasted dramatically with the assertive protagonist not needing to defer in any way to men in *I Know Where I'm Going* (Powell and Pressburger, 1945). The shift in these two very contrasting views of women's expectations reflects the dramatic reappraisal of audience preconceptions of gender roles at the time. The responsibilities and independence that women

experienced so intensely during the upheaval of war altered their willingness to fully accept old expectations and limitations. *I Know Where I am Going* (Powell and Pressburger, 1945) is an early example of a fresh start film. It would have not too much difficulty being remade today if you gave the zesty protagonist a career. It is fun and assertive. In fact, the protagonist is far more assertive than Alice in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Getchell, 1974) (referred to henceforth as *ADLHAM*) or Shirley from *Shirley Valentine* (Russell, 1989) or Frances from *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003) who lead much later journey based, fresh start/ self-discovery films. There is however a point of difference, the protagonist in *I Know Where I am Going* (Powell and Pressburger, 1945) is still a youngish woman in her late twenties. It would be another thirty years before Studios really responded to the potential market that is the older 'midlife female audience.'

The British Film Institute (Wigley, 2015) compiled a list of the best films in the category Fresh Starts. Two of these films, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (Getchell, 1974) and *Shirley Valentine* (Russell, 1989) were specifically female-focused but importantly also fit comfortably into what has become known as the 'older bird' genre. Cultural commentator Cherry Potter first coined the genre 'older bird' in her article *Sex and the Older Woman* (Potter, 2004) to sum up the female audience who had turned Nancy Meyer's film *Something's Gotta Give* (Meyers, 2003) into a huge success. Fans of Nancy Meyer's films represented a new frontier in female audiences. They were 50 plus, often financially independent with successful careers and keen to see relatable characters on screen. This description helped define audiences within the much broader term 'chick flick' and a definite improvement on the generalized terminology 'Women's Weepies' employed prior to the 1960s.

The term 'Older Bird' has continued as a genre description, appearing in even academic discussion in the collected essays *Chick Flicks* (Ferriss and Young, 2008). Over a decade later, it is time to update this term as it falls short in two areas. It has become too broad, encompassing female protagonists and audiences often across a 40-year age range, example, 80-year-old Judi Dench in *Philomena* (Cougan and Pope, 2013) to 39-year-old Diane Lane in *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003). The type of terminology used to describe midlife and older women has also elevated in recent years. For this discussion, the sub-genre identification 'Female Midlife Fresh Start' will be employed and the films discussed will primarily focus on women in their 40s and 50s.

EVOLUTION

So how has this sub-genre genre evolved in the date range 1974-2013 that I have specifically focused on? The expectation that the female protagonist will have commitments to employment outside the home is a significant change during this period. In 1974 Alice in *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974) is still a housewife needing a disturbance (death) to get her moving from a bad marriage, by 1989 *Shirley Valentine* (Russell, 1989) is not much different. After those two earlier films, the female protagonists are now working/earning outside of the home but still need a major disturbance to set them on a re-correction path for internal needs that are not being met. By 2003 in *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003) it is the female protagonist who must sell up everything in order to provide an alimony settlement for the unfaithful, academic husband she has supported.

The normality of divorce and the complexity of new relationships mark the evolution of this genre. Whereas the early films had Alice in *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974) and Shirley in *Shirley Valentine* (Russell, 1989) just waiting it out. *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013) and *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) both begin with long divorced protagonists trying to get it right the second time around. The subtlety with which the protagonists' dissatisfaction with their lives is conveyed, aptly reflects the increased sophistication in this genre. *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013) and *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) reflect the developed sensibilities of this genre's female audience over the last 40 years. *Shirley Valentine* (Russell, 1989) had to come right out and confess all to WALL for that audience to fully appreciate what was going on.

