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Let Go Of Your Hands

Year Of Lodgement 2023

School of Language and Culture

A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of practice-led research in the form of a full-length script for a feature film; plus a 10,000-word essay (exegesis). A summary of the script is as follows:

Let Go Of Your Hands is a coming-of-age film centred on the family and sibling dynamics of a mixed-race, Chinese-Pakeha household in present day Aotearoa. Siblings, Katie and David Leung are forced to reconcile with their identity and culture before Katie leaves the country for a prestigious opportunity. But little does the family know that Katie is desperate to find a way out of this opportunity, and David is secretly dealing with his wife's pregnancy – leading the siblings to question their connection to their culture, language, parents, and each other.

The script is framed by an Exegesis which is a 10,000-word essay on the subject of:

- (a) the genre of the script
- (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 other institution of higher learning

Candidate Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jemshenk", written over a horizontal line.

LET GO OF YOUR HANDS

by

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Second Draft
March 2023

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1

INT. KATIE'S BEDROOM - EARLY MORNING

It's dark outside. The morning birds have just started calling. A girls' bedroom. Messy in an organized, booksmart sort of way. A stack of textbooks on the floor about Asian history and literature. A small gold rabbit on the bedside table. A poster of Hong Kong above her bed.

[*Note: All Cantonese dialogue will be in square brackets]

MUM

Katie!

There's the stomping of someone walking around in another part of the house.

KATIE

Yep! Just wait.

There are several bags of luggage stacked up against the wall.

MUM

We have to go now!

Mum comes in. In her late 50s and with a Kiwi accent, she has neat hair that has started to go frizzy from running around after Katie. A full glimpse of the room...Katie (20s, mixed Kiwi-Chinese) is straightening her hair on the floor. Legs crossed, tongue poking out slightly. Katie is buxom and stout with frizzy black hair. Her face looks Chinese, but her hair and body type don't. She wears a baggy jacket and tracksuit pants. One side of her hair is curly and the other side straight.

MUM (CONT'D)

What are you DOING?

She sees Katie straightening her hair.

MUM (CONT'D)

LET'S GO!

KATIE

I'm almost done.

Mum walks out, frantic. Dad walks in. 50s, Hong Kong Chinese and fat in a festive way. The sort of dad that you could cry into if this was a different kind of family. Dad puts his arm on Katie's shoulder with a fatherly closeness. They don't say anything for a bit.

KATIE (CONT'D)

You proud of me?

DAD
Of course.

He watches her straighten for a bit.

DAD (CONT'D)
Curly hair is special.

KATIE
But no one knows what I am. Anyway,
mummy say I look better with it
straightened.

A horn honks outside. Dad chuckles. Mum stomps back in

MUM
KATIE-

CUT TO:

2 INT. CAR - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie is in the back seat. The sides of her hair are straight but she's missed a chunk in the back that is still frizzy. Dad is trying to find a parking spot and going round and round aggressively.

DAD
[Fuck your mother, HURRY UP! Can't
fucking park, I hope you die.]

This is a common Cantonese insult and Katie grins hearing it. Mum picks up the phone.

MUM
David?

KATIE
Is that David?

DAD
Is he here already?

Dad fumbles with the stereo, trying to connect the phone.

KATIE
I didn't know he was coming.

DAD
Put him on speaker.

MUM
... She was straightening her hair

KATIE
WHAT? We are on TIME it's the
parking that's making us late NOT
ME-

DAD
Put him on speaker!

Mum fumbles with the stereo too

KATIE
Park there, park there.

MUM
Will you stay for dinner?... No we
haven't found a park yet.

DAD
Katie, you put the speaker on.

Katie takes off her seatbelt and leans forward to hook the blue tooth up. Suddenly dad swerves into a park and Katie slams into the side.

KATIE
OW!

DAD
[Be careful!] You should have your
seatbelt on.

Title over the continuing scene of everyone getting out of the car and taking suitcases out: "LET GO OF YOUR HANDS"

CUT TO:

3 INT. AUCKLAND INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - SOON AFTERWARDS

Sounds of the airport. Last call intercoms, excited voices, the beeps of scanned luggage, and that low drone of air conditioner and planes in the background.

Suddenly: A couple is crying, embracing each other. Tears and kisses and 'I love you's echo round the airport. People stop and coo at them, like this is the peek of human existence.

David (mixed Kiwi-Chinese, 30s) is watching this couple from behind a pillar, waiting for everyone. David is extraordinarily handsome - tall with dark features. Well dressed and composed.

Suddenly, there is the sound of a large conversation. David turns his head, as do other people.

MUM
Have you got your passport?

KATIE
I'm not stupid!

MUM
Okay just checking.

DAD
[hey yum cha upstairs]

KATIE
I don't have my passport.

MUM
What?!

DAD
[wha! Half price on siu mai!]

David watches them scramble for Katie's passport. It's in her backpack. He does not alert any of the family to his presence. He doesn't want them to see him. Or maybe he secretly wants them to-

DAD (CONT'D)
David!

They stumble over to him, Katie dragging her feet behind. She doesn't care for David as much as her parents do. She tries to pretend this doesn't affect her, but their intense excitement to see him obviously ruins her day. No matter how hard they try, the parents can't contain their excitement to see him, as though this may be the last time. This desperation bothers Katie.

MUM
How was the motel?

DAVID
Okay. Normal.

DAD
[Have you had breakfast? There's yum cha upstairs]

MUM
Are you hungry?

KATIE
I'm hungry.

MUM
You had toast already.

DAVID
Yea. Dunno if I want Chinese food
for breakfast.

KATIE
We should check in now by the way.

DAD
There's other things. What do you
want? Look, Western food-

Dad and mum start discussing foods. David turns to Katie.

DAVID
(to Katie)
You excited?

KATIE
Yea! Of course.

DAVID
So weird to see you moving to a
whole other country by yourself.

KATIE
Why?

DAVID
Dunno.

Beat.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Dad must be proud.
KATIE
Yep. I'm the first in our family to
have a university education.

David grits his teeth.

DAVID
Yep.

KATIE
So-

Dad points upstairs

DAD
Hungry? Let's go!

David gets a notification on his phone.

DAVID
Actually, I'm not that hungry.

Dad shrugs. There's a power play here.

DAD
Up to you.

Dad catches the eye of the couple kissing and saying goodbye outside of the gate.

DAD (CONT'D)
[Fucking gweilo]. What a waste of time. All this romantic shit. Let's go.

Dad starts walking towards the yum cha. David is annoyed at this comment and starts following solely to refute it.

DAVID
It's nice to be sentimental, you know.

DAD
Huh?

DAVID
To have feelings.

DAD
Pfft! You remember I was going between Hong Kong and Auckland for work when you were a kid? I saw your mum maybe twice a month. You think I had time for romantic?

DAVID
That's not what I mean.

MUM
I get what he means.

KATIE
(under her breath)
Of course you do.

DAVID
(to mum)
Get what *who* means? Me or dad?

They get on an escalator, Katie trips getting the suitcase on.

DAD
Actually, we should check in first.
Check in over there!

DAVID
God, make up your mind.

DAD
Check in, then we can eat without
suitcases.

They get off the escalator, struggling as it is going the wrong way. David shakes his head, embarrassed at all this. They pass the couple again.

KATIE
I bet they don't even have a flight
ticket, they just come here to get
attention.

Mum and Dad laughs at this and David raises his eyebrows, almost imperceptibly. He knows Katie just wants brownie points. Katie secretly looks back at the couple when they pass. She's curious.

CUT TO:

4 INT. AIRPORT YUM CHA - SLIGHTLY LATER

They are waiting to be seated, this time only with carry on luggage. Dad walks straight through but David stops in.

DAVID
It says 'wait to be seated'. Can't
you read?

DAD
Pfft. It's yum cha.

David sighs, annoyed.

DAD (CONT'D)
Okay, up to you. I'll wait.

He stands back. Katie adjusts her glasses, watching the interaction between Dad and David.

MUM
Wow, are those new shoes?

The family look at David's shoes. Black leather. They look very new. And uncomfortable.

DAVID

Yea.

Dad shakes his head.

DAD

Waste of money. Are they comfortable?

David is deflated at this response, but pretends to be nonchalant. Katie notices.

DAVID

I don't care. I like them.

KATIE

They look good. Do they sell women's versions?

DAVID

These are men's shoes.

KATIE

I know I was just-

MUM

Is that a new hair style too? You might get scouted to be a model!

David doesn't care for this comment. Katie adjusts her glasses subconsciously. Dad puts his arm around Katie

DAD

Both of you could be models.

MUM

Lucky I married your dad! I didn't want my kids to have pink skin like me. You both have beautiful golden skin.

Katie catches Davids eye infinitesimally. There's a moment of connection where they both raise their eyebrows at each other. Suddenly a waitress comes up to them.

WAITRESS

You don't have to wait, please sit anywhere.

They gather their things. David knows what Dad will say next... And sure enough, Dad turns to David. Dad is standing a little too close, so when he turns his face is huge.

DAD
(to David)
See? Told you.

An infuriating comment. David could punch his father in the nose for this. The family move towards a table at the back, but David stays put. Katie rolls her carry-on past.

KATIE
It's okay. You haven't really been
to yum cha for a while.

5 INT. AIRPORT YUM CHA - SOON AFTERWARDS

Dad jokes to the waitress in Cantonese, Mum joining in too. Katie tries to find a gap in the conversation, looking from mum to dad to waitress desperately, but she can't jump in. David is texting. Everyone talks as if there is simultaneously all the time in the world and no time at all.

DAD
[My daughter here, she's going to
England to study. Oxford. You know
Oxford? Everyone knows Oxford.]

The waitress claps.

DAD (CONT'D)
[Studying history.]

Katie beams.

KATIE
Actually, it's-

The waiter turns to Katie, talking in Cantonese. Katie stutters through a response, trying so hard she could be sweating.

KATIE (CONT'D)
[Thank you.]

For all this stress, she can't even manage a full sentence. She could kick herself. The waitress turns to David

DAD
[He doesn't speak Cantonese.]

DAVID
I can hear it. Katie can't even-

But Dad's already started ordering.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Wait, I want the one with the
sticky rice, what's it-

DAD
Tsk.

KATIE
[Lo mai gai.]

Dad shakes his head at the waitress. David is annoyed.

CUT TO:

6 INT. AIRPORT YUM CHA - SLIGHTLY LATER

The food has arrived. Katie is doing readings while Mum repacks Katie's bag. David eyes this all up.

MUM
Katie, what did you do?
Everything's all scrunched up.

KATIE
(distracted)
Nothing.

MUM
God, what's this huge notebook for?

Katie's head darts up suddenly.

KATIE
It's just my study notes. It's
nothing.

She gets up and maneuvers awkwardly through the chairs, a little big for the space. Grabbing the notebook, David takes this in suspiciously but says nothing, not wanting to get involved.

A waitress brings another dish.

MUM
[Excuse me, can I please have more
sauce.]

DAD
Katie! Eat this one, I got it for
you.

Mum nudges David.

MUM
Did you see that? She didn't even
acknowledge me!

Katie looks back at Dad putting a deep fried sesame ball in
her bowl.

KATIE
Oh! Daddy, I love this one!

DAD
Best one is the place near our
house.

MUM
She was so sad you were leaving. Do
you remember the lady gave us a
whole box the last time we went
there?

David, feeling left out, leans in to look at her bowl.

DAVID
I've never had this one before.

MUM
Really? You would like it!

Dad puts one in David's bowl.

DAD
Try, try, try.

David looks at his bowl.

DAVID
No, I don't think I'd like it. It's
unhealthy anyway.
(to Katie)
What are you studying anyway?

KATIE
PhD in Asian Studies.

She looks comically young to be doing this. Mum is asking for
sauce again. She turns to David, Katie sees this.

MUM
I bet the waitress is ignoring me
because I'm white.

David ignores her comment.

DAVID
(to Katie)
Aren't you Asian enough?

He's heckling her.

KATIE
What?

DAVID
Why do you need to study Asians?

KATIE
Well, I, it's not like that-

DAD
PhD! [When your grandad escaped from China to Hong Kong he had to swim across freezing cold water and avoid all the policeman.] But it was all worth it... You will be a doctor!

DAVID
Not a real one.

DAD
When I was eating scrap chicken bones out of rubbish bins as a kid, my dream was to go to Oxford.

KATIE
It's not that big a deal.

She clearly thinks it is, closing her book and beaming. Academia and achievement is her value in this family. Mum chimes in too.

MUM
It IS a big deal. We never had the opportunity to go to university. You took hold of everything we gave you. I couldn't even imagine having the life you do-

Katie's proud.

MUM (CONT'D)
-Being able to follow your dreams.

David gets up.

DAVID
I need the toilet.

David walks to the toilet, the conversation continuing behind him.

CUT TO:

7 INT. TOILET - CONTINUOUS

David looks at himself in the mirror.

DAVID

Only a couple more hours. You can do it.

CUT TO:

8 INT. AIRPORT YUM CHA - CONTINUOUS

Mum and Dad are still raving over Katie and the sacrifices they made, sitting either side of her.

MUM

Everything was worth it. Daddy's thumb cut off at the factory-

DAD

Your success makes my suffering okay. Once you finish, you can be a professor and make lots of money and buy a nice house for us like Auntie's daughter.

KATIE

Yea.

Beat.

KATIE (CONT'D)

Hey, I'm excited to stop over at Hong Kong.

DAD

Why?

KATIE

I miss the food and the smell and the way everyone is always going somewhere. It's my home.

DAD

Home?! You've only been once or twice.

KATIE

But I feel more home there than
anywhere.

DAD

Make sure to tell people in England
your home is New Zealand.

Katie is visibly sad.

KATIE

No...I like being from Hong Kong.

DAD

You're lucky to be mixed because
people won't be racist to you.

KATIE

Maybe after this PhD, I can go live
in Hong Kong.

DAD

Why do you want to go there? I left
to give you a better life.

Dad shakes his head as though this is a cute joke. David
returns and sits down, putting food into his bowl.

DAD (CONT'D)

David have you renewed your Hong
Kong identity card?

DAVID

Nope.

KATIE

Hey, do you think I can get one? I
heard the rules have changed?

DAD

Of course not! You are born in New
Zealand. You are a kiwi not Hong
Konger.

He laughs and puts his arm around her like she's a kid.

KATIE

I need the toilet.

She gets up.

DAVID

I still don't get what Katie's
studying?

The family shrugs.

CUT TO:

9 INT. TOILET - CONTINUOUS

Katie in the cubicle with her pants down. She has her head in her hands. She takes a deep breath.

KATIE

It's just 4 years in England.
You'll make everyone happy and
proud and then you can do whatever
you want with your life. 4 years.
Easy. You can do it.

CUT TO:

10 INT. AIRPORT YUM CHA - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie coming back to the table. Her family are pouring over her textbooks. Dad points at a picture of Monkey King, beaming.

DAD

OH! Monkey King! [Grandma used to
tell us the pig story as kids-]

DAVID

I was actually thinking of getting
a Monkey King tattoo.

Katie sits down, launching into an isolating academic description. It's a way to deflect her own emotions.

KATIE

Ooh, are you talking about *Journey
to the West*? Many people
misinterpret the story, did you
know? I've read it in its original
form and there are many
interpretations-

DAD

Why would you get a tattoo? Make
yourself low class. No education.
And you can't come to Hong Kong
then. Everyone will think you are
part of [the 14k gang].

DAVID

No they won't. We don't live in the 80s anymore. That's stupid. Anyway, I'm probably not going to Hong Kong anytime soon.

DAD

What if you have a kid? You just wait and see. You won't be able to get a job, you know? You don't even have university degree anyway.

DAVID

And I'm doing fine without it.

MUM

Why ruin your skin like that?

DAVID

Oh my god. I was just thinking about it. I loved monkey king as a kid and the way he fought everyone-

KATIE

Oh by the way, it's not just fight scenes in Monkey King. Did you know there are some very complex themes about self redemption and ties to Buddhist values. You can really understand the Ming Dynasty life if-

DAVID

I'm just trying to connect to my culture. You always tell me to.

KATIE

That's exactly the reason I specialized in East Asian Studies.

Mum and Dad have not been formally educated and are not interested in what Katie is saying. The interruptions deflate Katie, who is putting on a show for her parents, trying to prove that what she's doing is worth their pride. Katie gives up.

DAD

David, do you have a job yet?

MUM

Don't worry too much, just enjoy.

DAVID

I already have a job. I'm freelancing.

DAD

Ah Sun. He is always looking for interns. I will call him tonight.

Katie looks obviously down that no one was listening to her. She's doing this for them, after all.

DAVID

I have eight years of experience, I don't need to intern. I get hired to do projects.

DAD

Tsk. How will you make money? What is projects? You need a real job. Once you have a kid, you will understand.

DAVID

I don't want a kid. And I make good enough money anyway.

DAD

Tsk. Why no kid?

David snaps.

DAVID

You know what? I don't want a kid because I don't want to raise them like you raised me.

DAD

You act like you were beat up. What was so bad in your childhood? Huh?

DAVID

The fact you put so much fucking pressure on me-

David's phone rings. It's his wife, Sarah.

DAVID (CONT'D)

(to Dad)

Be quiet.

He picks up.

CUT TO:

INT. AIRPORT YUM CHA - SOON AFTERWARDS

They are putting on their jackets, getting ready to leave. The atmosphere has fixed itself now. Dad is waving goodbye to Sarah on video call. Everyone forgetting the almost-argument before, except Mum, who is still in damage control mode, making sure everyone's happy. Katie is holding the phone.

