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Survived By...

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requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing*

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

Jess (23) is a budding professional athlete living in the shadow of her older, better educated and more successful sister, Lucy (26). After a year of looking after her terminally ill father, Jess's mother Carol decides it is time to call Lucy home. When Lucy arrives with high school sweetheart and new fiancé, Craig (26), Jess suddenly finds herself back in the background, competing for attention.

When Jess discovers Lucy and Craig's relationship is not the rosy picture Lucy would have everyone believe, Jess sees an opportunity to change the oppressive dynamic in which they have grown up in. But as Lucy resists Jess's attempts at a closer relationship, Jess finds herself further drawn towards Craig, where their relationship edges dangerously close to romantic. Carol, trapped between two demanding daughters, finds herself torn between the role of the dutiful wife who plays by the rules and the matriarch who encourages anarchy.

When their father, Richard (53), suddenly wakes from his deathbed, all progress made by Jess to change the dynamics of their upbringing, is shattered as Lucy and Carol are quick to submit to Richards traditionalist ideals. Feeling neglected and misunderstood, Jess seeks out Craig's affection in an act of rebellion against Carol and Lucy's fake facade. When Lucy discovers their betrayal, the family is thrown into uncharted territory. With a father whose death seems imminent and a mother who is in denial about her family's dysfunction, the survival of the family unit is uncertain.

The Thesis is framed by an Exegesis which is a 6000-word essay on the subject of:

- (a) the genre of the Thesis
- (b) the development process from synopsis to second draft

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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 acknowledgments), 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.

PART ONE: GENRE ANALYSIS

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

If we were to ask an audience member to define genre, simply put they would describe it as the category in which a film is filed; think online VOD or in a retail context. How genre is interpreted and used, however, depends on the stage in which we refer to, in the film's evolution.

Beginning with the first stage: the writer. It is fair to say, how a writer considers genre in the beginning phases of story development, an academic would reach the same conclusions. Which is to say, that genre refers to a set of guidelines as to which the story is constructed around. You could also describe this as ‘expectations’ of a genre, by which we refer to the audience and the elements they expect i.e. plot, theme, setting/era, character and so on. A Western, for example, audiences would expect to watch a film that is set in 19th to early 20th century in the American frontier with themes of hero vs outlaw/villain, nomad vs settler, indigenous vs newcomer and include scenes with gun fights, robberies, outlaws, sheriffs and so on. Another example is a Romance, where quite simply, audiences will expect to see a couple fall in love where the odds are stacked against them. While academics may theorise about the complexities of these expectations, writers are catering to a consumer-driven market and therefore it is unavoidable that they must consider these expectations when constructing the *world* of the story.

The next stage - direction - has a different relationship with genre where you could argue that most directors come with their own genre-specific aesthetic/style. While a writer must *first* consider the audience's expectations, the director is *already* catering to those expectations. A great example is the director Guillermo del Toro Gómez; whose aesthetic very specifically caters to fantasy horror films. Of course, while his taste and style may evolve over time, studio executives and audiences, will associate del Toro with a specific *style* of storytelling and therefore his direction becomes less about catering to the audience's needs, as a writer does, and more about catering to his own style in a way that best services the story. Therefore, genre, in fact, is something a director *embodies*, a pre-disposed style that they bring to a story.

In the case of a studio and/or distributor, genre is defined in the marketing sense; it tells them

who the audience is likely to be and therefore where and when they should market a film. If we look for example, to specific times of the year, we can get a sense of the genre-specific marketing. For example, the holiday season is typically a time of family-friendly cinema and therefore marketed as such and Valentine's Day is a time for romantic genre's, for example Fifty Shades of Grey.

What all stages have in common is the audience, whether that refers to their expectations of a genre or how they are exposed to a genre (in the case of a studio). Therefore, to define genre, is to define an audience: their expectations; their tastes; their demographic.

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

The genre of my film is Psychological Family Drama. Three films/TV shows that perfectly demonstrate this genre, and have heavily influenced my own writing is:

Room

Festen

We Need to Talk About Kevin

3. Make a case that this genre is recognised by the industry.

In 2014, Anne T Donahue of The Guardian, described the 'dysfunctional family' theme as the "manic pixie dream girls of overdone film and TV tropes" (Donahue, 2014). By which she meant, it is no longer new or offers anything different that audiences haven't already seen. She goes on to suggest, that to remain relevant, "fictional families as a unit also need depth, backstories, and a reason for us to care", or rather, a reason for us to *care* that the family comes together, despite the obvious reasons to be apart. This kind of interpretation requires an altogether new sub-genre of Family Drama, that includes more adult themes.