The female protagonist in later films needs only a glance or a gesture for this inured audience to get her reference and see where she is going emotionally. In *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), the audience only needs to see Gloria remove her glasses and approach the dance floor to know that she is no longer looking for a man. This genre's audience has over this forty-year period become an expert in the symbolism of cinema especially when it pertains to relationships. Consequently, a writer of this genre needs to be aware of how fast this audience's uptake is so that they do not overstate and bore their audience.

KEY SIGNIFIERS

There are several key signifiers of the Sub-Genre: Female Midlife Fresh Start. The first being that the protagonist is a middle-aged female finding herself in a situation that ensures that normality is no longer possible. Because of the protagonist's maturity, the disrupted normality (married life / divorced state) has existed for a decade or more. The age range is Alice in *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974) late 30's (considered older in the 1970s) to *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013) 58 years old. It is the end of a life the protagonist had expected to continue uninterrupted until a disruption makes change inevitable. In *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974), the death of a controlling husband and the loss of his sole income ensure change is coming. A mature audience with long life experience can relate to sudden and unexpected disruptions and is curious to see how someone of their generation handles tough choices.

The three films in discussion here *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) and *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974) all have simple, linear narrative structures. This audience is not expecting to be challenged with complex, 'Christopher Nolanian' type structure. This sub-genre's audience prefers to spend time nutting out the emotional complexities of the relationships revealed on the screen.

Romance and a second chance in late life love are expected in this sub-genre. But as the primary characters are older, neither the protagonists or the antagonists come baggage free. Late love features in all three films. In *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974), the protagonist has an initial false start at new love which is instructive. This false start is so threatening that it causes a second massive disruption and flight for Alice. In *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974) and *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), the women's personal journey toward self-discovery takes precedence over romance. In *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), the failure of the optimistically embarked on late love is the film's primary focus but it is the self-discovery, the by-product of this failed romance that carries the theme. The romance in *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) is ultimately a success. What *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) shares with *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), is the male antagonists' former lives providing obstacles and unresolved entanglements.

The support role of female friends is an important signifier of this sub- genre and has prominence in *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974) and *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013). These 'gal

pal' relationships provide the protagonist with therapy, wisdom, and laughter through difficult times. Friendship is a valuable commodity to the 40+ audience as it often fills the void once occupied by children or siblings.

Mid-life loneliness and loss of direction are also key signifiers. This theme of loneliness pervades all three films. The 58-year-old Chilean protagonist in *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), trawls the middle-aged singles discos looking for a connection. The only thing waiting for her at home is an ugly, hairless cat that is not even hers. *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) poignantly highlights the disruption felt by both the protagonist and her love interest Albert separately as their two respective daughters leave for college and they prepare for imminent loneliness. It is likely that many in the audience will have experienced the departure of a child and can relate.

Themes of personal growth and the ability to ultimately embrace change are expected in this sub-genre. The necessity for the protagonist to face a total readjustment of outlook and life expectations runs through all the films in this sub-genre and contrasts with Woody Allen's midlife Female Comic Tragedy *Blue Jasmine* (Allen, 2013) where the central character's mental health and delusional nature make her unable to embrace change and a fresh start. Jasmine's story provides the audience with a cautionary tale of rigidity and its peril and makes it quite definitely not part of this genre.

Gloria (Maza and Lelio, 2013) and *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) are also cautionary tales for the many women in the audience experiencing new, late-life relationships. Gloria's adult children are well adjusted, separate entities with their own lives. Gloria is now free to explore her own later decades unencumbered. Rodolfo is the man who appears to be perfect for Gloria until she discovers his hidden issues of extreme co-dependency with his inept, immature adult children whom he is unable to break away from. In *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) we meet Eva wanting all the check and balances she can on new love Albert, like 'Trip Advisor' before proceeding, that includes basically a warrant of fitness obtained by dishonest means from Albert's ex-wife. Eva has to be brave, take a risk and learn to trust her own judgment. When she does, she is rewarded with healthy midlife companionship.