SARAH (ON PHONE)

One final big Good Luck!! I am so proud of you, smarty pants. I wish I could be there to say bye, but I have this horrible stomach bug.

KATIE

That's okay! I'll call when I land too.

SARAH

Yay! Okay, I need to rest now. Don't forget to have fun in England. You're always studying. Give yourself a break to party!

David grabs the phone.

DAVID

Katie doesn't do fun.

KATIE

Yea I do, you don't know-

David has already walked off, still on the phone.

DAD

David, DAVID! You pay. You said your projects pay good anyway, right?

David goes to the counter, but doesn't look happy about it. Dad and Katie leave. Mum goes and tries to secretly give David money. David is insulted.

DAVID

What are you doing?

MUM

Don't tell dad!

DAVID

I have money. I'm not fucking poor.

MUM
I know you're not. I just want to help out. Dad ordered a lot of food.

DAVID
I can pay for it. I am well paid as a freelancer.

MUM
I didn't say you weren't.

DAVID
You implied it.

MUM
Sorry.

Mum lingers before walking off. David taps his card, but it declines. He stands at the counter, waiting until everyone is completely gone. Then he pulls out his phone, presumably to transfer money.

Katie is watching from the escalator, looking back at them.

CUT TO:

12 INT. CUSTOMS - LATER

The family are standing outside of customs trying to explain to dad what a bucket list is.

KATIE
It's like... Something you want to do before you die, you know?

DAVID
Yea, like mine is go to skydiving. Katie's is...?

KATIE
Oh well there's this band in Hong Kong, like a Cantonese post-rock band, I'd really like to go to one of their underground warehouse gigs and-

DAD
Ohh, I get it. Okay. I'd go to university.

Katie is dejected that people aren't really listening to her.

DAVID
It's usually meant to be something
fun.

MUM
I'd finish high school and get a
teaching diploma.

DAD
I'd be a banker!

MUM
Yes! That was your dream. Katie's
already achieving her bucket list
in Oxford anyway.

KATIE
Well I-

Dad puts his arm around Katie.

DAD
Katie, you are my bucket list.

DAVID
No, it's meant to be fun. Do you
always have to turn everything into
this? Why are you always so-

CUT TO:

13 INT. CUSTOMS - SLIGHTLY LATER

Everyones standing around the Customs entrance. It's time for
Katie to go. No one says anything and no one hugs. Mum and
dad both do a thumbs up.

KATIE
Okay... Bye.

She disappears into check in. No one moves or says anything.

MUM
(to David)
Are you staying one more night?

DAD
[Mummy is making potato and chicken
for dinner.]

DAVID
I'm gonna get a ticket back now.

MUM
Oh. That's better anyway, I didn't
have enough for you.

CUT TO:

14 INT. SECURITY CHECK IN - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie fumbles with her bags, picking the skin around her thumb nervously as she waits in line. Suddenly she picks too far and blood spurts from her cuticles.

KATIE
Damnit.

She wraps it in her jumper.

CUSTOMS
Next please.

Katie struggles to get her bag onto the conveyer belt, sweating. She looks around, but no one helps.

CUT TO:

15 INT. GATE - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie finally finds a seat and flops down, exhausted. She takes out her readings and tries to do them, but can't focus. She progressively gets more and more panicked, reading the same line over again. Suddenly, Katie notices a large man across from her with his arms folded. He is listening to an audio book and every now and then, bursts out laughing.

Katie takes out the large notebook from before out of her bag. There are drawings in here. She flips to a new blank page and starts to draw the man as a cartoon. When finished, she looks around and sees a sparrow eating a hotdog wrapper under a table. She draws this too. And then she sees two kids secretly reading a copy of *Fifty Shades of Gray* in the kiosk, giggling, while their parents have an argument meters away. She draws this exaggeratedly, smiling. Suddenly:

GIRL
What are you drawing?

Katie almost jumps out of her seat. A mixed girl, 9, has scooped over in her seat and is watching Katie draw.

GIRL (CONT'D)
I draw too.

KATIE
Uh... Really?

GIRL
Do you wanna see?

The girl scrambles in her own back pack for a notebook.
There's lots of little drawings.

KATIE
Wow. These are so good!

GIRL
I know. Are you an artist?

KATIE
Well, I...

Katie looks at the girl.

KATIE (CONT'D)
Are you mixed?

The girl nods and points to her mum a few seats away.

GIRL
Yea! My mum is from Singapore. How
did you know? Most people think I'm
Mexican or something.

KATIE
Wow, that's so cool. I'm mixed too!
My dad is from Hong Kong. Mixed can
tell mixed.

GIRL
I'm going to go to Singapore and be
an artist when I'm older!

KATIE
That's so funny! I wanted to do the
same thing as a kid, but in Hong
Kong.

The girl leans over Katie, swinging back and forth. Katie
doesn't say any more.

GIRL
Is that what you do then?

KATIE
Huh? Oh. No.

GIRL
That's sad. You know what you
should do? You should make a comic
book. I would pay a million dollars
for it. Then you can be rich! I
wanna be rich-

GIRLS' MUM
Lily? LILY! Don't annoy that lady.

GIRL
Whoops. I have to go now. Bye!

The girl runs back to her mum who has just woken up from a
nap. Katie watches them. Something has changed within her.

CUT TO:

16 INT. AIRPORT - CONTINUOUS

Dad and mum watch the flight boards. Katie's flight is
boarding now. Dad shakes his head incredulously.

DAD
Oxford!

MUM
I know.

CUT TO:

17 INT. AIRPORT - CONTINUOUS

David is walking through the airport by himself. He hears a
final call for Katie's flight to England. He pauses and looks
at one of the international flight boards. His sister is
going to Oxford. He doesn't know how to feel about it all.
While he's looking he gets a phone call from Sarah.

DAVID
What? WHAT? Since when? Did you
just do a test now? I- are you
sure? Of course I'm happy. I
just...can't be back tonight, I
need to stay with my parents for a
bit. Yea, I'll tell them. Yea, I'm
happy. I'm happy-

He looks stressed.

CUT TO:

18 INT. AIRPORT, GATE - CONTINUOUS

Katie is looking around frantically. People are lining up to board. She is holding her notebook to her chest. She takes her suitcase and backs away, going in the opposite direction, away from the She keeps going. Walking through all the checkpoints until...

CUT TO:

19 INT. AIRPORT - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie bumps into David.

DAVID
What the fuck?

CUT TO:

20 EXT. AIRPORT - SOON AFTERWARDS

Mum and dad start to walk off. Katie and David run up to them.

KATIE
Wait!

Everyone looks confused. Mum rushes to her.

MUM
What's wrong? Are you okay? Did you forget something? Oh no. Do you have your passport?!

Katie takes a breath. She wants to tell them the truth.

KATIE
I... I can't go.

Telling the truth is harder than expected.

MUM
What do you mean you can't go? What happened?

KATIE
I don't-

MUM
Are you scared? Don't let fear stop you from taking hold of opportunities!

KATIE

I can't go unless we find my birth certificate and god knows where that is. Maybe I won't even be able to go. I can defer it, you know? Until the next intake.

DAVID

I can help look.

Everyone stares at David. Katie did not account for this.

KATIE

What?

DAVID

You've worked hard for this. I can help.

Katie swallows.

KATIE

No, no you have to get back home, isn't Sarah sick? I can defer, you know? You should be-

DAVID

No, she said it's fine, she's getting better anyway.

KATIE

Are you sure? I don't want to-

DAD

Let's go!

MUM

I'll change the ticket to tomorrow morning.

Katie is freaking out. This has backfired. And the last thing she wants is David around for longer. Dad puts his arm around her.

DAD

Don't worry, don't worry. Everything will sort out. The God has given you great luck to be successful and bring-

Mum bounds back.

MUM
Tickets changed to tomorrow morning
11am! They said we can keep the
larger suitcases here overnight. I
know exactly where everything is.

Everyone starts to leave but Katie stays planted to the spot.

CUT TO:

21 INT. HOME, CUPBOARD - SOON AFTERWARDS

Mum does not know exactly where everything is. The cupboard is full of hundreds of boxes crammed with hundreds of documents. The family looks at the mess in dismay. They start to dig through.

Random documents, photos, tax forms are strewn all over the floor. David is going through everything systematically. A direct contrast to the rest of the family.

DAVID
Sarah organizes everything
alphabetically, you know.

Beat.

DAVID (CONT'D)
She's good like that.

Beat

DAVID (CONT'D)
She's learning Mandarin, you know?

DAD
We don't speak Mandarin.

Mum is going from room to room, getting flustered. Suddenly David gets a call. It's Sarah. He awkwardly leaves the room. Everyone can hear his raised voice on the phone outside.

KATIE
Wonder what that's about.

She isn't really looking through the boxes, just flicking things around.

DAD
She is not a good match.

KATIE
Really? I don't mind her.

DAD
Doesn't inspire your brother to do work, just tell him to follow his dreams.

KATIE
Oh. Yea. I get what you mean.

DAD
David could be very successful. He is smart and handsome and people like to talk to him. He threw his life away just to do rubbish.

Katie doesn't react to this. There's a pause. Dad picks up a document and reads it.

DAD (CONT'D)
The fishing village we went to when you were a kid has been pulled down.

KATIE
Oh. That's sad. I liked that place.

DAD
Life is better in New Zealand anyway. You are lucky this is your home.

KATIE
I know, I just-

David returns, scowling. He picks up a box and dad notices something.

DAD
David, where is your gold necklace?

Mum is calling from downstairs. David looks at where his necklace should be.

KATIE
(To Mum)
WHAT?

MUM (O.S.)
STORAGE, IT'S IN STORAGE!

Katie goes downstairs to talk to mum. David doesn't look up from his box.

DAVID
I lost it a couple months back.

DAD
Huh? Where?

DAVID
I dunno. I think when I was last up
here.

Dad is hurt.

DAD
This is from your grandfather and
your grandfather gave to me and I
gave to you. This is your culture.
How will you show your kids you are
part of this family?

David's head snaps up.

DAD (CONT'D)
How will you pass this down to
them?

DAVID
I can just tell them we are
Chinese.

Dad shakes his head.

DAD
How? You can't speak Cantonese, you
don't even show up to Chinese New
year this time

DAVID
I was busy.

DAD
Too busy for family? For your
culture? One day you will realize
the importance of your ancestors.

DAVID
I do realize.

Neither of them look at each other, just talking at all the
documents on the floor. Beat.

DAD
You don't want to be part of this
family so bad, well don't then.

David gets up and storms off.

22 INT. HOME, DOWNSTAIRS - CONTINUOUS

David passes Mum and Katie while going to the car.

MUM
David! Take Katie to storage!
(To Katie)
Go with him! He knows how to do
this stuff.

KATIE
I can do it myself.

MUM
You can't even drive! David is good
at this. Go, go!

CUT TO:

23 EXT. HOME, DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Katie follows David out to the car.

DAVID
Fuck off.

KATIE
What did I do?

She gets in the passenger side.

DAVID
Get out. I'm not going to storage.

KATIE
Fine. I don't want to go anyway.

Katie puts her seatbelt on. David sighs and gets in.

CUT TO:

24 I/E. CAR - SLIGHTLY LATER

Katie is looking out the window, contemplative. David stops
at a traffic light.

KATIE
Hey, do you remember the time we
went to that fishing village in
Hong Kong?

DAVID

Kind of.

KATIE

The houses were all floating on the water. Even when you were standing still, it felt like you were always moving.

DAVID

Yea. It was pretty cool.

KATIE

I loved that. The feeling of being on the water at all times.

The lights turn green. David starts to drive.

DAVID

I just remember I posted a photo of the scenery and everyone zoomed into that guy squatting in the background. Year eleven sucked because of that.

KATIE

Daddy told me the village has been pulled down. It's not there anymore.

David gets a call from Sarah on the car phone. He swipes it away.

DAVID

Oh okay.

KATIE

Aren't you sad about it?

DAVID

The village? No. Why would I be?

KATIE

I dunno. I just think that if I had kids I would want to show them these places that impacted me. But they are all being torn down or demolished, you know and-

DAVID

-You think my gold chain might be in storage?

KATIE

Maybe. But do you get what I mean?

Beat. David suddenly makes a U-Turn. Silence again.

DAVID

Mum and Dad told me they will move to England with you later.

KATIE

What?

David pulls into storage.

DAVID

Yea, they said that you can look after them when they retire.

David parks, reversing expertly. Katie doesn't like this future prospect, but can't say no. It's her duty.

KATIE

Oh well. I mean of course. They did so much for us and suffered for me to go to a good school, of course. Yes. That's... Of course.

DAVID

God.

KATIE

What?

David has already got out of the car.

KATIE (CONT'D)

WHAT?

Katie struggles to undo her seatbelt and get out of the car.

25

EXT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

David is already far ahead and she has to shout to talk to him.

KATIE

You always make me feel so bad for respecting mum and dad.

DAVID

Can you close the door properly.

Katie reopens the door and then slams it hard.

CUT TO:

26

INT. STORAGE - SOON AFTERWARDS

David opens the storage door. The siblings stand on either side. He looks around as though the sight of this memorabilia physically pains him. Katie starts looking at the boxes. She's clearly not looking for a birth certificate, opening a box of childhood memories instead. Her reactions are different to David.

KATIE

Aw! Do you remember this?

Katie lugs out a huge child-size panda toy. David looks at it and says nothing.

KATIE (CONT'D)

This was Christmas... Ten years ago? Were you at uni yet?

DAVID

Don't remember.

He does remember.

KATIE

Your gift must be in here too...

She rummages around the corner, mostly disappearing into the boxes. David starts to look in the opposite part of the storage unit. He finds a box of documents

DAVID

Shouldn't we be looking here?

He starts looking through the box. This is mostly old birthday and greetings cards. He takes one out addressed to David. It's a homemade Christmas card. David opens it up. Inside is a kid's handwriting. It's from Katie over 10 years ago: "I can't wait for you to come back from Hong Kong so we can play games again! Sorry I can't ship your present because it's too big :(I spent all my savings on it! Happy Christmas"

KATIE

What are you looking at?

David stuffs the card back in the box.

DAVID

Nothing.

KATIE

I found your Christmas gift.

She holds a small superhero toy, a petrol station freebie. Embarrassingly cheap compared to Katie's gift.

KATIE (CONT'D)

Wow, it still works!

She holds it in front of David's face, flicking it on and off.

TOY

Superheroes follow their dreams!

... But the batteries are running out, making the toy sound distorted.

DAVID

Can you-

Katie keeps flicking it on and off

KATIE

This was a good Christmas.

TOY

Superheroes follow their dreams!

DAVID

Was it? Can you- get- GET that shit out of my face-

TOY

Superheroes-

David bats the toy out of her hand.

KATIE

Oh.

It's awkward for a bit. She goes back to the boxes, rifling through different things. David notices an Er Hu - a Chinese two stringed violin. He tries to ease the tension.

DAVID

We waited in customs for like hours to get that into New Zealand.

KATIE

What?

David points.

KATIE (CONT'D)

We have an Er Hu?

DAVID

Dad and I want to Hong Kong for a year back in...2008? 2009? How old were you?

KATIE

I was nine. I begged to come with.

DAVID

Well, I begged to stay in New Zealand. Anyway, dad saw some kid play an Er Hu at a conservatory and got this idea in his head that I could be like that. He talked to the kid for hours after the showcase and then the next day he took out money to buy me an Er Hu. It was expensive. He didn't have enough money for both of us to eat for the rest of that trip, so he ate a plain bowl of rice at every meal. It sucked. I hated the Er Hu, but I had to do it. Every night I thought of how guilty I felt about something I never asked to do in the first place.

David plucks at the strings. He looks around at the storage unit. There are heaps of random instruments, textbooks, objects. Beat.

DAVID (CONT'D)

We did a lot.

KATIE

They wanted us to be good.

He sees a unicycle.

DAVID

That doesn't mean I had to do fucking unicycle classes.

CUT TO:

27

EXT. STORAGE - SOON AFTERWARDS

David squats outside the storage complex, sweating.

DAVID

I can't find it anywhere.

Katie comes out with a notebook. She gingerly looks at in front of David.

KATIE

Look, I used to copy your buildings when I was a kid and you were studying architecture.

DAVID

Oh. I didn't know that.

KATIE

Why would you? You were 20 and I was 10.

It's awkward now.

KATIE (CONT'D)

I always liked how you did windows. It was so clever.

DAVID

Yea. Thanks.

KATIE

Was that your dream?

DAVID

I don't think I had a dream.

KATIE

What about that big sculpture under your bed?

DAVID

What? What sculpture?

KATIE

You had made this huge like, architecture thing, it was so cool-

DAVID

Oh that. That was stupid.

David starts to really look through the boxes now, avoiding this conversation. Katie tries to muster up the courage to ask something.

KATIE
Hey... I was pretty good at drawing
right? I didn't really think so at
the time but...

She trails off as the phone rings. David doesn't look at her drawings and barely hears her, preoccupied.

DAVID
It's mum. I gotta take this.

KATIE
Oh.

Katie takes out her phone and checks if anyone has called her.

KATIE (CONT'D)
Why's she calling you?

David leaves the storage unit to answer the call.

CUT TO:

28 INT. STORAGE - SLIGHTLY LATER

David is walking back. Katie is cold and removed now.

DAVID
Mum asked why we hadn't gone
through the photo albums. She says
we took your birth certificate to
some restaurant to celebrate your
British Citizenship not long ago.

KATIE
Right. She didn't tell me that.

David shrugs, pulling out an album and looking through. Katie leaves, pulling out her phone.