Due to the rise of VOD platforms and therefore accessibility to non-mainstream film and

television, audiences are being exposed to more complex storylines that give voice to diverse characters and plot. Family dramas that are written for adult audiences, are now exploring the more psychological themes that underpin this notion of 'dysfunction' within the family context where mental illness and/or mental trauma is the catalyst to the plot. In *Rachel Getting Married*, we are met with a family still grieving the untimely loss of a younger brother who we learn became victim to the middle daughter's drug-addicted negligence. This film does not just carry the elements of drama in the present tense but also elements pertaining to psychological scars that form the backstory to the characters.

Therefore, we are not talking about Family Drama films we have come to associate with the holiday season; films where the whole family can watch. What we refer to, is the rise of films that speak to a more sophisticated audience, where more complex issues are addressed and therefore requires a sub-genre that defines such a film. In 2016, we saw critical acclaim given to family drama's *Manchester by the Sea* and *Fences*, where themes explore past misgivings that are inflicted by society and upbringing, and therefore threatens the survival of the family in the present tense. What we are seeing, are stories that rid the idea of dysfunction and replace it with something more human and thus, flawed. It is not unreasonable to suggest the psychological sub-genre, which has traditionally been reserved for Thrillers (*Black Swan*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Memento* etc.), could be described as the *human* element, and therefore transferable to other genres i.e. Family Drama.

4. Summarise the **history** of that genre

The importance of family in modern day cinema is as strong as it was in the ancient Greek works of Euripides. Euripides wrote *Medea*, a story about a woman who avenges her husband's betrayal by killing her own children. Even in what could be argued as the most taboo of subjects - to kill your own children - *Medea* is saved and redeemed by her grandfather, Helios. Such stories invoke the medieval proverb 'blood is thicker than water'.

That primal instinct of family being all-enduring, even in the toughest of circumstances, lives on in modern cinema, starting with the Women's Film; a rather one-dimensional genre (penned in retrospect in the 1980's) that targeted female audiences. Beginning in the Silent Film era, these

films put women at the centre of the universe where the biggest source of conflict was the need to decide; to pursue a life of career-driven opportunities or pursue a life of womanhood i.e. wife, mother. The complexities are few in this genre and although scholars (Simmon, 1993) have argued the validity of these films as a genre, due to them being merely an opposition to male-centric films such as Westerns and Gangster films, this is nonetheless the first example of the 'home life' being at the centre of a film's core conflict and where, of course, family ultimately trumps all.

Animation formed the next phase of what would be considered a family film, where family themes revolved around children in the context of family. Walt Disney was responsible for many animated adaptations including *Gullivers Travel*, *Pinocchio* and *Dumbo*. These films are not strictly family-centric films where themes also include adventure and self-discovery, however family remains at the core of the moral message, where the notion of 'family' is the most important and must be protected.

As we move beyond the era of silent films and animation classics, family films begin to reflect modern culture and the ever-changing family dynamics. Take for example *Kramer vs Kramer*, a film about the effects of divorce on a young family, released in 1979 at a time when society was actively questioning the roles of motherhood and fatherhood. *Kramer vs Kramer* was the first of its kind, sparking a conversation that was no longer had in hushed corners, but aired in public and to great debate. Divorce, it seemed, was the new threat to the family circle, an internal threat where *people* were at the core of the problem rather than external threats such as death or disease. Even *Time Magazine* entered the debate with an eight-page spread, discussing the film and the changing attitudes towards women in society and at home (Rich, 1979). The success of the film opened the door to a more diverse and sophisticated audience for the family drama genre. Audiences, particularly female audiences, craved entertainment that would reflect and challenge their own personal struggles within the family unit and where survival became a dramatic question rather than a dramatic conclusion.

In last decade, family drama has taken over television as one of the most compelling genres to watch. Shows such as *Mad Men*, about a nuclear family living in the oppressive environment of

the 1950's, to *Transparent*, about a family dealing with a gender-changing father. What connects everyone regardless of race or gender, sexual affiliations or political leanings, is family. Family dramas have given voices to those who have felt excluded or even oppressed and have provided a framework where these kinds of oppressions can be used as ammo in a film or series core conflict.

Now, the conversation is moving beyond the dysfunctional to the more complex, where themes explore the psychological scars that can result from familial abuse or oppression. We saw this in the film *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, where a mother finds within herself, a way to forgive her homicidal son, or in *Room* where the bond between a mother and child held captive for more 5 years, becomes the key to their escape and ultimate survival. The drama of family continues to entrance audiences and spark conversation as we move into an era of conscious film making.