Key imagery and symbolism are most prominently represented by final scenes that contrast with opening images. There is the physical depiction of all three protagonists moving forward

and taking control in their lives in the final scenes of *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974), *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) and *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013). At the end of *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974), love may have caused Alice to find compromise, and she will not move to Monterey City. But in the final scene, she stands outside a bar in Tucson called The Monterey where she will no doubt have a career and a future. Eva in *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) is at last strong enough to say 'Enough!' She finally asks the thoughtless young man she regularly massages to help her carry the heavy massage table up the many stairs to his room. This is in total contrast to the hard done by, martyred Eva we meet in the beginning, doing it all herself. Throughout *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), an older woman is dancing with new men in discos. Men on the dance floor take her hands and hold them tight. Even her daughter holds and controls Gloria's arms during yoga. In the finale of the film, she is dancing alone to the song *Gloria*. Her arms float freely as she dances solo in a joyous trance alone, unencumbered by anyone.

AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS

When a midlife female in 2019 enters the cinema to watch a film within the sub-genre Female Midlife Fresh Start, she expects to be presented with relatable mid-life dilemmas handled in a refreshing, original and occasionally humorous way. The woman in this audience may have grown up watching a demure Samantha in *Bewitched* (Saks, 1964-72) hopping into one twin bed, with a very buttoned up, Darren sleeping in another. That same woman has spent the intervening 40 years watching films that explore deeply into the female psyche and sexuality. She might be aged 50 and older but just like the younger audience, she is looking for guidelines and role models to help traverse an extended period of adult sexuality. Once taboo, midlife/ older folks having sex is now embraced. Laura Snapes in *The Guardian* quotes 'A UK Film Council survey in 2011 showed that 60% of older female filmgoers were tired of seeing themselves portrayed on screen as "sexless grandmothers"' (Snapes, 2018).

In 1974, we got a peak of the naked back view of the body double for Pauline Collin playing *Shirley Valentine* (Russell, 1989). Today's audience wants to see issues of midlife women's sexuality embraced. Real late 50s naked bodies come together in joyous celebration in *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013). A British co-production with Netflix, *Wanderlust* (Payne, 2018) saw Toni Collette deliver the first over 40 female orgasm to be shown on the BBC. The Netflix

series *Grace and Frankie* (Kauffman, 2016) has a huge female 50+ following. Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, both in their 80s, play women in their 70s facing a myriad of fresh challenges. They discover their husbands of 40 years are gay lovers. Newly self-supporting, the two women need money. How about a business manufacturing vibrators for the 70 plus market, designed for arthritic hands? Very little is considered taboo nowadays. Older girls kicking back and smoking weed is clichéd to death. In *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013) it at least receives a fresh take when with female solidarity and great maturity, Gloria and her former husband's attractive, new wife bond over a joint.

I believe what this contemporary audience hopes to find in this film sub-genre today are new and challenging stories that explore age-old female mid-life challenges; invisibility, loneliness, sexuality, love, and purpose. By adding topical issues such as technology, older age employment, environmental issues these films can draw audiences with a sense of urgency and freshness. A successful film in this sub-genre may not offer the audience solutions but the sub-genre done well can provide cathartic release and support.

Casting Off delivers an assortment of relatable midlife female characters. Protagonist Elle has spent 30 years lost in the narcissistic maze created by of her Alpha-Type corporate husband Tom and worn down by him, she has just followed. The script follows her arc from relationship cheerleader in denial to simmering disillusionment to the active pursuit of her stronger self. At the end of the film, Elle is in control not only of the boat but also actively pursuing her own objectives. She is acting on her own sexual desires as opposed to responding to Tom in a desperate attempt to receive his distracted affection. *Gloria* (Maza and Lelio, 2013), *Enough Said* (Holofcener, 2013) and *ADLHAM* (Getchell, 1974) explore the lives of middle-aged women, increasingly invisible and alone in the world and while Elle is married at the commencement of the script, the marriage is unfulfilling and she is neglected. Loneliness and how midlife women deal with it is the universal theme that *Casting Off* shares with these three films.