CUT TO:

29 EXT. STORAGE - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie is on the phone to mum, pacing around outside. A bug keeps crawling up her arm and she has to keep shaking it around.

KATIE
Why can't you just tell me? You
always have to go to David...
(MORE)

KATIE (CONT'D)

NO that's not fair... He dropped out of uni and I'm getting a PhD. I am completely capable... why do you always treat me like I'm so much younger than I am... Do you know how much energy I put into listening and consoling and comforting everybody when David left? And now he's back I don't matter anymore!... I'm not being dramatic! That's exactly how it is.

She clicks off and storms back inside.

DAVID

It's at Golden Empress.

KATIE

What?

He holds up a photo: *The family at dinner. Katie is smiling and typing on a laptop at the same time while everyone is cheers-ing in the background. Someone is holding two passports up in front of her - New Zealand and British, along with her birth certificate.*

CUT TO:

30

INT. CAR - LATER

David is driving while both parents are trying to talk through the bluetooth car phone, interrupting and yelling.

MUM

I'M SO RELIEVED! YOU ALWAYS HAD SUCH GOOD PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS. BY THE WAY-

DAVID

You don't have to yell

DAD

KATIE!

KATIE

Yes?

DAD

IS DAVID THERE?

DAVID

What?

DAD
ARE YOU GOING TO THE RESTAURANT

KATIE
We are both going. Not just David.

DAVID
Yes, going now.

DAD
KATIE!

KATIE
Yes?

DAD
MAKE SURE TO TELL JOE YOU'RE GOING
TO OXFORD-

MUM
OH WAIT, JOE DOESN'T-

DAD
HE THINKS HIS KIDS ARE SO SMART.
ALWAYS TALK SHIT WHEN DAVID, DAVID
YOU FAILED AND THEN-

MUM
THIS DOESN'T MATTER, KATIE, KATIE
LISTEN-

DAD
WE WILL MEET YOU THERE-

DAVID
ARE BOTH OF YOU STUPID? YOU DON'T
NEED TO YELL. IT'S BLUETOOTH.
BLUETOOTH! YOU JUST NEED TO TALK
NORMALLY-

CUT TO:

31 EXT. YUM CHA - SOON AFTERWARDS

A large yum cha restaurant at the end of a strip mall. As Katie gets out of the car, David gets a call from Sarah. He starts to walk away.

KATIE
Hi Sarah! Hi!

There's yelling at the end of the phone. Katie grimaces unconsciously.

DAVID
Fuck off. You don't know what's
going on.
(to Sarah)
No, you aren't listening, you don't
get it-

He walks off and Katie can hear his angered voice. She walks inside without David.

32 INT. YUM CHA - CONTINUOUS

A Millennial style fusion restaurant. Katie is gobsmacked. She picks up a menu. The special today is "dumpling sandwiches".

KATIE
What the...

David is behind her.

DAVID
... fuck?!

David takes out the photo and holds it up: What was once a traditional Hong Kong yum cha is almost unrecognizable now. They look at the name on the wall.

KATIE
It's not even called Pearl Garden
or Jade Emperor or anything

DAVID
It's called 'Beijing Baby'?! That's
how you know it's a gweilo
restaurant.

KATIE
Lowkey racist.

DAVID
Mum would say that's fine.

KATIE
You don't know how many
conversations I have with her about
that stuff.

They loiter round, and then stop at a framed "A" food grade

DAVID
That's also how you know it's
gweilo owned. Should be at least a
'B'.

They laugh privately and walk around a bit more David points
to a corner table

DAVID (CONT'D)
You sat there and cried as a kid
because no one would listen to you
recite some story you wrote. You
were like seven and you kept
standing up on your seat telling
everyone a story.

KATIE
I don't remember.

DAVID
Yea, right in that seat over there.
After a while dad yelled at you and
you just started crying and saying
no one cared about you. You were so
annoying.

Katie is annoyed at this last comment.

KATIE
Annoying? How did you know I wasn't
feeling left out?

DAVID
Cus you weren't.

KATIE
How do you know?

DAVID
Come on. I was just talking. It
can't have been that bad if you
don't even remember it.

KATIE
Well I remember it now.

DAVID
It was my birthday dinner.

David stops a waitress, asking to find the manager. Katie
sighs and follows.

A squat Yorkshire man bounds out like a puppy.

MANAGER

Hallo! How can I help you?

DAVID

Hi. We are looking for Joe?

MANAGER

Oh, we changed hands a couple of weeks ago - Joe had to leave for personal reasons.

KATIE

(to David)

Oh, so that's what mum was trying to tell us in the car.

DAVID

Personal reasons?

KATIE

Is he okay?

MANAGER

Oh yes! He's just gone off to become a monk. He lives in the temple on Hillside now.

A beat.

DAVID AND KATIE

A MONK?!

MANAGER

Yea! But maybe I can help with any problems you're having?

KATIE

Oh I, uh, we came to dinner here a couple of months ago to celebrate my British Citizen acceptance-

MANAGER

Ooh! Congratulations!

KATIE

And um, I need to... we took a silly photo here with my Birth Certificate and my new passport but-

MANAGER

Where are you from originally?

KATIE

Huh?

MANAGER
Well you don't look British? What
are you?

KATIE
Oh, we are half Chinese.

MANAGER
Chinese?? Never would have expected
that! You both have *huge* eyes.

He gestures to his eyes.

KATIE
Yea

She looks flustered. David notices.

DAVID
Anyway, we might have left her
birth certificate here.

MANAGER
I'm sure you can request a new one?
I haven't seen anything like that
around here.

DAVID
She actually needs it as soon as
possible to go to England tomorrow
morning.

The Manager looks confused.

MANAGER
I have absolutely never heard of
such a strange rule before. Are you
sure that's what was requested?

David looks at Katie, confused. Feeling cornered, Katie
avoids his eye contact and starts to leave.

KATIE
Of course? Why would I lie about
that? Anyway thank you for your
help, you said Joe lives in the
temple now? Yes we will try there,
thank you again and we will be back
here to eat one day. Okay! Bye!

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - SOON AFTERWARDS

David and Katie are leaving, but bump into mum and dad.

DAD

Find it?

David looks at Katie. He knows something is up.

KATIE

No.

DAD

Shit.

KATIE

It's okay, you know I can just defer-

DAD

Joe lives in the temple now by the way, you shouldn't have even wasted your time here.

MUM

I was trying to tell everybody, but Katie didn't pick up her phone.

DAVID

You could have called me.

MUM

I didn't want to cause trouble.

Katie makes a face at mum, pissed at this obvious dig.

DAVID

What trouble?

MUM

Nothing.

DAD

Are you hungry? We can get lunch?

KATIE

No.

MUM

Katie, you just ate anyway, so you shouldn't need any more food.

KATIE
I said no. We need to find my birth
certificate.

She walks off.

CUT TO:

34 INT. CAR - SOON AFTERWARDS

It's silent. Suddenly:

KATIE
God I can't wait to leave. Also
what was up with that British guy
asking what we are as though we're
animals or something.

Katie doesn't stop talking. She has a nervous energy at the moment.

KATIE (CONT'D)
Isn't that weird? So weird that no
one will ever see us for who we
really are. You get what I mean?

David opens his mouth to reply.

KATIE (CONT'D)
It makes me sad, you know? I feel
like I don't really have a sense of
self because it's just people
projecting things onto me. Things
they want for me and they expect me
to be. Like mummy for example. I
bet she expected to have a girl
version of you!
(laughs)
All pretty and stuff. Well sorry!
I'm me!

David goes to reply again.

KATIE (CONT'D)
And then on top of that, I'm
convincing people of something I'm
not even sure of.

David nods. Not bothering to talk anymore.

KATIE (CONT'D)
Maybe I'm just trying to convince
myself. You know?

This comment hits David too close to home.

DAVID
Not really. I don't care about what
people think.

David tries to ignore Katie's commentary.

KATIE
Of course you don't.

They stop at a light. Katie roots around in the car

DAVID
What are you looking for?

KATIE
Chewing gum.

DAVID
I don't have any.

She opens the glove box. There's chewing gum.

KATIE
Wow you buy the fancy kind?

DAVID
There's none left.

She opens it up. It's a full packet. She puts it back.

KATIE
Daddy says chewing gum has too much
sugar anyway.

DAVID
This one's sugar free. Last time
Dad sat in my car he had one and
said he really liked it.

KATIE
He was probably just saying that. I
know he doesn't like that stuff.

They are at stop light. David turns to her.

DAVID
Why are you like that?

KATIE
Like what?

DAVID
Always competing with me.

KATIE
I'm not-

DAVID
You don't even need to. You're
going to Oxford.

Beat. Katie says nothing.

KATIE
How's Christchurch?

DAVID
It's fine. Cold all year round
pretty much.

KATIE
I don't think I could take that.

DAVID
Will be worse in England.

KATIE
Mm.

They turn the corner and there's a queue of traffic.

DAVID
FUCK.

KATIE
It's fine.

DAVID
No, how will we get you to England
in time?

It's clear David doesn't really care and neither does Katie.
They just sit there.

KATIE
David, can I-

The phone rings. It's Sarah. David pulls over onto an empty
field.

DAVID
Stay in the car.

Katie says nothing and turns away from him. He walks out of earshot. Katie, checking he's far enough away, slouches down in the chair and calls mum on her phone. Katie peaks out the window at David, who looks exasperated, throwing his hands up.

KATIE

Yea, they are definitely having issues. Wait I can't hear you, I'll put you on speaker but be quiet. Where are you, it's so loud?

MUM (ON PHONE)

Some random place daddy's friend said to try. It's kind of dirty. What kind of issues do you think they are having?

KATIE

I don't know, just all day today she's been calling angry and-

DAD (ON PHONE)

[What are you talking about?]

KATIE

Shh. I think David has problems with Sarah.

DAD (ON PHONE)

I KNEW IT! See, this is what happens when you don't listen to your parents.

Katie peeks out the window again. David is off the phone and walking back.

KATIE

I have to go!

She is still trying to hang up when David gets in the car. He turns the car on, but instead of hanging up, the call goes to bluetooth speaker. Dad's rant about Sarah is blasted for David to hear.

DAD

I never liked her! Why didn't he marry a good Chinese girl? Always rebel, rebel against everything we say-

Katie hangs up. A beat while David takes in what was said.

KATIE
We were talking about Joe's son,
not you, you remember he went to
Stanford? He's rebelling a lot, you
know?

DAVID
You are ALWAYS like this.

They arrive at the temple.

CUT TO:

35 EXT. TEMPLE CARPARK - CONTINUOUS

KATIE
Make you look bad? You do that
yourself. I'm WORRIED about you!

They get out of the car.

DAVID
Bullshit. You're only doing this
because you can't face up to things
yourself. You avoid your own shit
by dobbing me in. Every. Time.

KATIE
FUCK YOU!

Other people in the carpark stare. They start to whisper.

36 I/E. TEMPLE - CONTINUOUS

They whisper-bicker all the way up the stairs, but when they
walk in, things change. The temple is another world: quiet,
symmetrical and glistening. Both siblings stop. There's calm.

A monk greets them and offers them incense. Katie takes one,
but David shakes his head. David stands to the side, watching
as Katie bows and puts the josticks infract of the deity.

DAVID
How did you learn to do all that?

KATIE
We did it all the time as kids
remember? You must have done it in
Hong Kong with daddy?

DAVID
No. It was mostly arguing about my
future.

KATIE
I can teach you if you want?

Beat.

They pass by a Chinese school room. There are characters
written on the boards. There's no one in there.

DAVID
Hey! We did calligraphy here!

KATIE
I didn't think you'd remember.

DAVID
Do you learn this stuff in your PhD
courses?

Katie hasn't thought about her PhD for most of this day.

KATIE
Not really. We do look at pictures
of calligraphy and analyze it
though.

DAVID
Hey they still have all the ink and
brushes!

He goes inside.

KATIE
Hey! We can't go inside.

DAVID
Why not?

Katie nervously follows him a second time.

CUT TO:

37 INT. TEMPLE CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

They are messing around with the inks, pretending to write
and teach each other. But Katie is only write obscure quotes
and David can't remember anything. Neither of them can
remember their Chinese names. They waste hundred of pieces of
paper trying and getting the radicals wrong.

DAVID

I don't know why daddy didn't really want to teach us Cantonese. I will teach my kids. If I have kids.

KATIE

Yea mum decided to take us here. It was after he got... you know... you remember those teenagers followed him off the bus when he spoke Canto.

DAVID

Yea.

KATIE

Sometimes I get weirded out that mum is more into Asian culture than dad is.

DAVID

The grass is greener, I guess.

Katie looks at David who is struggling to write simple characters. David notices, but doesn't say anything. They stop mucking around, contemplative. David walks away and fiddles with brushes in a corner, away from Katie. They don't look at each other for a moment.

KATIE

Hey... Do you remember one time mum dropped us here for class instead of dad? The teachers thought we were just some lost white kids?

DAVID

That was funny. They didn't even recognize us even though we had been going there for months.

A beat.

DAVID (CONT'D)

You're right. We don't really exist properly. Only half in one world and half in another world.

Katie doesn't say anything. Suddenly, a monk knocks on the window. He tuts and shuffles inside.

MONK

Excuse me, miss and mister, you are not allowed to be in here.

Dressed in robes and painfully calm, the siblings barely recognize him.

MONK (CONT'D)
This is the classroom for young children to learn the calligraphy. You must be respectful of-

KATIE
Joe!

The monk is confused.

KATIE (CONT'D)
[Ah Sing is my dad]

The monk's behaviour changes as he reverts back to his old self. Joe is jolly, crude and fun.

JOE
OH! [That dumb fuck]! What's he doing now? Is he still watching [dirty movies]?

His laugh resonates along the temple. Another monk passes by the door and looks disgruntled, making a shushing sound. Joe gestures an apology, but then pulls the finger behind the monk's back. David raises his eyebrows at Katie, who giggles.

JOE (CONT'D)
Wow you both grow up so much! [David you are a handsome boy]. You could go to Hong Kong and be a model!

David smiles, obviously used to this. Katie waits.

JOE (CONT'D)
And Katie, your daddy told me you are very smart.

Something about this comment bothers Katie.

KATIE
I'm... Going to Oxford.

JOE
Wow! Your daddy must be very proud.

KATIE
Yea.

DAVID
Why are you here?

JOE
I live here.

KATIE
But... Why?

JOE
Ohh. I see.

He leans in close to the siblings.

JOE (CONT'D)
Do you remember I owned the
restaurant? It didn't make much
money for a while. So I let some
bad guys...

He vaguely mimes counting cash and smoking cigarettes.

JOE (CONT'D)
Okay? You understand?

David and Katie do not understand. But they nod anyway.

JOE (CONT'D)
And then I feel bad, tricking
peoples money like this. So I ask
them to stop use my place for
money. They say ok, but I still
feel bad. So I come to the temple
to repent.

Katie is not convinced. Joe notices this.

JOE (CONT'D)
Sometimes we want to save face so
much but [the dead chicken will
lift the pot with its feet].

KATIE
Huh?

JOE
It's a saying. You need to admit
your mistake even when it is
obvious. I came to the temple to
face my mistake. But Jason, you
remember Jason? He dropped out of
Stanford to be a tattoo artist. He
never admit his mistake. No brain.

DAVID
Tattooing makes good money.

JOE
No. He needs to own up to his
mistake. He waste his opportunity.
Waste my time raising him. Tsk.
Disappointing-

KATIE
I feel sick.

What?

JOE

What?

DAVID

KATIE

I feel sick. I need to go to the
car.

No one moves.

KATIE (CONT'D)
GIVE ME THE KEYS

David throws them at her and she leaves the room. Joe,
unaffected, keeps ranting.

JOE
You know how much I gave up for my
stupid son? [Haiyaa]. Working 24
hours, no sleep, no nothing, just
so he can drop out of-

CUT TO:

38 I/E. THE CAR - LATER

Katie is sitting with the windows rolled down looking at the
sketchbook from storage. When she sees David walk up to the
car, she puts it away.

KATIE
Any info?

David really looks at her for the first time and starts to
say something. But he ends up nodding instead.

DAVID
Yea.

CUT TO:

39 I/E. THE CAR - SLIGHTLY LATER

They arrive outside of a prestigious high rise office tower.

KATIE
Wait, who is this again?

INT. BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

They get stuck trying to navigate the rhythm of the revolving doors

DAVID
Tracey. She was in charge of lost and found when the restaurant was Golden Empress. Shaved head. Waitress. Joe says she works here now.

He takes out a folded staff photo and taps at an aggressive looking goth.

KATIE
Ohh, I remember.

Inside the building, a receptionist smiles at them warmly. Two men in business suits look over some complicated blueprints in a corner.

DAVID
Wonder what Tracey's doing here.

KATIE
Probably cleaning staff. Daddy always said she was a disappointment who barely finished university.

The words come out of her mouth without thinking. She feels guilty. David looks hurt. He walks towards the elevator.

DAVID
I'd hate to know what you think about me.

KATIE
No, I-

The elevator arrives.

CUT TO:

40

INT. ELEVATOR - CONTINUOUS

Katie and David are going to the 11th floor.

KATIE
This isn't what I expected

She looks at David, who doesn't look back. When the elevator stops, he gets out and leaves her behind.

CUT TO:

41 INT. OFFICE - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie knocks gingerly. Nothing happens. David knocks louder and a young Chinese woman in a floral print dress and a pixie cut opens the door. Is this Tracey??

TRACEY
Hey! How can I help?

KATIE
(aside to David)
I don't think she's cleaning staff

DAVID
No shit, miss PhD.