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

The feeling or tone that can be expected of a family drama is very insular and character driven where much of the conflict occurs out of a pressure-cooker environment, such as the family home or an event in which brings the family together i.e. weddings, funerals, baptisms, graduation, birthdays etc. The film *August: Osage County* is a great example of this, where 99% of the drama occurs inside the family home due to the disappearance and ultimate death of the father. With 11 characters, and a home environment that is dark and deemed suffocating hot, the filmmakers provided a pressured situation where explosive and revealing conflict, was inevitable. We see this again in *Festen*, a drama that takes place in the confines of a family-run hotel during the celebration of the fathers 60th birthday and with the very stylized film *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, where every scene is a flashback, shot in a way that feels boxed in and contained.

Of course, at the centre of a family drama is family: siblings, parents, grandparents, step mother/fathers etc. The survival of family, as a unit, is at the heart of all family drama's and therefore the psychological scars that each family member carries, becomes the obstacle to the very survival of the unit. The lack of maternal bonding between Kevin and his mother in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, is what leads him to a very dark place with homicidal intentions, all

to attract the attention from a mother who has remained aloof and withheld affection. The survival of their family hangs on whether the mother can overcome tragedy and finally offer unconditional love, that Kevin has so craved.

Themes of nostalgia often play a key role where imagery such as family photos, childhood trinkets such as toys/teddies, teenage fads like old posters or dated decor, can be expected. Nostalgia can also come in the form of flashbacks, whether to a time of more calm or to a time that provides the source to the family conflict.

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

With the rise of VOD platforms, traditional structures such as the happy ending, seem a thing of the past. Audiences are becoming more sophisticated and discerning, due to the sheer amount of choices they have at just a click of a button. There is a movement away from predictable and fanciful storylines and audiences come with high expectations to be moved and on the edge of their seat.

The core conflict of a family drama, most especially when it is a psychological drama, is the impossibility of survival as a family unit. Audiences expect to watch stories that reflect modern society and where the struggles are relatable; stories about divorced parents as in *Boyhood*, or about substance abuse as in *Rachel Getting Married* or families that deal with sexuality as in the TV show *Transparent*.

A modern-day family is more than just your nuclear family, it's a diverse, bubbling torrent of insecurities and tensions. Contemporary audiences expect to see diverse and complicated characters who either self-destruct or destroy those around them. Of course, realism in this genre is important; realistic characters, realistic storylines, realistic settings. That is what makes this genre so powerful.

7. Explain how **your** screenplay fulfils those expectations

Diverse voices include female voices. When I set out to write this screenplay, I knew I wanted

the story to centre around strong female characters. And thus, Jess and Lucy were born - one sister living in the shadow of the other. As typical of the genre, I set the action around an event, the father on the cusp of dying and thus a family coming together to say their goodbyes. To make sure my screenplay fulfilled the expectations that the story would be about family and not about the affair that ensues between Jess and Craig, it was important to setup the core conflict at the beginning; the rivalry between Jess and Lucy, the underlying resentments between Jess and Carol. The act of peeling away layers is very important in family drama structure. As like in life, there are many layers to our resentments and jealousy and I've explored those elements through use of juxtaposition i.e. Jess and Lucy's appearance, beer versus cider in the fridge, Lucy's graduation photo versus Jess's marathon photo, Jess and Lucy's diet, their grass versus the neighbour's grass, Jess's treatment of Craig versus Lucy's treatment of Craig.

While more development will go into the deep-seated resentments between Lucy and Jess, the elements in which audiences expect to find in a family are there in droves; a family on the brink of collapse; themes about testing family values; modern voices with a realistic setting.

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

While we are seeing an emergence of strong female characters, there are still so few dramas that are carried by a strong female cast that does not also portray men as weaker or inferior. One of the most important elements in writing this story about complicated women, was to make sure I didn't exclude male audiences because of poor character development. My male characters, although minor, needed just as much complexity. Therefore, my screenplay offers audiences a mirror in which to look at how our society and their lingering traditionalist values, challenge a generation of men *and* women, trying to reconcile themselves within a modern, gender-neutral culture.

Secondly is the setting. While majority of the action takes place in the family home, I've also used the small, rural New Zealand setting as an extension of that home. The insular tone of the family home is reflected in the insular setting of a small town and so it gives opportunity to break down the four walls and take some of the action outdoors, where a small community can provide

that claustrophobic setting.

The third element is my character Jess, who is both the hero and the villain. I'll admit that I struggled with this story structure for some time, trying to understand how an audience could sympathise with someone who is doing most of the destruction. But because Jess is doing the only thing she knows how, it means her actions feel necessary and important to getting the family where they need to be. This kind of storytelling is why I have penned this film as a psychological drama, as it challenges audiences to stay with a character that can be destructive whilst simultaneously constructing a family that is closer and stronger.