In terms of New Zealand cinema history, a feature film in this sub-genre is new territory. *Other Halves* (McCauley, 1984) is ultimately a love story about a still youngish woman (32) and a teenager. *The Wall* (Rowan and Koea, 1992) is an insightful, 30-minute, made for TV satire/drama look at a bullied and curtailed widow free at last. It ends with the main character

Louise, leaving, going out the gate, but how she copes and what adventures await her remain unknown.

For a New Zealand middle-aged female audience, a full-length feature like *Casting Off* is a fresh take and novel treat. It is aspirational and fantasy combined; the what could have been merged with the what still could be. They have time to invest in Elle, to see why she is stuck and to follow her frustrations and her escape and ultimately her reinvention. The audience is alongside her on the journey and as with two of the most successful films in this Midlife Fresh Start Genre; *Shirley Valentine* (Russell, 1989) and *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2009), *Casting Off* is also a travelogue. The breathtaking Hauraki Gulf in summer and the wild, unpredictable and evocative beauty of Great Barrier Island are both sentient characters, compelling and appealing to local and international audiences alike. The island itself and the mana of the strong women there; Val (Police, and Coastguard), who more or less runs the place and JoJo, the successful Maori mussel barge owner and local matriarch, who has never had a hand up or out. The power of friendship between the very diverse but equally lonely middle-aged characters is also a new local frontier as is the middle-aged revisiting of first love that anchors the story of *Casting Off*. AJ holds the puzzle pieces of herself that Elle has forgotten in her time away from New Zealand adrift in Tom's wake. Ultimately *Casting Off* is a hopeful female, midlife fresh start film about shedding of old identities that no longer fit and embracing new beginnings. For many middle-aged women in the audience, the film will be a reminder of the essence of themselves and what they may need to cast off in order to reconnect with that truth again.

Exegesis for Scriptwriters: Part Two

About *Casting Off*

By Sue Lees

SYNOPSIS

For the last 25 years, Kiwi Elle has packed up the family and followed where ever in Asia her ego-driven, corporate, Aussie husband Tom has been posted. Never assimilating, Elle has spent her life just counting down till she could go back home. She and Tom have a deal, after 25 years he will retire and bring her back to home New Zealand. That day has come. The couple in their early 50s and their financial prime, embark on their two-week retirement trip on Elle's classic, old family launch Aroha. The holiday begins as a visual love letter to the Hauraki Gulf. All should be perfect, but without their now grown kids to mask the cracks, it is pretty apparent they are now just two ill-suited strangers in a very tight space and both are harboring secrets.

The onboard crisis occurs when Elle discovers Tom has accepted another posting in Shanghai without even discussing it. The enormity of this betrayal blows the final veneer of successful 'coupledom' out of the water. Elle leaves in the dinghy, but instead of heading to the nearest harbor, to elude Tom she heads into open sea. The obstacles awaiting a now castaway Elle on Great Barrier Island are not only physical. Elle has old history with the place. It is the home of her first love, AJ Tupere, once a soulful, young poet now a burdened, middle-aged, cray fisherman. It is not long before both Tom, AJ and the rest of the Islanders are trying to hunt her down. Elle takes refuge with Coop, a chilled hippie who appears to have all the answers but beneath the flowing new age aphorisms, Coop may be the most troubled of them all.

Now well out of her depth, Elle manically treads water, struggling to stay on top. There is work on a Mussel Barge with an irascible female boss, a husband undergoing a new age transformation, an old love who is calling her to task on her failed life ambitions, his P-stoked Ex who could make it all explode and a vulnerable little six-year-old boy Nino who will bear the brunt if it does. Through it all, Elle clings to the lifebuoy mythology that she is a

'good mum.' When her two worlds finally and chaotically collide, Elle is forced to choose. But that decision may have come too late for AJ. Before Elle can take the helm, cast off and steer toward her authenticity, she must front up to the past, and her own culpability for a life half lived.