CUT TO:

42 INT. OFFICE - SOON AFTERWARDS

David, Katie and Tracey are sitting around a table. Her office is large and has an impressive view. Tracey talks, mostly because David and Katie are too gobsmacked to say anything.

Tracey is straight-talking and laughs a lot. Although young, she feels like a good natured auntie. There's something old about her, like she's been through a lot.

TRACEY
And then after all that, I decided
to take up a research position
here.

Beat. Clearly no one has said anything for a while.

TRACEY (CONT'D)
I know, I know. Astrophysics is
boring but I get to check out stars
at Mt John Observatory sometimes.

She takes out her phone and shows photos of her at a conservatory, looking at stars.

KATIE

So... Were you doing all this when you worked at the Golden Empress?

TRACEY

(laughs)

Don't tell, but I pretty much have no student loan because Joe let me take home so many under the table tips! Anyway, I haven't seen you both for months, what are you up to now?

DAVID

We're looking for a gold necklace I left at the restaurant, like a thickish-

Katie looks at him.

DAVID (CONT'D)

And Katie's birth certificate.

TRACEY

Birth Certificate? What for?

Katie gets up and starts looking around the room, fingering different objects.

KATIE

I'm meant to be going to England for my Phd-

TRACEY

Wow! That is amazing!! Your mum and dad must be proud. What's the certificate for though?

Katie doesn't answer.

DAVID

You need it to travel to the UK apparently.

Katie picks up a picture frame on Tracey's desk of herself, her mum and brother. The photo has been folded where dad should be.

TRACEY

Huh. I didn't know that-

KATIE

-What happened?

Tracey's energy flattens.

TRACEY

I have a girlfriend. That's what happened. But it's all good now, my brother is a doctor in the States so I guess everything's sorted.

Tracey takes the frame from Katie and puts it in a draw.

TRACEY (CONT'D)

Anyway, you said you're looking at something from the restaurant? Joe probably told you about the lost and found archives.

CUT TO:

43 INT. HALLWAY - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie and David follow behind Tracey down a long dimly lit hallway. Katie whispers to David.

KATIE

Can you believe that?

DAVID

What?

KATIE

Her dad doesn't talk to her anymore just because she has a girlfriend.

DAVID

Dad didn't talk to me for years after I dropped out of uni. And then after I married Sarah.

The lights are motion tracked, so each come on sporadically as they move. At the end of the hall is a large cupboard. Tracey takes out a set of keys and opens the cupboard without hesitation.

Inside, there are hundred of boxes organized by date and object type.

TRACEY

A lot of things get lost at the restaurant. It's like Sagittarius A*

Beat.

TRACEY (CONT'D)
That's a black hole.

DAVID
Are you even allowed to keep this
stuff?

TRACEY
I'm not keeping it! I was in charge
of lost and found at the restaurant
and that pertains to after they
changed hands.

David starts to look through while Katie hangs back. Tracey
smacks his hand.

TRACEY (CONT'D)
I'll do the looking. Birth
certificate first, considering
that's the most important.

Tracey beams at Katie, who smiles back uneasily. She leans
close to Katie.

TRACEY (CONT'D)
I know what it's like to be a
daughter in an Asian family.

Katie looks over at David who is on the phone outside the
cupboard.

TRACEY (CONT'D)
You will never be able to get it
right with them so just... Don't
let other people dictate your life.
Do what you want.

KATIE
But you don't even talk to your dad
anymore.

TRACEY
Would you rather I talk to him
happy but talk to myself sad?

CUT TO:

44 INT. ELEVATOR - SLIGHTLY LATER

Tracey waves at Katie and David who are getting in the
elevator.

TRACEY
Good luck in England! I hope you
find it, Katie.

The doors close and David starts putting on his necklace,
beaming. Katie looks in thought. David awkwardly pats her
shoulder.

DAVID
Don't worry.

CUT TO:

45 EXT. OFFICE - LATER

It's sunset. Katie is tired and hungry but David is
exhilarated from his find. A new confidence and swagger
radiates from him.

DAVID
Let's eat!

CUT TO:

46 INT. STEAMBOAT - SOON AFTERWARDS

David waltzes in. People stare like he is a foreigner.
Something hurts him about this and his confidence slips.

DAVID
[two seats]

WAITER
HUH?

DAVID
Two seats.

They have to wait for a while. Chinese families that know the
owner are served first.

47 INT. TABLE - SLIGHTLY LATER

Katie is picking at a tissue on the table, David pours tea
for the both of them. The waitress gives them english menus.

DAVID
Doesn't she know us? If dad was
here she wouldn't do that.

KATIE
We couldn't read the Chinese menu
anyway, you know.

DAVID
You can.

Katie keeps picking at the tissue.

DAVID (CONT'D)
You can read whole books in
Chinese. I don't get it.

The waitress comes over. David looks expectantly at Katie who takes a breath.

KATIE
[Can I order...] Uh..

She looks up at the waitress, who yawns.

KATIE (CONT'D)
Uhh... [Can I have...]

She points at the menu, and swallows.

KATIE (CONT'D)
[This one, this one, this one.]

David opens his mouth to ask something, but Katie gets up.

KATIE (CONT'D)
I need the toilet.

CUT TO:

48 INT. BATHROOM - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie is sitting on the toilet, pants down, urinating. She sits there for longer than needed, just staring at the door. Why can't she tell anyone? Why is she so scared?

49 INT. TABLE - CONTINUOUS

David takes a selfie with his necklace and texts Sarah. He looks at the photo and then deletes it. There are 20 unread texts from her, upset and disappointed in his reaction to her pregnancy. The food comes - a variety of fresh meats and vegetables to put in the pot of boiling water. He puts his phone away.

50 INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Katie looks at herself in the mirror.

KATIE
You're going to tell him. You're
going to tell him.

A mum drags her crying toddler in and starts to change his diaper in the middle of the bathroom. Katie eases past them.

51 INT. TABLE - SOON AFTERWARDS

David is eating. Katie sits, gets ready to say something and then -

KATIE
David! [Serving chopsticks!] You're
using the wrong one for the cooked
and raw.

DAVID
Oh.

The energy is off between them now. They eat in silence, dipping food into the boiling water and waiting for it to cook, each watching the food intently.

DAVID (CONT'D)
I want Sarah to try this stuff.

KATIE
Why not just take her to Hong Kong?

DAVID
I don't know if she'd like it. We
were raised so differently. I can't
talk to her about some of the
things I talk to you about. She
just doesn't get it.

KATIE
Mum and dad had to go through all
those differences.

DAVID
Yea and we are the fucked up
products.

Beat.

KATIE

I had this dream the other night
that I was in Hong Kong.

DAVID

Dad says it's shit there now
anyway. And there's no point going
back. So, it's probably for the
best not to take Sarah there.

KATIE

I was so happy. I was so, so happy
in my dream. I was walking around
the buildings, it was like I was
finally home. And then I realized I
must have died and gone to heaven.
Because I had never been that happy
before.

DAVID

How do you know whether you'll like
it there? You've never been.

KATIE

I don't know.

They eat in silence for a bit.

KATIE (CONT'D)

What was it like?

David puts his chopsticks down.

DAVID

To be honest with you... It wasn't
for me. I think that made dad
really sad.

KATIE

Yea.

DAVID

It made me really sad I think. He
didn't tell me the stories he told
you. So I wasn't really prepped for
it. He just talked to me about
making money. For me, my...
Cultural identity or whatever,
meant I needed to make money and-

WAITRESS

Excuse me, would you like a fork?

Katie and David look at each other. Neither are struggling with the chopsticks.

DAVID

We're good, thank you.

The waitress leaves but looks back at both siblings as though confused.

KATIE

You know, it's like we aren't able to be part of the culture properly. We only get access through little bits and pieces - money, grades, success, making mum and dad proud. All this surface shit. And when we want more, we just aren't allowed. We have to prove it through...

David taps his necklace.

KATIE (CONT'D)

Exactly.

They eat in silence, the sound of Cantonese familiar but terrifying at the same time. They are aware they are out of place, but at home all at once.

DAVID

Katie. Don't get angry, but... Is this - Oxford, academia - is this what you want? Is this your dream?

There's a long pause. Katie wants so badly to say no. Here's her opening, but:

KATIE

Absolutely. Yes.

David nods.

DAVID

Okay. I think I know where to go next.

CUT TO:

52

INT. CAR - SOON AFTERWARDS

A photo of the family at a karaoke, dated to the same as the last photograph. David is holding the photo in one hand and driving, looking at the road names. He is driving fast and when turning a corner, Katie slips

DAVID
It would break their hearts for you
not to go... I think it's down this
street?

KATIE
Really?

DAVID
Yea, I think so. It's the street
with a jungle gym park.

KATIE
No I mean, would it really break
their hearts if I didn't go?

David looks out the window at a seedy Korean BBQ (KBBQ)
Restaurant.

DAVID
We're here!

53 INT. KARAOKE - SOON AFTERWARDS

They walk to the back of the KBBQ and down stairs. There are
neon lights on the walls and music. Katie opens a text from
her parents: "Joe called your dad and said it is a huge
achievement for you to go to Oxford. Daddy is so happy". She
clicks off, strained.

DAVID
It's weird to go just by ourselves,
usually the whole family's here.

Katie nods, but says nothing. They see a lady in uniform.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Hey, do you know where lost and
found is?

The lady points vaguely in a direction and continues walking
away. It's loud in here, each booth contains its own energy:
drunk middle aged men doing business meetings, Kpop girls
crying over their idols, families celebrating birthdays.

David is talking to reception, asking earnestly about lost
and found. It's a long time while David explains the
situation. He's making an effort for Katie. A waitress cleans
the table in front of Katie.

KATIE
Excuse me, can I order a-

She points at one of the bottles.

KATIE (CONT'D)
One of those?

After a while, David comes back. Katie has had three drinks already.

DAVID
They said we can go check out the booth we were in that night- are you drinking?

KATIE
No, these were there when I sat down.

CUT TO:

54 INT. KARAOKE BOOTH - SOON AFTERWARDS

The booth has already been taken by a group of Cantonese exchange students. They are singing an old Beyond song that both Katie and David recognize. Katie sits down, but David is looking around, conspicuously moving things and looking under jackets.

GIRL
[Who is that?] Hey! What are you doing?

DAVID
I'm looking-

GIRL'S BOYFRIEND
Who are you? Do you even know anyone here?

He starts to get up in David's face, tipsy and aggressive

GIRL
[He was going through my jacket!]

GIRL'S BOYFRIEND
Were you going through her jacket?
Huh?

DAVID
No, I swear, I'm-

He looks around to find Katie, but she's...on stage? She has her arm wrapped around a random girl and they are singing together to an old canto pop song, laughing.

GIRL'S BOYFRIEND

You're what?

DAVID

I'm here with my sister

He points, gobsmacked at Katie on stage. The couple is too tipsy to really take in if they know David, but this comment calms them down.

GIRL'S BOYFRIEND

Sorry, man.

David flops down on the couch, exhausted after the confrontation. He watches Katie up on stage. She can read the Cantonese fine now, barely stumbling through the language and joking along with new found friends. It's weird to see Katie so free like this, David finds himself smiling and clapping along with everyone else when she finishes the song.

She sits down next to him, puffing and holding a drink.

DAVID

Slow down with that. You've never really drunk before.

KATIE

CHILL OUT! I'm not a baby.

She downs the drink too fast and gets hiccups, slurring her speech.

KATIE (CONT'D)

Daddy used to sing that one around the house. Before all of the hospital stuff.

DAVID

I know.

KATIE

That stuff made me scared.

It's loud and they have to shout over other people singing, laughing and drinking.

KATIE (CONT'D)

I feel like my Chinese-ness is tied to dad being alive. What happens when he dies? Are we still Chinese? I thought about that a lot when he was getting the surgeries.

A beat.

DAVID

I don't know.

KATIE

And I get that he's fine now and it wasn't even life threatening, but like, that was the first time I realized I was half of two things and whole of neither of them. Like, I have a New Zealand birth certificate and now a British passport and nothing to show I'm from Hong Kong. Except for dad. No one believes I'm Chinese unless... I do all these achievements. That's my only in. That's the only way I can be Chinese. Just like your only in is to make money. Kind of fucked right.

David chuckles lightly.

DAVID

Yea.

KATIE

I feel like I've built my life on how I can outwardly project my Asianness. But it's stupid! And a little racist! I'm literally just typecasting myself so I can feel closer to my culture. And mummy hates the fact I have curly hair because I'm meant to be a pretty mixed girl! But I'm not! I can tell she hates that.

Beat

KATIE (CONT'D)

I thought Asian studies would fix this, but I feel further away. I literally straighten my hair every morning to look more Asian. What the fuck!

Katie rests her head on David's shoulder.

KATIE (CONT'D)

I wish we could have stayed friends.

David doesn't know what to say.

KATIE (CONT'D)

You were the only one who got what it was like to be half this half that.

DAVID

It's-

KATIE

I know, I know. I don't want to talk about that. It's in the past. Let's be friends again for 5 seconds, ok? Let me tell you a secret but you have to promise not to tell anyone.

She leans in.

KATIE (CONT'D)

I don't want to go to Oxford at all. AT ALL. I hate the idea, you know? Doing more of the same stuff for another 4 years makes me... Want to...

She vomits all over the table.

CUT TO:

55

EXT. CAR - SOON AFTERWARDS

David is strapping an almost passed out Katie into the passenger seat, who is groaning incoherently

KATIE

Why do people drink oh god I'm never gonna do this again.

DAVID

Yep that's exactly what everyone says. Welcome to adulthood.

KATIE

I AM an adult! I'm twenty three and I'm the smartest person in the world!

She curls up in the seat, eyes closed. The lights streak past and David is mulling over what has just happened. He has never seen his sister like this before and he is worried.

The phone rings. David leans over to check Katie. Katie groans, but ultimately seems asleep. He answers on bluetooth.

DAVID

Hey did you get my messages? I've been trying to talk to you all day - I found my necklace! Everything's okay now.

SARAH (O.S.)

Oh okay! Everything's okay now! Great!

DAVID

What's wrong?

SARAH (O.S.)

Okay, let's see. I tell you I'm pregnant, you barely talk to me, you don't even ask how I am and ignore me all day! Then you call me out of nowhere to say everything great because you found some necklace you lost months ago

DAVID

This is important to me. You have to understand that.

SARAH (O.S.)

Are you serious? How do you manage to make me the bad person in all this? You go off and leave me to be responsible while you waltz around dealing with some ridiculous identity crisis.

DAVID

You wouldn't get it.

SARAH (O.S.)

This is meant to be a happy time. You're meant to be happy about your future child. But you've just turned this into a selfish 'finding yourself' moment. AGAIN. Same as when we got married and you just had to put it off because you wanted to find me a traditional Chinese dress in Christchurch?! Everything's always about you and your identity crisis and there's always got to be something wrong with you!

DAVID
There's nothing wrong with wanting
to pass down my heritage, my
culture to our child.

SARAH (O.S.)
What culture? What heritage? You
wouldn't even visit your family for
Chinese New Year, even though I
told you to!

DAVID
This isn't about you! I didn't want
to go back when I didn't have a
job! It's embarrassing! And
everyone's always so disappointed
already in me.

SARAH (O.S.)
Of course it isn't about me. It's
never about me.

DAVID
You don't know what they're like!
They're...They're

SARAH (O.S.)
You know, I would give anything to
have a family like you do. I'm not
saying they're perfect but have you
even tried to tell them how you
feel?

Beat.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Well how can you ever expect them
to change?

David hangs up. Sarah keeps calling back, but David doesn't
pick up.

Katie, still curled up and turned away, has her eyes open,
trying to steady her breath. She has heard it all.

CUT TO:

56 EXT. HOME - SLIGHTLY LATER

Katie is full asleep now. David tries to wake her, but she
grumbles and clings to him. He looks at her tenderly. She
looks so naive and small. David picks her up. Katie mumbles

KATIE
You used to do this when we were
kids.

David pretends not to hear this.

57 INT. HOME - CONTINUOUS

Carrying her through the house, David passes by the photographs and memories that he has been avoiding. He looks at a family photo depicting a smiling Katie with her bachelor's degree and a sullen David in the background. There's more to Katie than he thought.

58 INT. HOME, KATIE'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Katie's room is a mess. The sort of calculated mess of a booksmart student who has never done her own washing.

David puts Katie in bed and slowly creeps out. This would be embarrassing if anyone knew. Suddenly he spills a glass of water on the floor.

DAVID
Shit!

Using an old shirt to clean up, he realizes that it's leaked under Katie's dresser. Reaching underneath, he bumps something. Curiosity gets the better of him and pulls out...and old homemade time capsule. Something you would take ver seriously as a kid.

Even though it is meant to be only opened at the end of this year, it has clearly been opened several times before this, the sellotape curled and yellow.

David looks up at Katie and then slowly opens the capsule.

Inside is Katie's birth certificate. Taking out his phone, he googles about needing a birth certificate to travel. Reading the results one after the other, he feels stupid. Shaking his head, he shoves the birth certificate back, angered. But there's something more in the capsule. David pulls it out, fingers barely able to reach.

He takes out hundreds of curled up pages of inked cartoons. Confused, David flicks through them. Clearly a lot of passion has gone into, but David is confused what it is. After some discovery, he realizes this is a autobiographical graphic novel with a cartoon version of Katie battling various exaggerated characters of her family and herself.

In the place of David is a dotted line outline of a person, invisible in every panel.

David flicks to the beginning, looking up at Katie.

CUT TO:

59 INT. HOME, KATIE'S ROOM - LATER

David is entranced by Katie's comics, unintentionally laughing at funny parts and reading other parts intently. We see the creative passion, but also pain, that has gone into Katie's work. She's upset about things that she can't tell anyone. David stops at one panel that visualizes her parents dreams as chains around Katie. The next panel she tries to talk about it to David's outlined character, who says nothing.

CUT TO:

60 INT. HOME, KATIE'S ROOM - THE NEXT MORNING

There are birds outside. It's very early in the morning. Similar to the time Katie was at the airport in the beginning of the film. David gets to the last couple of pages that are set in Hong Kong. These are not inked yet, redrawn several times with hard eraser marks where the buildings should be. David looks at Katie for a moment. He moves towards her, comic pages in hands and almost wakes her, but then stops. Instead he puts the pages back into the capsule, says nothing and leaves.

CUT TO

61 INT. HOME, KITCHEN - LATER

Katie, rubbing her temples, comes into the kitchen. The family is there eating pancakes.

KATIE

I feel like shit.

Katie plops down at the table and starts eating. David watches her, saying nothing.

MUM

Guess what! I called the embassy and they said you don't need a certificate and that passport is just fine.

KATIE

What?

MUM

I know, stupid we didn't think to do that yesterday but I was just so flustered and-

KATIE

Why would you do that?

MUM

What?

KATIE

I...I was on a wild goose chase all day trying to find this and it didn't even matter! You could have just called the embassy?! Are you being fucking ridiculous right now?

David, knowing the truth, watches this unfold.

DAD

Hey, respect mummy, she was very stressed for you. When you were eleven, mummy drove two hours to Tauranga for your science camp-

KATIE

No! I don't give a shit about the past. This is about now. I... I could have gone yesterday and now I have to go today, do you know how much that ruins everything?

Dad looks angry. Katie starts shoveling food in her mouth, almost on the verge of hyperventilating.

MUM

Katie, do you not want to go?

KATIE

What? Of course I do! I'm just worried because we took so long and David should be back home because Sarah's pregnant.

Silence. David's head whiplash snaps towards her.

DAVID

What the fuck is your problem. After everything I did for you.

KATIE
You didn't do anything. You just
wanted your necklace.

David nods, hurt. Biting his tongue.

MUM
Pregnant?

DAD
But you don't even have a job

DAVID
I DO HAVE A JOB.

DAD
THAT'S NOT A JOB. YOU MARRIED THAT
GIRL AFTER ONE YEAR, WE BARELY KNOW
HER, YOU DON'T HAVE A STEADY
INCOME.

DAVID
Why are you yelling at me? Katie's
the one not wanting to go to
Oxford.

The fire alarm goes off. Mum has left a pancake burning on
the stove. She gets up.

MUM
(to David)
Why didn't you tell us? You didn't
even tell us about Christchurch.

Katie has been left out of the conversation. She just keeps
eating.

DAD
I worked so hard for you, I came
here with \$50 in my pocket and
struggled everyday so you could
have a good life and neither of you
are grateful. You're luckier than
anyone else. If I had the money to
go to England when I was accepted,
I would go!

KATIE
What?

MUM
Katie, just tell us what's going
on.

DAD
No I don't care, I don't want to
hear it. You make such a small
thing into a big problem.

KATIE
I'm sorry. It doesn't matter. I
don't know what to do. Daddy tell
me what to do. I'll do it.

Dad stomps down the hallway to leave. Then he comes back.

DAD
Real Asian kids would do what's
right.

He goes away again.

DAVID
And we aren't real? What the fuck
is RIGHT huh? Doing something that
makes me unhappy just so you will
be proud?

Dad comes back.

DAD
HAPPINESS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH
SURVIVAL. DO YOU KNOW WHAT I GAVE
UP TO SURVIVE?

DAVID
I DON'T NEED TO SURVIVE. I NEED TO
LIVE.

David has said something Dad has never thought of. Katie goes
to her room. Dad slams the door and leaves the house, mum
following trying to calm everyone down.

62 INT. HOME, KATIE'S ROOM - SOON AFTERWARDS

Katie is repacking her suitcase. David stands in the doorway,
watching her.

KATIE
I'm going.

DAVID
Why did you do that?

KATIE
I'm SORRY okay? I just wanted to
get out of the conversation!
(MORE)

.

KATIE (CONT'D)
But you should have told them
earlier anyway, so that's not my
fault.

DAVID
No, why did you lie about this
birth certificate stuff.

Katie stops.

DAVID (CONT'D)
I know you don't need it to travel.
You had it the whole time.

KATIE
I have a fucking headache. I need
to pack and I can't do this right
now.

DAVID
I thought you liked this. Everyone
thought you liked this. I asked
you, Katie. I asked if this was
your dream and you said yes. You
lied to me.

KATIE
Well I DON'T LIKE IT! Is that such
a big surprise?

DAVID
YES! YES IT IS. BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T
TELL ANYONE ANYTHING!

KATIE
And YOU DO? We didn't even know you
got fucking married!

David's voice goes low. A "don't even bring that up" low.

DAVID
You know why I didn't tell anyone.

KATIE
Fuck this.

She starts throwing balled up clothes into the suitcase.
David walks out. He stands in the hallway thinking. Mum and
Dad are yelling in the driveway. Then he walks back in.

DAVID
You know what? Everyone is so proud
of you all the time.

(MORE)

DAVID (CONT'D)
You got childhood stories from dad,
I just got yelled at. And yet you
still complain.

KATIE
They only yell at you because you
were the prodigy! You're the son!
You have it made already.

DAVID
I'm sick of hearing this. Do you
know how much pressure that put on
me? To make money? To get a good
job to support some imaginary
family? You talk about that like
it's a fucking dream!

KATIE
And do you know how much pressure
you dropping out put on me?

Beat. David leaves, but this time Katie follows. David is in
the kitchen and Katie is in the doorway of the bedroom.
There's the hallway between them.

63 INT. HOME, HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

KATIE
No, you don't get to just walk
away. You always leave when it's
hard. You didn't even explain why
you left uni. You didn't tell us
about Sarah. You JUST LEAVE!

DAVID
That was the only choice I had.

KATIE
Was it? You can't even talk to ME?!
YOU'RE THE ONLY ONE WHO UNDERSTANDS
LIVING IN THIS FAMILY. BEING MIXED.
Not even mum and dad get it because
they are at least WHOLE of
something.

DAVID
Because you just repeat everything
back to mum and dad. You did it
last time about me dropping out and
you did it again today.

Katie stops. Her legs give way and she sits on the floor. Outside dad gets in the car and drives off, mum still yelling. The siblings don't move nor say anything. Katie starts crying.

KATIE

I feel like I'm going to die without experiencing anything other than mum and dad's pride. You got Dux. I barely got UE. You never did anything wrong. I just... I just wanted them to like me.

David grits his teeth.

KATIE (CONT'D)

There's so much I want, but I can't have because... I...

DAVID

Mum and Dad worked so hard.

David looks down.

DAVID (CONT'D)

It feels like a personal attack on them.

KATIE

Yes, you get it. You get it.

Katie spots one of the family photos on the wall. She gets up and looks at it.

KATIE (CONT'D)

I'm living in the shadow of your achievements and disappointments. I'm meant to learn and be better all at the same time. Mum and Dad are so terrified of you leaving that they just kowtow to you now and then put all this excess pressure on me instead. I'm meant to... I just want to go somewhere and do nothing.

DAVID

Yea? Why don't you? Katie, look at me. What do you want? Don't think about mum or dad or whatever. What do you want?

The door slams

DAD (O.S.)
Tickets are cancelled. Are you
happy? You wasted all this time and
money for nothing?

MUM (O.S.)
No they aren't cancelled. He's
being dramatic
(to dad)
Why did you say that?

INT. HOME, KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Katie comes through to the kitchen, sheepishly.

DAD
[You're going]

KATIE
I thought you cancelled them?

DAD
Of course I didn't

He goes to the room and drags Katie's suitcase out.

KATIE
No, daddy listen. I need to be
honest-

DAD
I'm not listening to you.

KATIE
Please. I just want you to
understand me. Mummy?

Mum is standing watching it play out, unsure what to do.

DAVID
Come on, daddy be reasonable. Why
are you obsessing of this?

Dad throws the suitcase down. Katie starts crying. She talks
in between sobs and hiccups.

DAD
DON'T TALK. NONE OF YOU UNDERSTAND.

MUM
I don't want Katie going like this.

KATIE

No, daddy's right, I should go. Why can't I be happy about it. I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm being stupid. It's a huge opportunity and... It's Only 4 years, I can do what I want afterwards.

DAVID

STOP. Dad, she doesn't want to go! You make her feel so guilty, just like you did to me. You treat her like a puppet that can magically fix your suffering and your past but she CAN'T. She's just a kid! Look at her.

Katie is sniffing, head down. She goes and sits on the sofa. Dad looks shocked, but it manifests as anger, he opens his mouth.

DAVID (CONT'D)

NO. DON'T YELL. You and mum put so much pressure, so much fear into us. I know you had a shit life, dad but Katie is terrified to do anything that might disappoint you. And mum, you put so much pressure on her to look like this perfect mixed kid in your head. Can't you see? You say everyday we have all these opportunities and choices but WE DON'T. You made me learn the Er Hu because... YOU WANTED TO LEARN IT! We have to live in your regrets, acting out your fucking bucket list until YOU feel like you've achieved the life YOU want.

He looks around. Katie is on the sofa looking at the off TV. Dad is standing in the hallway and mum is in the kitchen. They refuse to look at David or Katie.

DAVID (CONT'D)

Why were you so mean when I quit architecture school? Don't you want me to be happy? Don't you want Katie to be happy?

Silence.

DAVID (CONT'D)

God. It's so fucking hard having two parents from two different cultures. YOU
(points at mum)
Tell us to enjoy and YOU
(points at dad)
Tell us to make money and be successful. Do you know how confusing that is? How much pressure that is? BOTH OF YOU ARE TELLING US TO DO DIFFERENT THINGS. WE HAVE TO LET YOU FUCKING LIVE VICARIOUSLY THROUGH US OR SOME SHIT!

Beat. David looks at Katie.

DAVID (CONT'D)

Katie's staying with me until she figures this out.

David picks up Katie's suitcase and walks out.

CUT TO:

65 I/E. CAR - CONTINUOUS

David is putting the suitcase in the back. Katie looks at him. He smiles at her, for the first time.

DAVID

I'm having a kid.

Katie nods. She puts her hands in her pockets and takes out the notebook she had as a kid.

DAVID (CONT'D)

Oh yea, I forgot to say at the storage unit. Your drawings were good. You should keep going.

CUT TO:

66 EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

David starts to reverse, but dad suddenly jumps in front of the car. David slams on the breaks and beeps. Dad doesn't move. He keeps beeping. People come out of their houses by this family doesn't care.

DAVID
GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE WAY.
(under his breath)
Oh my god. Are you fucking serious.

David gets out of the car.

DAVID (CONT'D)
WHAT ARE YOU DOING

DAD
[I want to talk to you]

DAVID
No. Get out of the way.

DAD
[I want to talk to you.] I'm sorry.

DAVID
That doesn't mean anything.

Katie gets out of the car.

KATIE
David, it's okay.

Both Katie and David stand on either side of the car while Dad is at the boot with his arms still outstretched. He looks at both of them, lowering his arms. Mum is at the front door.

DAD
Did you know I had the chance to go to England to study? We didn't have enough money and I couldn't get a scholarship. [My dad] told me he would give all of his savings for me to go. He was in the hospital then. The money could pay for his treatments or my education.

Beat.

DAD (CONT'D)
I didn't go. [My dad] got angry. He said if I gave up this opportunity, he would never talk to me again. I left and came to New Zealand and I never talked to him again. Even when he was dying, he wouldn't talk to me.

Beat.

DAD (CONT'D)

All I knew how to do was grow vegetables. Just like my mum and dad. I had no education. Just like them. It was embarrassing that I never progressed. They gave up so much. [Mum and Dad] selling all their ancestral gold so I could go to a good school.

Beat.

But I was bad at gardening in the beginning... I'm sorry. The vegetables grow different here than to what I knew in Hong Kong. The dirt gave them more... Freedom and opportunity and I didn't know how to understand. I didn't know how to let them grow.

Katie looks away from Dad, overwhelmed with emotion.

DAD (CONT'D)

I... It was hard seeing you get all the opportunities I couldn't.

Beat.

DAD (CONT'D)

If you don't want to go, don't go.

CUT TO:

67

INT. AIRPORT YUM CHA - LATER

It's late. Katie is at the front of the family, wheeling her suitcases through the airport. Everyone keeps asking if she's sure. Katie is confident. A different person from the beginning of the film.

MUM

Do you have your passport?

Katie unzips a pocket on her pants and takes it out.

DAD

Remember to visit Temple Street in Hong Kong.

MUM

She's only got a couple of hours there.

DAD

Go anyway.

He beams at her. David is on the phone in the back of the family.

DAVID

I'm sorry for being weird. You just need to understand that this is important to me.

SARAH (O.S.)

I just don't want you to disappear again when things get hard. I don't have any family. You're all I have.

DAVID

I know. I won't.

David joins Katie at the front and puts his arm around her.

KATIE

I declined the offer. I'm just going to travel to England for a bit. Get some space. Enjoy.

DAVID

I'm proud of you.

Beat.

KATIE

I'm proud of you too.

CUT TO:

68 INT. CUSTOMS - SLIGHTLY LATER

Mum goes up to her suddenly, touching Katie's hair.

MUM

I... Didn't know you felt so upset about these things. I just wanted you to feel like you fit in. I knew it would be hard for you both to be mixed and I knew you were having troubles but I just... I didn't want you to feel alone.

KATIE

I know. I have David for these conversations anyway. I'm not alone.

She looks back at him and he smiles at her, thumbs up. The family stand there watching. Katie nods her head and waves goodbye.

KATIE (CONT'D)

I'll send you pictures when I land.

And just like that, she disappears.

DAVID

I half think she's gonna reappear.

Mum laughs wryly, but all of them look around, as though checking anyway.

CUT TO:

69 INT. CUSTOMS - SLIGHTLY LATER

The family have waited until it's clear the flight has gone. IT's very late now and they start to walk back to the car. AT the car, they stand together awkwardly. David shifts from foot to foot before:

DAVID

I might stay for a couple more nights. If that's okay.

DAD

[mum still has potato chicken in the fridge]

DAVID

Sarah said she can come up too tomorrow morning... We can maybe... Get lunch or something.

CUT TO:

70 INT. AIRPLANE - CONTINUOUS

Katie puts on her headphones and closes her eyes. The plane is full of people going about their lives, all with their own fears and dreams.

CUT TO:

71 INT. HOME - SOME TIME LATER

David eating breakfast with mum and dad. Sarah is talking avidly to his parents, asking

SARAH
So when I have the baby I have to
eat special foods?

DAD
Yes! Mum and I will cook them for
you. You don't need to worry, we
will look after you.

Sarah beams at David.

DAVID
She eats anything, you know?

DAD
Good. You will fit in with us.

DAVID
(To Sarah)
You okay staying here for a bit?

SARAH
(to David)
I want our kid to have grandparents
who can teach them Cantonese.

Dad gives some bread to Sarah.

DAD
Try, try, try! This one, you will
like.

SARAH
What's it called again?

DAVID
[butter polo bun]

DAD
Oooh! Learning, huh?

SARAH
[butte polo bun]

MUM
Your tones are good! Better than
mine when I started learning.

David suddenly checks Katie's messages on his phone - nothing
new. He puts it away, smiling to himself. She's okay.

CUT TO:

72 INT. HONG KONG AIRPORT - SOME TIME LATER

Katie exits the plane, in transit, looking out the windows at the scenery. It's transcendent. She goes straight to customs. She tries to keep looking at the city, but the customs queue ushers her away.

CUT TO:

73 INT. CUSTOMS - SOON AFTERWARDS

The seat number is called and Katie gets up, waiting in line. She looks around at everyone, talking and picking up their bags. She's more okay than she expected. There's a sense of transient peace, but there's something missing, her heart isn't full yet. Suddenly-

CUSTOMS

Excuse me, Ma'am, could you please weigh your carry on?

Katie's bag is too heavy. She has to transfer some things to her backpack.

Opening the carry on, she notices a huge envelope that she doesn't remember packing. She opens it. It's the graphic novel. She looks at it, shocked. On the front is a post it note from David: 'finish it'.

She packs up her bag, in a trance and without a second thought, walks out, just as in the beginning. Back through the gate, through the customs. She walks even when they are calling her name on the intercom to get on the flight. And finally-

- She exits the airport.

It's dazzling. The light, the noise, the city. She could live here forever. Immediately, this is home.

CUT TO:

75 EXT. HONG KONG - SLIGHTLY LATER

A montage of Katie walking through the city, looking up at the buildings, eating street food.

Suddenly, she stops. She sees a park bench overlooking the city. She sits down and takes out the graphic novel, flicking through until she gets to the pages in Hong Kong, with the erased scenery.

.

She looks up at the buildings and then at her page. This is what she imagine. This is the place she had been picturing. Katie starts to draw.

END.