THEME

When I began writing the first draft, then titled *Barrier Blues*, I wanted to explore the theme of a lost and lonely, mid-life woman who, after dedicating her life to others, can no longer remember what she really wanted out of life. During the evolution of that draft, there was a paradigm shift. Tom stopped being so much the villain, and Elle's culpability began to emerge. This factor colluded with another big question I had often considered. As a mid-life woman surrounded by friends at a very similar life stage, I was struck by how often in conversation one of us would say 'Well, I would have done that [in life] but I always had to...'. The age-old female card of 'carer' versus career would be played. While empathizing and often playing it myself, something was bothering me. Where is the line between familial responsibility and responsibility to the self? So, were we all hiding behind the former because it was easier and safer? As I wrote *Casting Off*, I was exploring this question, and I feel that many of the female midlife audience will have considered it too.

Trying to get that balance right has probably occupied the minds of many women from the minute that new life steals their hearts and dominates their decision making throughout their entire lives as a parent whether their children are toddlers, teens or even towy, middle-aged adults. There is no magic universal right answer which Elle's particular journey creates that will relate to every mother in the audience but maybe the 'take out' is that they reflect on their own unmet needs. Relatability and commonality are key elements that draw this audience in intellectually, and commit them emotionally to the story.

Throughout *Casting Off*, there are illusions to the dilemma of parental responsibility conflicting with the needs of the self. Elle stalks back in to get Lammie (her grown kids' childhood toy) before she leaves otherwise ill-equipped in the dinghy and ostensibly right at the very moment she has decided to leave her marriage for good. Elle, AJ, JoJo and Coop all struggle with their own internal balance as parents. Coop's internal struggle is the deepest and also the most camouflaged. During the denouement, Coop apologizes to Elle for Lammie's

incineration in the fire that started in the hidden alter dedicated to his little girl. Elle answers 'All part of the letting go process, aye Coop?'. Just after the midpoint, Tom tries to manipulate Elle using her own parental insecurities. 'You think our marriage has been a disaster. How's it going to feel when you add motherhood to that list of failures too, Elle?'. Elle finally sees his power play clearly, and as he dodges the barrage of flying eggs, it is anger at herself as much as Tom, that is being displayed.

There are many illusions to this theme but one of the most visual and tragic moments is when Elle finally allows herself to break the shackles of parental responsibility, and she kisses AJ in the water. At the very moment of release, semi-naked and vulnerable, she is caught out and shamed by none other than Mad Maddie, the appalling mother from hell. Elle now views her step towards her authentic self as a mistake. The fact she has also endangered a small child (Nino) further enforces her disgust at herself and causes her to retreat behind the barrier of her old belief system; she needs to be 'a good mum.'

PROTAGONIST

Elle is the protagonist. When we first meet Elle in the luxury, glass cage-like apartment in Shanghai, it is apparent she belongs there as much as the Christmas Tree does. Elle is over 'the waiting' and ready to make 'her' life choices even if she has forgotten what they might be after living life in the shadow of Tom. Elle believes that everything she has missed in the 25 years of following his career around Asia will be magically restored when she finally returns to her idealized homeland. Elle's outer motivation is to return to New Zealand and find a real home and real friends, a tribe, to fill the void left by her departing children. Her initial default strategy to achieve this is to pander to Tom. She chooses to accept his sexual attention as a substitute for any real deeper emotional connection between them.

Initially, the audience may consider Elle's situation as not particularly dire. She lives a luxurious life provided by a successful, albeit emotionally distant husband. But as Elle is revealed so is the magnitude of what is at stake if she does not wake up. Having already slept through the majority of her life, without an alarm bell, this woman is in danger of never having lived. Although she is yet to be aware of it, she also risks losing the one thing she truly wants, to be valued and respected by her kids. She is given little prods along the way that disturb her slumber such as Tom's willingness to sell 'her' boat, her tūrangawaewae.

Elle's wake-up call comes when Tom breaks their 'deal' and accepts another Asian posting, revealing he had no intention of them finally being home. From that moment, Elle is not only woken but also jolted into action. She is willing to row away from everything except her kids. Heading off without a lifejacket but holding Lammie tight, Elle ventures into open sea, away from her marriage and her way of life.