Let Go Of Your Hands

EXEGESIS

EXEGESIS PART ONE

Introduction

My thesis is creative practice as research, comprising a creative artefact (a screenplay) accompanied by a critical component (an exegesis). This conforms to AUT University's guidelines for a 'Format Three' thesis, as described in the Postgraduate Handbook 2021, which states 'practice does not serve to illustrate theory but is more appropriately understood as the site of research; the exegesis relates directly to the practice-oriented work and as such does not have a research topic or question of its own; the purpose of the exegesis is to elucidate and clarify the relationship between the central concept, key contexts, relevant critical context' (pp. 109-113). Accordingly, in my exegesis, I provide a discussion which overviews the creative work, which will include:

- § A synopsis of the creative component and an explanation of my intentions
- § A review of key texts relevant to development of the creative work, in the form of a comparative analysis
- § A detailed description of the process and methodology used, and a reflection on the outcomes of this creative practice as research
- § Discussion of theoretical and critical context where relevant

The central theme of my screenplay is: *The Internal Wants of One's Self vs The External Pressures of Culture, Family and/or Society. Let Go of Your Hands [Let Go]* focusses on Katie and David Leung, two mixed Chinese siblings who struggle to understand their culture and self as separate from their parents. While David has rejected his parents and culture, distancing himself as much as possible, Katie has immersed herself

so deeply in her parents dreams that she can no longer differentiate herself as a separate entity.

For part one of the critical component, I will be considering my screenplay in the context of six other dramatic texts, focussing on the way these texts dramatize the same central theme as my own work. I aim to compare and contrast the way these scripts use different techniques, goals and perspectives in dramatizing this theme, exploring how these commonalities and differences relate to my own screenplay. The films I will be discussing are: *Whip It* (Cross, 2009); *Turning Red* (Collins & Shi, 2022); *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)* (Baumbach, 2017); *Joker* (Phillips & Silver, 2019); *A Separation* (Farhadi, 2011); and *Shrek* (Elliot, Rossio, Stillman, & Schulman, 2001). I will be referencing the screenplays for these films, unless stated otherwise.

2 Purpose, Takeaways, and Meanings

The central theme of these films is between internal wants and external pressures. The specification between internal and external is important because this theme is connected with larger cultural and social issues beyond the characters' control. Often, the internal want is a secret and kept hidden away from other characters, with the protagonist often feeling shameful or embarrassed. While the protagonist knows that this want will be fulfilling for them, they worry about social, cultural or familial pressures that ultimately warn against these wants.

The characters that embody this theme are often outcasts, outsiders or minorities. This is important for the central purpose of these films as a critical commentary on the pressures of society, culture and family. For Katie in *Let Go*, she wants to independently find herself and her identity away from her parents. However, Katie feels pressured to do

the opposite of what she wants because of external cultural pressures to be respectful of her parents' sacrifices. Similarly, David wants to live without the scrutiny of his parents and their cultural attitudes towards his chosen life. Thus, the theme is connected with larger social ideas of cultural pressure.

Because these external difficulties become a continuous obstacle for the character, they will often lie in order to maintain a sense of control in both worlds - the external pressure and the secret want. The irony of these two worlds is that the secret want does not always align with what the character needs, which adds a third layer of tension into the film's purpose. For an example, Shrek wants to live by himself in his swamp, but the truth is he actually needs love and connection. Mei wants to be a good daughter, but she secretly needs to be accepted fully as herself. Often the initial wants of the character are informed by societal or familial pressures, further exploring the way external pressures warp individual identity and wants.

With regard to audience interpretation and emotional/intellectual impact, the audience is encouraged to investigate the nuances of social pressure and particularly the way these pressures impact personal desires and identities. Roger Ebert describes *A Separation* as: 'a film in which every important character tries to live a good life within the boundaries of the same religion' (Ebert, 2012). A key concept in this citation is 'trying' to live life but having 'boundaries' to navigate. The boundaries in these films can span cultural to religious to gender to familial, ultimately questioning how external pressures can stop people from living an authentic life. Emotionally, the audience may leave with a feeling of solidarity and empathy for the characters on screen, thus prompting us to have a more critical look at social pressures around us. Furthermore, this type of film often inspires a sense of empowerment,

encouraging audiences to consider breaking free of the social constraints in their own lives: ‘cinema is one of the most efficient tools of cultural change, creation and development’ (Moosavi & Dehghanharati, 2020). In this sense, the takeaway of these films is to encourage movement away from oppressive social and cultural idea and inspire audiences to navigate their own external pressures with more confidence and solidarity.

3 Attitude / Tone

The attitude in a film is the tone used to dramatize a theme or subject. Because the central theme is focussed on the dichotomy between personal wants and social pressures, the tone often blends realism with tongue-in-cheek humour in a dramedy way. This satirical tone is important as it supports the central takeaway of these films: showcasing the absurdity of socially imposed pressures and obligations in the hopes of encouraging change. Themes concerning social change are often paired with a satirical tone as it provides a ‘mode of assessing the socio-political system in a society’ (Olaniyan, 2015). Satire forces audiences to question what is considered familiar or normal. Thrall et al states that satire is ‘a literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humour and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved’. This is distinctly evident in almost all the films we are analyzing. Even in a psychological thriller such as *Joker*, there is an element of humour and surrealism in the film’s attitude.

However, it must be noted that this absurdist and tongue-in-cheek tone is never done with the intention to hurt. Because these films consider real world pressures, each film must be careful not to cross into Schadenfreude comedy territory. The purpose is not to make fun of social pressures, but rather to bring them to light - to isolate them and shine a spotlight on their nuances: ‘The best satire does not seek to do harm or damage by its ridicule’ (Harris, 2004). This is can be evidenced in *The Meyerowitz Stories*: ‘The withering

wit is tempered here by a warmth that makes the film as moving as it is brilliantly comic' (Travers, 2017). The significance of this comment is the fact wit and warmth work together to create an honest sort of humour. These films are not about laughing at another culture or family, but rather finding empathy and familiarity in their struggles. The tone is clearly very connected to the overall purpose of these films.

In contrast, if these films do not have a tonal sense of humour and wit, they cross over into tragedies, which are centered around the struggle and ultimate downfall of a character at the hands of society. This difference of attitude and tone is evident in *A Separation* and it clearly impacts the purpose of the film. I have included *A Separation* as a point of comparison with not only the other films, but also my own screenplay. The attitude of *A Separation* remains serious and tragic, never using humour or wit to emphasize the central theme. The effect of this is a totally different emotional takeaway for the audience.

While it can be speculated that the difference in *A Separation*'s tone is because it is dealing with religious and political obligations, this is not always consistent with other media in this genre - *Jojo Rabbit* (Waititi, 2019) explores political pressures during the Holocaust and *Derry Girls* (McGee, 2018-2022) considers the religious tensions between Protestants and Catholics during The Troubles. Therefore, I believe the tone of *A Separation* is because of the historic timeline - *Jojo Rabbit* and *Derry Girls* occur some time after the political events take place. Conversely, *A Separation* was made in the midst of Islamic political unrest and cinematic censorship:

At a time when filmmakers in Iran are under more pressure than ever — Jafar Panahi and fellow director Mohammad Rasoulof were handed lengthy prison sentences late last year as well as a 20-year ban on making films, and the House of Cinema, a non-governmental organisation that served as a filmmaker's guild in Iran — Farhadi has had to walk a line to

avoid censorship. “What’s the point of making a movie if it can’t be seen by the 70 million people in my home country?” he has asked. (Mohammadi, 2012)

With this in mind, it is difficult to imagine the film having the same impact, or perhaps even having the same chance of being made, if done in a satirical tone. With political unrest happening at the time of Farhadi’s film, his choice to use a more serious narrative attitude is understandable within the context of the Iranian film landscape. There needs to be a level of distance between the subject and humour: ‘Very painful or highly taboo subjects require a great deal of distance in order to feel funny’. The lack of temporal distance between the subject matter and the creative work is why *A Separation* is not done in a tongue in cheek tone. However, because my screenplay, like *Turning Red* or *Whip It*, explores a general, almost timeless concept (culture and family), rather than a specific political event, there is no need for temporal distance - satire and humour is acceptable. Furthermore, the purpose of *Let Go* is to draw attention to the absurd reality of these familial and cultural customs. Thus, the tone aids in reflecting this purpose.

4 Narrative Structure and Script Devices

The narrative structure of these films are all linear with very few experimental non-linear elements. Even in *Meyerowitz Stories*, which is rooted in past regrets and unresolved emotion, never uses flashbacks. Rather, we are introduced to the familial pressures on each child in the present. *Turning Red* uses fantasy elements to reconcile the past with the present, but again does not use non-linear flashbacks.

Pacing is often fairly quick and moves from escalation to escalation in a fast paced way – this is also connected with the tone as satirical and witty. Regardless of whether the time frame is over 1 month or 1 year, a common trait is quick pacing. I note this is for two

reasons. The first is so that we can grasp the family or cultural dynamic as soon as possible and thus frame the film within the contextual external pressures of the family, society or culture. If an escalation happens almost immediately, we can understand the pressure on the protagonist easily. Secondly, this is to create more tension between the two facets of the main character's existence – the internal want and external pressure.

The escalations are both external and internal events that widen the rift between personal wants and external pressure. Usually, the first escalation is completely external - this is because the character begins their arc as naive or unable to fully realize their dreams themselves. The first external escalation is 'the push' that the character needs to move out of their comfort zone and understand their own self more. In *Shrek* it is the quest to rescue Princess Fiona - a journey that Shrek would not have gone on without the forced quest of Lord Farquaad. In *Turning Red*, the boyband coming to town is a clear escalation as it introduces the tension between Mei's want to be a good daughter and her secret want to be a normal teenager. In *Whip It*, the beauty pageant introduces the tension between Bliss's want to roller derby and her mother's want for Bliss to be a beauty queen. Narrative escalations in these films are about furthering the rift between internal and external wants, and forcing the character into situations where these wants may collide. The suspense and dramatic tension of these films come from the delicate balance between outward self and secret self - the self that fulfils societal expectations and the self that fulfils personal expectations. This is important for the narrative structure of the film as it leads to a third act climax where both of these worlds collide and the character must make a necessary choice between succumbing to external pressures or exploring their personal wants. This choice creates the tension needed to propel the story to its concluding question: Will this character get what they want/need? Without this moment of tension, the audience may feel

that the character has not sufficiently undergone the experiences and struggles needed to grow by the end of the film, thus leading to a sense of dissatisfaction. The overall narrative structure of this genre (exemplified in the six films discussed in this exegesis) can be summarized via the following mutual structural elements:

1. Character has resigned themselves to the external pressure.
2. Character experiences a destabilization that leads to the discovery of a new, secret self.
3. Character tries to balance their new self with their old self.
4. The two selves are forced to collide, often leading to upset with other external members of the society, family or culture. This is the low point of the film.
5. a: The character reconciles with either their self, their family, or both and leads a more true and fulfilling life (*Shrek*, *Whip It*, *Turning Red*, *The Meyerowitz Stories*).
b: The character does not reconcile with their self or family and the pressure of both the secret want and the external obligations has led them to lead an unfulfilling life (*A Separation*, *Joker*).

Furthermore, there is usually a single, pinpointed goal for the character. This goal is often in stark contrast to the external societal pressures and is sometimes not even immediately, consciously realized by the protagonist. The dramatic irony of these films is that often the audience knows the goal of the character before they realize it. Dramatic irony is a common feature of these films, as it is important for the character to initially be clueless as to what would help their personal growth journey. The narrative arc of the films moves in a linear form towards this single goal, forcing the characters into uncomfortable situations that lead to steps towards this goal. This also heightens the tension as the character's goal is vastly different to their external circumstances. Conflict in these films is a mix of external,

internal and interpersonal. As previously discussed, the takeaway of these films is to investigate the external and internal pressures of characters. To achieve this takeaway, there needs to be both external and internal conflict in these films. External conflict is necessary to introduce the cultural, societal or familial pressures, whereas internal and interpersonal conflict is necessary to explore the growth of the character and their movement towards a more personally fulfilling life. Furthermore, because these films, by nature, consider interpersonal pressures, it would be incongruous to only showcase external conflicts. The interpersonal conflicts are what create tensions between the external (culture, society, gender), the interpersonal (family and friends who embody or enact these external pressures) and the personal (the protagonist who is going through a change or realization). All three of these conflicts must be present for a satisfying character arc and narrative structure. The personal conflict is also crucial because it gives insight on the difficulty of the character's change and decision. The decision between maintaining an existence that is externally validated and choosing to chase a personal want or dream must be a personally conflicting choice. If there is no personal conflict then the character's choice and subsequent growth is not interesting nor compelling for the audience.

Joker is an interesting example of why these three conflicts are necessary in conjunction. *Joker* does not employ any personal conflict, rather choosing to only have external and interpersonal conflicts. This leads to the audience being unempathetic to Arthur Fleck's struggles and makes the character feel as though he has no autonomy in decisions: Arthur is only being acted upon, rather than independently deciding to act in response to unjust external pressures. The problem is that the exploration of societal oppressions and pressures necessitates a personal conflict. At no point does Arthur make a conscious decision to either succumb to social pressures or follow his personal desires. We

never gain any insight into Arthur's personal conflicts, rather, we watch external conflicts escalate to a point of hopelessness. There are no realizations for the character and thus no justifications for why we need to care about their potential growth. *The New Yorker* comments extensively on this: 'Joker is a viewing experience of a rare, numbing emptiness' (Brody, 2019). The 'numbing emptiness' seems to arise from the fact that viewers become desensitized to the protagonist's suffering at the hands of only external conflicts. There are no internal moments of insight, change or realization.

5 Protagonists

The protagonists are often high energy and fairly naive. Even the grown children in *The Meyerowitz Stories* present themselves as emotionally stunted in several scenes:

Matt shouts across the vehicle.

MATT
That's right, I don't take after you. None of us do. You had to be the only artist in the family. And it doesn't matter that I make money because you don't respect what I do!

Harold climbs in the car.

HAROLD
What do you need my respect for, the world respects you because you make money.

MATT
(throws up his hands)
Ugh, I want to punch YOU in the nose!

Matt runs around to the driver's side.

HAROLD
I know you think you can treat me this way because of your money.

MATT
It doesn't matter how much money I make, you make me feel like a big piece of shit because YOU DON'T CARE ABOUT IT!

Harold starts the car.

MATT
But you also actually DO! You're privately obsessed with it. You know that I BEAT you! I BEAT YOU!

(Baumbach, 2017)

The introduction of these characters as 'unworldly' and not yet matured, regardless of age, is important for both the narrative arc and protagonist arc. The character arc is

towards a final moment of growth or realization. In order for this to feel satisfying, the character must begin the script at a point in which the growth or realization feels impossible. In contrast, *Joker* and *A Separation* present protagonists that are not necessarily naive, but are rather not yet disillusioned by the society around them. Their growth and realization leads to a moment of disenfranchisement, whereby the character can see the truth of the world they live in:

MURRAY FRANKLIN
You have a problem with Thomas
Wayne, too?

JOKER
Yeah. I do. Everything comes so
easy for him.

MURRAY FRANKLIN
And what's wrong with that?

JOKER
Have you seen what it's like out
there, Murray? Do you ever actually
leave the studio? Everybody just
yells and screams at each other.
Nobody's civil anymore. Nobody
thinks what it's like to be the
other guy. You think men like
Thomas Wayne, men at ease, ever
think what it's like to be a guy
like me? To be anybody but
themselves.
(shaking his head, voice
rising)
They don't. They think we'll all
just sit there and take it like
good little boys. That we won't
werewolf and go wild. Well, this is
for all of you out there.

(Phillips & Silver, 2019)

Even in *A Separation*, the characters are naive about their social status in comparison to poorer, lower class citizens. Arthur in *Joker* is naive about the way he can follow through with societal expectations and achieve his dreams. The important commonality is that protagonists all start off naive and conclude in a more knowledgeable space. Whether this conclusion is positive or not, all the characters in these films follow the same narrative arc.

Ultimately, the characters start off in a place that is stifling. In *Whip It*, Bliss feels rejected and alone in her parents' wants for her. In *Turning Red*, Mei is introduced as a traditionally good Chinese daughter, but feels unable to have normal teen experiences. *Joker* shows Arthur being oppressed by the judgement of society. Because *A Separation* and *Joker* consider oppressions beyond the family unit - political, religious and societal - it may feel unrealistic to show a growth in which the character positively removes themselves from the external obligations – these films consider larger pressures than a family discussion. Therefore, a character disillusionment arc emerges in *A Separation* and *Joker*. The character growth is inverse to the other films and they conclude not with a positive growth or realization, but a disillusioned realization. However, the key commonality is that the characters still begin with less understanding of the world around them - whether this leads to disillusionment or fulfilment is not important. What is important is the fact the character undergoes a ‘truth realization’ whereby they realize the impact of the external pressures.

In *Let Go*, the character arc begins with Katie at her least autonomous and most naive. She clearly has no space to do things for herself, as evident by her mum repacking her suitcase. Throughout the film, she follows the same movement as discussed in the other films – through a series of escalations, Katie learns to separate herself from the external obligations around her, thus undergoing the necessary ‘truth realization’.

6 Secondary Characters

Secondary characters are often ‘push’ characters: They are friends or family that encourage the protagonist to move towards their goal. A perfect example of the ‘push’ character is in *Shrek*. Without Donkey, Shrek would not have undertaken any of the new or uncomfortable experiences that ultimately lead to his happiness and positive growth.

DONKEY
Ohh! You're so wrapped up in
layers, onion boy, you're afraid of
your own feelings.

SHREK
(os) Go away!

DONKEY
There you are , doing it again just
like you did to Fiona.

(Elliot, Rossio, Stillman, & Schulman, 2001)

These characters often voice moments of introspection and wisdom. Without the secondary character, it would be impossible for the protagonist to grow. Because we are introduced to the main character as naïve or lacking in necessary skills, the secondary character is often confident and acts as a guide for the protagonist. Even in *Turning Red*, Mei's friends act as an ensemble secondary character that provides confidence and encouragement to Mei during her period of growth and change.

The Meyerowitz Stories is particularly interesting because each sibling is both a main character and secondary character simultaneously. In this way, Baumbach accurately portrays the realism of sibling relationships, showing that they are the encouragement, introspection and confidence that the other sibling needs. In *A Separation*, the daughter becomes the necessary secondary character, offering a voice of truth at times when her parents are caught up in societal pressures.

Nader is busy working with Termeh on her math homework.

NADER
He sells it for 200 tomans a
kilo. If he uses 270 kilograms
of flour a day... write down 270...
how much is his daily income?
Meaning how much profit does he
earn a day? So how do we
calculate this?

TERMEH
Did you lie?

Nader is shocked at hearing Termeh say this.

NADER
What?

TERMEH
You lied.

(Farhadi, 2011)

The secondary character, such as Termeh, is also often a child, or has a childish way of being unabashed by the truth. It is this sense of truth that is necessary for the protagonist to grow. The secondary character also wholeheartedly wants the protagonist to succeed or make the right decision towards positive growth. They often are a manifestation of what the protagonist wishes they could be.

Furthermore, it is important to note that there is often a crucial falling out with the secondary character. The falling out is important as it often represents the tension between true self and false self – external pressures and internal wants. In *Turning Red*, Mei fails to stand up for her friends when her mum blames them for ‘corrupting’ Mei. In *Shrek*, Shrek believes Donkey has betrayed him. The significance of the falling out is that it becomes a core moment of growth for the protagonist.

The conflict often occurs when the main character reverts back to a former self after having made important strides in personal growth. The secondary character, who genuinely wants good for the main character, shows disapproval at this negative growth. However, this is all important for the character to realize their old self is wrong. A reconciliation is made, often directly before the final act and then the protagonist must make a crucial choice for themselves. In the final act, the secondary character is present as a form of support.

Overall, the secondary character is a supportive force of encouragement. They provide insight and guidance for the main character, ultimately pushing the protagonist to grow positively. Even in *Joker*, Arthur’s relationship with Sophie is his positive encouragement – even though it is revealed that this interaction has been hallucinated, Sophie is still the ‘push’ character.

7 Genre

Though the genre of these films range from comedy to drama, I would argue that at their core, they are coming-of-age or right-of-passage films. The purpose of these films is to show the character's movement away from external pressure, ultimately leading to maturity and a development of the individual self. Each of the characters starts off either lacking in autonomy or knowledge and, through a series of personal conflicts, realizations and escalation, the character grows. This is the blueprint for a coming-of-age film.

However, not all of these films are in the format of a traditional coming-of-age narrative, particularly regarding the age of the characters. This is important to note as, in my own screenplay, I want to show the way different cultures and families undergo right-of-passage experiences at different times. In essence, the right-of-passage is the realization of self vs society/culture/family/religion and the enacting of this autonomy. This can happen at any age or stage of life.

I regard *Whip it* and *Turning Red* as coming-of-age films, and *A Separation*, *Shrek*, *Meyerowitz Stories*, *Joker* as right-of-passage films.

Whip It and *Turning Red* are traditional coming-of-age films. They 'dramatize situations and events that bear upon the child's initiation into new domains of psychosocial experience and the adolescent's and postadolescent's encounters with the pleasures and perils of modern life' (Schimdt, 2002). Both films are centered on adolescents and focus on typical teen situations such as parental pressures, first love, sex, underage drinking, and so forth. The external pressures of teen coming-of-age films usually come from parents or family and the narrative structure follows the adolescent rebellion away from familial structures. However, these two films are unique because they show the way parents can

embody wider social pressures – gender expectations in *Whip It*; and intergenerational trauma and cultural obligations in *Turning Red*. Overall, these two films fit much more obviously into the coming-of-age genre.

Shrek and *The Meyerowitz Stories* are right-of-passage films in the sense that they follow an older character who is learning to separate themselves from external forces, going through several necessary experiences for maturation. *The Meyerowitz Stories* is particularly interesting because it shows the parental and familial expectations that can still linger past childhood. The film shows the late coming-of-age of the three Meyerowitz children. With their father's ailing health, the children learn to not only separate their dreams from their father's dream, but also to learn how to live by themselves. This film provided a strong inspiration for *Let Go* as it showed the way coming-of-age films can include different experiences and cultures. *The Meyerowitz Stories* shows that this theme can be relevant at any age. It explores adult children going through a delayed period of growth and learning, later in life, to separate the self from the parent.

Furthermore, *Shrek* presents the right-of-passage genre through the style of a children's animated film. In *Shrek*, we are introduced to a character who is oppressed by societal pressures and discriminations. After undergoing a series of uncomfortable, but necessary experiences (friendship and love), Shrek grows in ways that are unimaginable from the beginning of the film. Ultimately, *Shrek* is a right-of-passage film that charts the growth of a character away from external pressures and towards a truer and more autonomous sense of self. While it can be argued that all films chronicle the growth of a character through a series of uncomfortable obstacles, I believe that what makes a film distinctly a right-of-passage film, are the obstacles the character endures. If the obstacles are highly specific and contextual, it is not a right-of-passage film. However, if the

obstacles are universally understood as stages of maturation (first love, sex, attraction, drinking, etc), then this is a right-of-passage film. The audience must immediately recognize that the character is going through a universally understood right-of-passage experience. Regardless of the age or even humanness of the character (Shrek being an ogre), we understand the obstacles in the film to be ones that universally encourage maturation and growth.

Although this could be a somewhat contentious opinion, I believe *A Separation* and *Joker* can still be considered right-of-passage films. The difference is that these films are set against a backdrop of social injustice. In these films, the character's growth is to do with seeing the world realistically. The positive growth from the other films is shrouded by personal conflict. The characters cannot achieve their wants because of societal obligations or oppressions. Therefore, the right-of-passage is a disillusionment with the world around them. The central theme - the personal want vs the external want – merges with political or social comments about oppression and we are confronted with this theme from a different perspective. The character is now exploring their sense of self in relation to an unjust world around them. However, the core of these two films still show characters that are forging their own identities and in this process, either lose or find themselves. For these two films, the right-of-passage experiences (divorce in *A Separation*; bullying in *Joker*) uncover too much injustice in the world and the characters further lose themselves.

Therefore, we can see that all of these films fall within the coming-of-age or right-of-passage genre. They all present character/s that are introduced as needing to go through necessary life experiences to grow and separate themselves from external forces, whether that be parents, family, culture or society. The interesting divide is in the way these genre can yield different conclusions. I will talk more about this in the following section.

8 Endings

The concluding arc for these screenplays can be either negative or positive. Because the films are considering the way a character both acknowledges and separates themselves from external forces, there is a clear division between films that consider familial external forces and societal external forces. Familial external forces often lead to a positive conclusion and character growth, with the final moments being focussed on showing the character in a scene of independence or change:

He picks up the plate of cookies--

HAROLD (O.S.)
Pick a day. Except for next Saturday, L.J. is coming up for lunch, so you'll need to find something to do, but you can go to a movie or, I think there's bowling.

Danny throws the plate of cookies onto the ground, startling everybody including himself.

DANNY (to the nurse's aide) Sorry.
HAROLD Danny! What are you doing?

Danny stands in the doorway.

DANNY
Sorry, Dad, I didn't think that would be so loud.

HAROLD
See if you can rescue some of the cookies from the porcelain.

DANNY
I'm leaving now, Dad. I'm going to drive back to the city--
(again to the aide)
You'll be here, right?

NURSE'S AIDE
Yes.

DANNY
I'll clean this up, don't worry.
(back to his Dad)
And then I'm going to LA to see Matthew.
(and to himself)
"I love you." "I forgive you."
"Forgive me." "Thank you." "Goodbye."

(Baumbach, 2017)

Films about societal external forces are more likely to show tragic endings, whereby the recognizing of external pressures and attempting to untangle oneself leads to a downfall. Because these pressures are societal, the characters realize they are unable to truly escape these pressures and this leads to a negative growth. In the case of *Joker*, Arthur's only escape from the external pressure and the only way to truly be autonomous, is to remove himself fully from society. However, in removing himself, he becomes a criminal. For Arthur, his right-of-passage is in the realization that he will always be treated poorly. In *A Separation*, the characters are forced to reconsider their perspectives on status, wealth, gender and religion. However, they too conclude that they cannot escape these pressures – the separation of self from societal pressures is larger than just separating oneself from parental pressures. Unlike *Joker*, the characters in *A separation* resign themselves to the society they live in and conclude in the same place they began, only disillusioned now.

Therefore, while the endings may seem to vary greatly, they are clearly linked to the expected character and narrative arc. The idea of a character beginning in a place of naivety, undergoing necessary life experiences, and finally emerging with more knowledge of oneself, is evident in all of these films. The difference lies in the format of the external forces. If the external pressures concern family or parents, the characters have a positive ending. This is simply because it is easier to separate oneself from these pressures. However, if the external pressures concern larger concepts such as society or politics, the characters have a negative ending. The only outlier is *Shrek*, but I believe the positive ending is to do with its genre as a children's film, in which a positive growth is necessary for this format of films.

9 Motifs

The motif of want and desire is common to all of these scripts. It is usually present in the dichotomy of ‘what do *I* want’ in comparison with ‘what does everybody else want’. As discussed in the previous paragraph about genre, these films deal with coming-of-age concepts. Because of this, the distinction between self and other is central to the script. The dramatization of this theme often pitches the personal want against the external want. In *Turning Red*, Mei begs her mum to let her go to the 4* concert (personal want) but her mum immediately refuses (external want). In *Whip It*, the opening scene of Bliss trying to get blue dye out of her hair (personal want) in order to look presentable for her mother’s beauty pageant (external want).

Often, the motif is introduced as a hierarchy, with everybody else’s wants in a higher status than the protagonist’s. However, as the film progresses, and the main character sheds expectations from other characters or social obligations, the hierarchy inverts. Traditionally, the ending will showcase the character either putting what they want first and making a clear decision towards this. At the end of *Shrek*, Shrek’s choice to marry and live with Fiona explicitly shows Shrek prioritizing his own wants. In *The Meyerowitz Stories*, Danny drops his father’s plate of cookies and states that he is going to LA to meet his brother. This is a clear visualization of him finally putting his wants over his father’s.

Conclusions

A critical discussion of the films *Whip It*; *Turning Red*; *The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)*; *Joker*; *A Separation*; and *Shrek* illuminates several commonalities and differences. With the central theme in mind, I have provided an in-depth exploration of a range of films, considering how my own screenplay fits into this discussion. Script devices are very similar, with a linear movement towards a certain goal. There is rarely voice over

narration, experimental structures or flashbacks. Conflict is threefold, combining external, interpersonal and personal conflicts together. Attitude is often satirical and tongue-in-cheek. However, if the film is considering specific current events, it is usually serious in tone. Protagonists battling familial or cultural pressures often follow a line of positive growth, moving towards autonomy and maturity. Conversely, protagonists battling larger societal and political pressures often have a disillusionment arc. These films ultimately aim to inspire change, encouraging audiences to consider the social structures around them that may be damaging to their sense of self.

EXEGESIS PART TWO

Introduction

In the second part of my exegesis, I will reflect on my creative practice as research. This will include the intentions, experiments, conclusions, decisions, and dramatic narrative of my screenplay.

I will first provide a brief synopsis, highlighting the core elements of my story. Then I will consider more specific elements within my screenplay, such as the intentions, world of the story, protagonist, antagonist (or antagonistic forces), and dramatic tension. This section will explore how I have both implemented and experimented with core storytelling elements in my own work. Overall, I will be reflecting on the decisions and creative intentions I have made in my screenplay, *Let Go of Your Hands [Let Go]*.

2 Synopsis

The synopsis establishes the core elements of a story, giving the audience an overview of the characters, the setting, the conflict, and the conclusion. The importance of a synopsis is to ‘give the reader a full, if brief, account of the whole text so that they can follow its main points without having to read it themselves’ (Newcastle University, 2023). It is crucial that the synopsis gives a ‘full’ account of the text and is not a teaser or trailer of the narrative. As Brindley (2009, p.4) states:

‘The generally accepted idea of a synopsis... deals in WHO, WHAT and HOW, but also establishes the other major characters and their lines of conflict, what is at stake for these characters, the setting in time and space, and the major turning points of the story. The last is crucial; the key element of any synopsis is a clear indication of the story’s structure. That is, how the story begins, develops and ends.’

2.1 Synopsis for *Let Go*

Let Go explores the relationships, pressures, and cultural identities of a mixed race Hong Kong Chinese-Pakeha family in present day Aotearoa New Zealand. Daughter, Katie Leung, is at the airport ready to go to Oxford for her PhD in Asian Studies. She is proud of her heritage and makes huge efforts to maintain a connection to her cultural identity, including succumbing to cultural and familial pressures. However, Katie has an epiphany at the boarding gate that this is not what *she* wants, but rather what *her parents* want. Realizing that she cannot go through with this, she runs out of the airport only to be too struck by cultural pressures to admit the truth to her proud parents. Making up a lie that she cannot board the plane without her birth certificate, the family rush back home to try and find it so Katie can board the next day.

Meanwhile, older brother, David Leung, who has chosen to have limited contact with the family and is not proud of his mixed heritage, is unwillingly present for Katie's farewell. During an awkward reunion with the family, he secretly discovers that his wife is pregnant. Suddenly struck by the realization he will not have anything to culturally pass down to his child, David goes on his own search for a lost gold chain that was passed down to him by his father.

The siblings end up using a photograph that has both the birth certificate and gold chain displayed to find the objects. Through this photograph, they visit several culturally and personally significant spaces, bonding over their shared understanding of being mixed and the pressures they face to maintain a connection to their heritage. While David finds his necklace, Katie cannot find her birth certificate. After Katie gets drunk at a karaoke place and admits she doesn't want to go to Oxford, David realizes there may be more to Katie's story. This is confirmed when, taking Katie home, David finds her birth certificate underneath her

bed. However, he also finds an unfinished graphic novel chronicling Katie's experiences in the family.

When Mum reveals she has solved the (non-existent) problem, Katie explodes and says this is not her dream but theirs. Angry and disappointed, her father reveals he wanted to go to Oxford but sacrificed this dream for his family's economic needs. He comments that both his children are disappointments. While Dad has stormed out, Katie and David end up talking about their struggles. Reconciling with their father and expressing the pressure they feel, Katie ultimately decides to still get on the plane. She maintains that she has worked hard for this and will still go. David, disappointed, slips the graphic novel into her suitcase. When on the plane, David makes a point to ask his parents to come for dinner with him and his wife, making the first step to reconnect.

The ending shows Katie on her stopover in Hong Kong. Finding the graphic novel in her suitcase, she decides not to get onto her flight to England. She sits down at a park in Hong Kong and starts to finish her drawings.

Let Go is centered on exploring the theme of personal wants vs external pressures within the context of mixed-race and Asian identity.

3 Intentions

One of the main goals in *Let Go* is to frame the coming-of-age genre within a cultural context. Katie and David are in their early 20s and 30s respectively, yet are still learning to separate their own wants from the pressure of their parents and culture. In a Western society, this would be seen as fairly late for coming-of-age. However, this is normal in East Asian societies: 'for young women growing up in Hong Kong, the data create a picture of very delayed transitions to adulthood, with a variety of experiences

occurring while they are still living with their parents' (Achmad et al., 2007, p.164). As a mixed-race Hong Kong Chinese woman myself, I often find that well known coming-of-age films are not always relatable to other cultures. Films such as *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985), *Superbad* (Rogen & Goldberg, 2007), *Ladybird* (Gerwig, 2017), and *Edge of Seventeen* (Craig, 2016), seemed to summarize the coming-of-age experience as one of sex, drugs, and rebellion, rarely taking into account the nuances of puberty in ethnic households.

While traditional milestones are still present in non-Western coming-of-age experiences, there is also the added layer of cultural identity and racism. This is evidenced by Gay (1994) who states that American middle school educators must understand the 'additional dimensions for African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, and Native-American youth because of factors of race and ethnicity'(p.1). With regards to the cinematic landscape, I identified a gap in coming-of-age media that authentically showed ethnic and mixed race characters. While there has been a noticeable boom in the last five years - *Turning Red* (Collins & Shi, 2022), *Ginny and Georgia* (Lampert, 2021), *Never Have I Ever* (Fisher & Kaling, 2020) - these still followed the traditional format of a young, often teenage, protagonist going through a difficult rebellious stage in school. I am interested in showing the 'delayed transitions to adulthood' of East Asian communities.

Another important intention was to portray a multi-ethnic family and platform the genuine experiences of mixed-race individuals. Mixed-race representation in cinema is statistically low, with Asian and Pacific Island (API) communities explicitly asking for more mixed-race representation. In the 2021 Coalition of Asia Pacific in Entertainment (CAPE) study for API in the entertainment industry, it was found that 'the most common suggestions from respondents surveyed is to see more portrayals of mixed-race and multi-ethnic

characters and families' (p.3). This lack of representation, coupled with my own lived experiences as a mixed-race Asian individual, has hugely shaped my script. Showcasing a genuine mixed-race and multi-ethnic experience is an important consideration in *Let Go*.

4 The Audience

When creating an original piece of work, it is important to consider how the audience will respond. Using Ted Hope's terms, I must consider what the audience will 'take away' from the story. The main take away of *Let Go* is to explore the nuances of Asian culture, mixed-race identity and family pressures.