The arc that Elle traverses is defined by both physical and emotional signposts. In Shanghai, Elle is ensconced in luxury and imprisoned in a glass case. Jian Zhang, the driver can see Elle lives in denial and worries for her, 'You look after you self, Elle.' Initially, on the boat, Elle plays the martyr, keeping things on an even keel. She lets Tom treat her like a pack horse loading the boat while he socializes and lets jibes about her weight and aging go as she turns a blind eye to Tom's increasingly disrespectful behavior.

From the moment Tom breaks their deal, Elle's outer mask begins to crumble, and we glimpse something more genuine and more authentic. In her time alone in the bush, Elle is resourceful. Reflecting on her former vanity, she sits on a rock, deriding herself as she looks at the vain, impracticality of a now broken, bejeweled sandal. In her time with Coop, Elle becomes the driver both physically and metaphorically. She not only handles the motorbike but she takes control of their household finances and seeks a job with JoJo, the least desirable boss she could wish for. The second act climax and the fallout sees Elle briefly retreat to the security of her past behaviors and life. However, Tom's blatant deceptions, as well as AJ's on the mark accusations, help force her back towards the ultimate completion of her arc.

Before that arc is complete Elle must deal with the issue that eats at the very core of her. Does she have the love and respect of her grown children? By staying in a lousy marriage, Elle had convinced herself that she has been a 'good mum' and states this at points during the script. Elle does not fully evolve until she confronts that demon.

ANTAGONIST

In the first draft, I considered Tom to be the antagonist. In this draft, however, Tom has morphed, and his primary function is as an energized obstacle creating havoc. AJ is now the antagonist, in both his primary capacity as Elle's romantic interest and also as a constant

reminder to Elle of how far she has drifted from her younger self and her genuine essence. From the moment Elle and AJ re-meet she tries to apportion blame for her life's failings on to him. AJ does not buy it and continues in subsequent meetings to hold her accountable for her own decisions. Elle's surprise at this further enforces to the audience how Elle's 'modus operandi' in her years with Tom has been denial and abstention of responsibility.

Despite what Elle may say, her actions reveal something entirely different and AJ holds her accountable on this. If what they had shared years before meant nothing to her why did she carry their little book of love poems close for 30 years? Throughout the script, AJ questions Elle's belief that her 'good mum' role is valid if she plays it at the expense of her essence. He consistently cuts through to Elle's core issue and challenges it. In the climactic scene, AJ has had enough and stops holding back. He spells out that Elle's historical demands on him align completely with Tom's treatment of Elle. AJ clearly shows Elle how hypercritical she is and how she needs to front up to her own life choices. AJ's statements are clear and irrefutable. AJ forces her final transformation. Faced with this truth and the realization that she has finally driven AJ, the love of her life away, Elle must act. She takes the final decisive action that results in the completion of her personal transformation. Elle confronts her children with her new identity and then with them as approving witnesses, she finally casts off her old life.

THE DRAMATIC QUESTION

The dramatic question set up at the beginning of the script and answered at the end is: Will Elle break through the barriers she has created that hem her in? In terms of physical representation on the screen, the audience is waiting to see if this suppressed, combustible woman will finally break out and if she does where will it take her?

This question is established in the first couple pages of *Casting Off*. Elle immediately appears at odds with her environment. Like the Christmas Tree, Elle is very out of place in Shanghai. In the opening scenes, she is in denial about her husband's true nature and stands very alone behind a barrier of glass which separates her from the world. Arriving back in New Zealand, the glass barrier is now a car window, only half down, letting Elle breathe a small amount of fresh air.

The story begins on page one, but the intensity of conflict between Elle and Tom really begins to build once they are alone together on the boat. It climaxes with Elle's dramatic departure at the quarter mark, and she begins her journey into the unknown. At the mid-point, Elle and AJ who have been circling each other on the Island re-meet. Their magnetic dance of attraction and rejection continues to rise in line with other pressures on arising from Tom and Maddie until it climaxes at the end of the middle section with Maddie's breakdown and Coop's Fire. Both of these events risk Elle taking shelter back in the way of life she has only just escaped.