Intellectually, I want audiences to question their understanding of 'normal' coming-of-age experiences and milestones. By reshaping Western cinema's portrayal of the coming-of-age genre, audiences can become more open to other cultures and cultural experiences that may differ from their own. Furthermore, I want audiences to challenge their preconceived ideas about multi-ethnic and cultural households. By exploring an authentic Asian family dynamic, *Let Go* will provide an intellectual takeaway of confronting ideas about family, coming-of-age, culture and mixed-race identity.

Emotionally, it is important for the audience to feel empathy for the character's experiences. Because *Let Go* is about a cultural experience that may not feel immediately universal, empathy creates a connection between the unfamiliar experience and the audience. Representing the Asian and mixed-race experience in a way that evokes empathy will allow audiences to gain insight into a different culture. In order to provide true representation, I believe the takeaway should focus on encouraging audience to empathize with experiences that may be different to their own.

A key image in *Let Go* that visually embodies this takeaway is actually in the argument between the family near to the end of my screenplay. In this scene, it has just been revealed that Katie does not want to go to Oxford and is only doing it for her parents. Simultaneously, the parents find out that David is having a baby with his wife. There is a burst of emotion and hurt between each family member. The crucial moment in this scene is the fact that each family member talk past each other. There is the language barrier of the father, the cultural barrier between the parents and the intergenerational cultural barrier between parents and mixed-race children. The argument is strongly emotive and summarizes the nuances of multi-ethnic and mixed-race identities in a way that is rarely seen in cinema. The characters try to explain their emotions but their dialogue is refracted through cultural and language barriers.

I was personally inspired by the final scene in *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022) where Joy and her mother struggle to connect, stumbling through their different languages and cultures. The scene was deeply evocative and showed the dynamics of Asian familial relationships through a lens of compassion and empathy. Inspired by this, I used empathy as the driving force to explore the nuances and complexities of mixed-race and multi-ethnic identities.

5 The World of the Story

The world of the story is the context, setting, and space that the narrative and characters exist in. McKee (1998, p.69) defines the world of the story as its ‘setting’:

‘A story SETTING is four-dimensional – period, duration, location, level of conflict...

PERIOD is a story’s place and time... DURATION is a story’s length through time...

LOCATION is a story’s place in space... LEVEL OF CONFLICT is the story’s position on the hierarchy of human struggles.’

In ‘level of conflict’, McKee defines the potential levels as ‘inner, even unconscious conflicts’, ‘personal conflicts’, ‘battles with institutions in society’, or ‘struggles against forces of the environment’, and says ‘your story may sit at any one or any combination of these levels’. This definition is relevant to my screenplay as the levels of conflict in *Let Go* are directly relevant to the society and environment. The narrative of the story is driven by visiting spaces that manifest culture, memory and identity. Thus, the connection between setting and conflict is highly relevant to my own story.

Furthermore, Douglas (2011, p.187) distinguishes between the *setting* and the *world* of the story, when talking about the TV series *House* (Shore, 2004-2012) and *ER* (Chrichton, 1994-2009):

‘No one would mistake *House* for a show about Chicago. Instead, House’s world is his diagnostic unit in this hospital; and within that, the internal landscape of House’s need to overcome “a world of pain” (his own) propels the stories. And no one would mistake House’s hospital for the one in *ER*, although it was also in Chicago.’

This citation captures an important distinction between the world of the story and the literal setting. Despite *House* and *ER* being both literally set in Chicago, they become different TV shows because of the world of the story – the ‘internal landscape’, the beliefs, and cultures.

5.1 The World of *Let Go*

I will be using McKee and Douglas’ definitions to assess the world in *Let Go*. The period and location is present day suburbia in East Auckland, New Zealand. This area was not only chosen because of the population of Asian immigrants in East Auckland, but also because of my personal experience living in this area. The duration is three days. The level of conflict combine the ‘battles with institutions in society’, ‘personal conflicts’ and

‘unconscious conflicts’. The Leung family unit is the central setting of the screenplay. The rules, culture and operation of this family set the ‘internal landscape’ of *Let Go* and distinguishes this story from others set in East Auckland.

The cultural setting and milieu of *Let Go* is very important to the screenplay. Rooted in Asian culture, duty and respect are highly valued qualities, particularly respect for the sacrifices of elders. There is an lineage-based hierarchy in *Let Go* where the wants of the parents ultimately veto the wants of the children. Disrupting this hierarchy implicitly means disrespecting one’s parents, lineage and culture. Success and education are also valued by the Asian cultural setting, especially by the Leung familial setting, coming from a low-class, low-education background. I also touch on the gender-based hierarchy of Asian cultures in my screenplay, briefly exploring the duties of the daughter in comparison to the son. Overall, duty, respect and success are of high value. Disrupting the lineage-based hierarchy and putting the wants of oneself above elders are of low value.

6 Protagonist

The protagonist is the central character in the screenplay – the one who drives the action and whom we empathize with. Aronson (2010, p.79) writes that ‘Conventional narrative is all about the protagonist’s journey’ and goes on to list these identifying markers of the protagonist:

‘The film is the protagonist’s story, the protagonist is who the ‘film is about’... The protagonist drives the action that makes the decisions.

The protagonist is not passive and reactive...

The protagonist is the person whose head we are inside, whose shoes we are in and with whom we identify...

The protagonist is central to the film’s dramatic highpoints ...’

Because *Let Go* is closer to an ensemble or dual protagonist script, it is necessary to consider other definitions of ‘protagonist’. Truby (2007, p.57) disputes the idea that the protagonist be conceived of as an individual and rather explores the protagonist as part of a ‘web’:

‘The single biggest mistake writers make when creating characters is that they think of the hero and all the other characters as separate individuals... [Instead] think of all your characters as part of a web in which each helps define the others. To put it another way, character is often defined by who he is not... All characters connect and define each other in four major ways: by story function, archetype, theme, and opposition.’

This is highly relevant as my screenplay is centered on the potential breaking down of a group (family), as well as the quest of a protagonist.

6.1 The Protagonist in *Let Go*

I will be assessing the motivation, stakes, and arc of protagonist, Katie.

6.1.1 Motivation

Katie is an early 20s mixed race Hong Kong Chinese-Pakeha student. We first meet Katie as she boards the plane to Oxford to begin her PhD in Asian studies. Katie has two conflicting wants – to make her parents proud by going to Oxford, but also to get out of going to Oxford because she secretly does not want to go. What she needs is to have the space away from her parental and cultural pressures to discover herself. Her inner goal is to become an artist in Hong Kong.

The key strategy Katie uses is avoidance and compliance. Because her want is in direct contrast to her parents, she feels that actively working towards her own desires is a disrespect of her parent’s sacrifices, and she feels conflicted to admit her wants. Because of this, Katie

avoids being direct with her wants and lies about things to get out of them. This is evident in the fact Katie would rather lie about needing a birth certificate to avoid boarding the plane, than outwardly tell her parents the truth.

6.1.2 Stakes

The stakes are the loss of Katie's identity and her family. As a mixed-race person, Katie's cultural identity is tied to her family. She feels that disrespecting her parents is a disrespect of her Asian father and thus, her own identity. Katie feels that by refusing to do what her parents want (and refusing to enact the character of a good Asian daughter), she is giving up a part of her identity. Furthermore, Katie is close with her father and has a good relationship with him. She feels that he will no longer be proud of her if she does not fulfil his expectations. Another layer of stakes, is in the fact Katie often feels overlooked by her parents in favour of her brother. She feels that the only way to gain her parents attention is to continuously make them proud.

The stakes escalate every time Katie visits old places from her memory and realizes more what she wants but also more that this may disappoint and disrespect her parents. The separation of herself from her parent's expectations is terrifying for Katie and the more she learns about herself the less she can go back to who she was.

6.1.3 Arc

This is the kind of story where the character changes. As this is a coming-of-age story, the focus is on the character becoming more independent by the end of the script. Katie is introduced as naïve and lacking in autonomy - She focusses her energy into fulfilling her parent's wants and cultural pressures. By the end, Katie has made choices for herself and taken a step towards a life that she wants to lead.

7 Antagonist

The antagonist, or antagonistic force, is the entity that opposes what the protagonist wants. They ultimately create the obstacles that stand in the way of the protagonist and their goal. Antagonists are commonly thought of as individuals that antagonize the protagonist. However, McKee's (1998, p.318) definition of an antagonist is particularly significant because it explores the way an antagonist is a force that pushes the protagonist to grow and the story to become more solid:

“Forces of antagonism” doesn't necessarily refer to a specific antagonist or villain. In appropriate genres arch-villains, like the Terminator, are a delight, but by “forces of antagonism” we mean the sum total of all forces that oppose the character's will and desire... A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them...’

7.1 The Antagonist in *Let Go*

The antagonist force in *Let Go* are the parents. The pressure of the father proves to be an antagonistic force to both Katie and David's personal and career wants, however their mother is an antagonist force to their identity wants. Both parents try to oppose Katie's wants for her own sense of autonomy, using guilt tripping tactics to encourage her to stay part of the cultural and familial unit. The parents' constant conversation about lack of opportunities, childhood suffering and financial stress are all guilt tripping strategies.

However, these tactics are not consciously employed and do not have a malicious intention. Both parents use guilt tripping tactics unconsciously, believing that their suffering and culture necessitates an inherent family hierarchy. The critical turning point in my screenplay is the parents' moment of realization that these tactics are harmful. Ultimately, by

the end of the script, the antagonists (parents) are confronted with the fact they must change in order to maintain the relationship with their children.

8 Dramatic Tension

In this section, I will discuss how dramatic tension, or suspense, is generated in my screenplay. This will include describing how my choice of character turning points has been used to build tension throughout.

Dramatic tension can be defined in terms of plot and/or character. The plot-line tension is derived from a character's need. This need is the ultimate question of the narrative. Mamet (1991, p.64) writes that the audience wants to know the answer to a question posed at the start of the story: 'The solution of the problem posited at the end of the experience is the end of the story.' In a later work, Mamet (2005) clarifies that the question posed has these components:

- '1) WHO WANTS WHAT?
- 2) WHAT HAPPENS IF THEY DON'T GET IT?
- 3) WHY NOW?'

These plot questions are the basis of dramatic tension and are important to maintaining the viewers' attention. Crucially, the audience feel a tension between the character's needs and the narrative conflict that make it difficult for the character to achieve this need.

Character tension can be divided into two subsections: dramatic tension derived from the relationship line, and dramatic tension derived from the inner line. Using the relationship line to create tension means audiences are focussed on the connections and conflicts between

characters, rather than within the character's internal self. Aronson (2000, p.16) writes that television series generate interest by centering on a family, or group that functions *like* a family, and presenting threats to or conflict within that family:

[A] successful series television presents a 'village' - a community with its own style and concerns... A group of compelling characters which functions like a family and demonstrates a range of ongoing problems, conflicts and ambivalences that are capable, if necessary, of being revisited every episode for three to five seasons.

Furthermore, Weston (2003) puts the 'emotional event' at the heart of the story, which she defines as an important 'emotional transaction' that changes the relationship between characters:

'How are the characters different – or what has changed in their relationship – from the beginning..? *Events* are not just the incidents of the plot. An *event* is truer than the text. It looks beneath surface, as a shift in the emotional lives of the characters. It is the ultimate subject choice... It's *what happens* in the story.'

Using inner conflict to create tension means audiences are focussed on a character's relationship with themselves - their 'character arc' and whether they change - to generate suspense. Cleary (2004) asks: 'What inner need eats away at them until they change in response to it? What does the protagonist need to understand if they are going to be ok?'. This concept of understanding whether a protagonist will 'be ok' is crucial to the dramatic tension in a screenplay. By definition, the protagonist elicits empathy and compassion from the audience. Therefore, the audience is waiting to see whether they will feel comfortable or satisfied in 'leaving' the character at the end of the film – usually marked by an understanding that the character will 'be ok' beyond the timeline of the film itself.

8.1 Dramatic Tension in *Let Go*

I will be dividing my discussion of dramatic tension into plot line, relationship line and inner line. I will identify the steps by which tension escalates in my script by exploring the set-up, turning points, moments of truth, climax, and resolutions.

In *Let Go*, the central question, or what the audience is waiting for, changes between the different lines. On the plot line, the audience is waiting to see if Katie will find her birth certificate and go to Oxford; on the relationship line, the audience is waiting to see the reconciliation between the siblings and the confrontation of their parent's behaviour; and on the inner line, the audience is waiting to see whether Katie breaks free from parental pressures, and if David makes a decision to reconnect with his family. On a combined inner line, the audience is waiting to see if both David and Katie resolve the difficulties with their cultural identity. These three dramatic questions are introduced throughout the set up in pages 1-25.

On Page 2, Katie states that no one knows 'what' she is when she does not straighten her hair. This immediately indicates a conflict in her identity – how she appears to other people vs how she feels inside (inner line). The second part of this dialogue, that Mum prefers Katie with straightened hair, sets up a conflict between Katie and Mum (relationship line). The inner line is further explored on page 15, where Katie is explicitly shown not wanting to go to England, despite doing so for her parents:

INT. BATHROOM - MEANWHILE

Katie in the cubicle with her pants down. She has her head in her hands. She takes a deep breath.

KATIE

It's just 4 years in England.
You'll make everyone happy and
proud and then you can do whatever
you want with your life. 4 years.
Easy. You can do it.

The establishment of the family relationship line begins on page 2: There is a conversation between Mum, Dad, and Katie that shows the awkwardness around the older sibling, David:

MUM
David?

KATIE
Is that David?

DAD
Is he here already?

Dad fumbles with the stereo, trying to connect the phone.

KATIE
I didn't know he was coming

DAD
Put him on speaker

This interaction, coupled with David's own reaction to the family on the following page 3, solidifies a dramatic tension in the relationship line:

David watches them scramble for Katie's passport. It's in her backpack. He does not alert any of the family of his presence. He doesn't want them to see him. Or maybe he secretly wants them to-

The obvious tension between these characters set up a question on the relationship line where the audience is not only waiting to discover what has happened, but whether the family will reconcile in some way during the film.

The last dramatic question to be established is the plot line question. The plot tension is created between pages 21-24. Here we see Katie realize that she cannot go through with her parent's wants, but also cannot imagine disrespecting their sacrifices by admitting this to them. On page 25, we are fully introduced to the plot line question: How will Katie keep up this lie to her family?

Her parents have proud, expectant faces. They've done so much for her. She can't let them down, but she can't go either.

MUM

Let's go to the gate together. You can't miss this.

DAD

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, let's go. Don't be scared.

KATIE

I'm NOT scared, I just...I just.

MUM

What?

DAD

What?

KATIE

I couldn't get on the plane without...

Lightbulb moment.

KATIE (CONT'D)

...a birth certificate

Perhaps what is particularly tense about this plot line question, is the fact audiences implicitly know the answer from the beginning of the film: it is impossible to maintain this lie. Therefore, not only is the audience tensely waiting for an inevitable conclusion, but they are also waiting for the confrontation of this inevitable conclusion. Because a high level of tension occurs on all three lines around the same time, this helps to elevate dramatic tension and conflict in the script.

8.2 Turning Points in *Let Go*

I will now discuss the main turning points for Katie, exploring why each moment is a 'point of no return' for the character's growth.

1. Katie's conversation with the mixed child, Lucy, at the airport gate. Here, Katie realizes what she has given up to please her parents. Being confronted by a mirror-image of her younger, more innocent self, Katie ultimately realizes she cannot go through with this decision.
2. Katie's choice to lie about the birth certificate is the moment where plot line and inner line tensions collide. Unable to be honest to her parents, Katie makes a decision that

fuels the plot of the script – needing to find her birth certificate. However, she has knowingly sent her family on a wild goose chase to avoid the truth.

3. Katie’s conversation with Tracey, a mirror image of a future self, makes Katie realize she has to make a decision. This is a moment of truth for Katie, where she realizes that she has changed and nothing can be the same again. This moment occurs just after the middle of the script.
4. Katie’s revelation to David that she does not want to go to Oxford shows a moment of true honesty towards someone. Although she is not sober, this is still the first time she has told anyone what she genuinely feels. This is the ‘end section’ climax of the film where momentum starts to build. At this point in the timeline, Katie is meant to go to board a second flight the next day and the siblings have just spent the whole day looking for her birth certificate. The addition of this revelation into the mix means that there is one more secret (David’s knowledge of the situation) to keep, which signals to the audience that something is bound to spill.
5. Katie’s final choice to still go to England to ‘find herself’, but not to study is her first step to an genuine and independent life. While the audience feels somewhat fulfilled with this decision, they know that this turning point is not the end of the script yet.
6. Katie’s final choice to stay in Hong Kong during the stopover and finish her graphic novel is the resolved ending point that is satisfying for the audience. Here, Katie has changed markedly since the beginning of the script. The dramatic tension is resolved on all three lines, with Katie finally being honest to her family and herself about what she wants, reconciling with her brother and also making an independent choice.

As demonstrated, my script contains several key dramatic questions on the plot line, relationship line and inner line. These questions are ultimately related to Cleary’s (2004) statement: ‘what inner need gnaws away at them until they change in response to it? What

two impulses are they torn between? How conscious of this are they?’ and much of the plot line action also revolves around these inner questions of character needs. Because of the focus on inner needs, I have discussed the way protagonist turning points elevate dramatic tension in the script, identifying the different points of no return for protagonist, Katie.

Conclusion

In part two of my exegesis, I have reflected on my screenplay, *Let Go of Your Hands*. I have explored relevant theoretical concepts in Screenwriting and demonstrated knowledge of these including intention, the world of the story, protagonist, antagonist and dramatic tension. Furthermore, I have shown how my own screenplay both embodies and experiments with these conventions.

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