The dramatic question is answered at the end and represented by several key signifiers. Elle casts off from the 'family' when she leaves the kids on the wharf with Tom, who is finally crying. Immediately after that, Elle takes the dinghy and spends a day love-making with AJ, before she leaves, she paints him a picture of a mermaid with the caption, 'I am the journey.' There is also an image of a scarecrow, decked out in the trappings of Elle's former life, scaring birds off in Coop's veggie patch. The very final scene answers the dramatic question very visually by contrasting to the opening image of Elle in Shanghai, trapped behind a barrier of glass looking at lights. Elle is at last, unimpeded by any barrier and dives into the dark sea creating her own tunnel of phosphorene light.

STORY STRUCTURE

For protagonist Elle, the major turning points occur when she is unable to utilize her well-practiced avoidance and denial techniques when the truth is irrefutably placed right in front of her. The turning point that catapults Elle into the Second Act is a double beat. First, she learns that Tom has been negotiating on a new posting with Mickey King then; secondly, she discovers he has accepted without discussing it and consequently has broken a deal that has sustained her for twenty-five years. This double beat creates the wake-up call for Elle that drives the rest of the story.

At two junctures at either end of the script, Elle finds Viagra amongst Tom's things. The first time on the boat, her shock is eclipsed by the enormity of other unfolding events. At that time, she cannot be sure if it is something Tom has been using it secretly but exclusively with her. Building towards the Third Act Climax at the Motel, Elle discovers the packet is now near empty despite them not having had sex since she left the boat. Elle stares up at her

reflection in the mirror, unable to hide from the truth. Tom's true nature is revealed further to Elle that same evening when she discovers that, despite him knowing how much the Aroha means to her, he has been negotiating its sale to Chester. When Elle leaves this time, she will not be coming back.

Elle's relationship with AJ contains several beats, but two are pivotal. The first one, just before the Second Act Climax, comes when Elle realizes that AJ has found their jointly created book of love poetry and art, Barrier Blues. His reaction shows that this is also something crucially important to him too and leads Elle to reconnect with a freer, more truthful part of herself. She kisses AJ. The kiss is a point of no return. It is AJ's cuttingly incisive confrontation with Elle outside the Motel which marks the climactic moment of the script and which shocks her into the realization that she alone is responsible for her life choices and she must take ownership of them. AJ accusations force a dawning of a belated maturity onto Elle. The potential to lose AJ results in Elle finally summoning the courage to risk confronting her children with her new life choices.

As discussed earlier in this Exegesis, eating at the core of Elle, the real fear that resides deep within her, is that if she steps toward her authentic self and away from the carefully constructed mask of 'good mum,' she will lose her children's love. This is Elle's final and toughest call. In revealing she has smashed the family unit wide apart, she risks her children's trust evaporating. At the end of Act Three, in the denouement, at very moment Elle is brave enough to take that risk, she is rewarded. The kids can speak honestly and openly to their mother for the first time. Dylan tells her, that while loving her, he felt under constant pressure to supply everything her life was not. Sophie comments that her mum reminded her of an unfinished project shoved to the back of a wardrobe, now seeing the light. As she and the kids restore the Aroha's nameplate on the back of the boat, they bond. The kids have a new respect for their Mum. Elle looks at peace when Sophie delivers the important summary of their childhoods, in an almost semi blessing, 'I guess you did what you had to do.' Elle cries with release as her kids fold her into a communal hug.

Throughout Act Two, Coop prematurely chastises Elle for not believing in her right to shine. In the last lines of the script, Elle is free, resilient to the judgment of others and comfortable in her both her roles as lover and mother. Secure in her worth, she floats, lit from within. 'Elle smiles up at the stars also unequivocal about their right to shine.'

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