PART TWO: SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

a) Emotional Truth

(i) Describe the 'emotional truth' you intend the audience to recognise in this screenplay

The emotional truth comes back to the primal instinct of survival and how family are not easily broken, no matter how deep resentments or other struggles may go. Jess's emotional truth is that she *needs* her family, but only if they are willing to change. The catalyst to survival is the ability to change and the core conflict is the resistance to that change.

Jess, my protagonist, has lived in the shadows of her older sister, Lucy, her whole life. When Lucy is in the room, Jess doesn't exist. Like many stories about family, psychological scars can be traced back to upbringing and the parents. What I hope audiences will recognise is the human aspect to these scars, this is not a story about abuse or neglect, but about subtle oppression that is a symptom of traditionalist values still lingering in our society and which affects both women and men who are living on the edge of a new generation of liberal thinkers.

The road to freedom for Jess, is to encourage her family to shed their traditionalist values or in this case, their fathers oppressive parenting style, and embrace a new beginning where they are free to be themselves.

b) How did your screenplay develop from initial concept to a first draft?

(i) Synopsis

Jess (23), is a work in progress. She's young and immature and has spent the last year caring for her terminally ill father (Richard, 57), the only person in her family she feels understands and respects her. Her mother, Carol (55), worries about her lack of ambition and isn't shy about expressing her thoughts, however all Jess hears is criticism about her inadequacy compared to her ever-successful older sister, Lucy (28), who has just returned home with her high-school sweetheart turned fiancé, Craig (28).

Jess's long-term resentment and jealousy rears its head as Lucy's arrogance and tactless actions fail to elicit any kind of anger or punishment from their mother. But Jess soon finds that Lucy's success story of career and love isn't what it seems. The noticeable cracks in her and Craig's relationship leaves Craig susceptible to Jess's affection and sexual advances. As two people starved of love and respect, their relationship quickly spirals into an affair that risks the family dynamic and Jess and Lucy's already shaky relationship. After the death of their father, Lucy acts to reinstall a close bond leaving Jess with the moral dilemma of whether to tell Lucy about her and Craig's affair. The emotional turmoil of losing their father plus the deception from Jess and Craig begs the question: Will the family survive?

This story is about family and its ability to withstand grief and deception. Jess's longing for the type of love and respect that Lucy so effortlessly acquires, leads her into the arms of Craig, risking her relationship with the only people who can help her overcome her grief for her father. Deep down, Jess knows that she is using Craig to punish Lucy, but with success comes regret as Jess realises she may never get her family back.

(ii) Development

From the beginning, my objective was to write a story about a family at the height of their grief. I knew I wanted the father to be on the brink of dying and therefore the story revolved around three woman, Carol, Lucy and Jess. The introduction of Craig was a device to create a moral conflict for Jess - the affair - that would ultimately threaten to destroy the family.

Initially, Carol played an essential role in the toxic family environment. She was to be an absent mother that was unable to take care of herself let alone two grieving daughters. The feedback I received was that the most dramatic triangle was that between Jess, Lucy and Craig rather than Jess, Carol and Lucy. If that was the case, it was therefore important to setup the key relationships to show what is at risk i.e. Jess and Lucy's fractured relationship and Lucy and Craig, high school sweethearts, on the brink of collapse.

What became clear after my initial synopsis and subsequent treatment was the question of who the main character was. Lucy's dramatic action of chasing funerals to escape her grief, verged on being more interesting than Jess's dramatic action of seducing Craig. By asking the question 'who's story is this?' I had to re-evaluate where the stakes were and what was at risk. What I settled on was the story between Jess and Lucy, Jess feeling abandoned by Lucy and forced to take care of the family and Lucy is more concerned with how her life looks from the outside rather than facing the undesirable truth. It became a story about sisters rather than an ensemble drama about a family.

When writing my first beat sheet, my key focuses were:

- Establishing Lucy as the villain in Jess's narrative, the person preventing Jess from being free
- Escalating the tension between Jess and Craig, pushing them to the point of no return.

At the completion of my first beat sheet, I had the bones of a story about a neglectful sister and a misguided affair that ends badly. What I didn't have was a dramatic metaphor for a story about two sisters struggling to come together. In my revised beat sheet, I sought to make clear there was a relationship between the two sisters that was worth saving and the same between Lucy and Craig - what tied them together in the first place, and what was it that risked tearing them apart?

There was also the question of the affair - why *should* Jess and Craig be together? What reason does Jess sought the comfort of Craig and vice versa? How far can I take that relationship to create a conflict for Jess i.e. who does she choose, Craig or Lucy? At what point, does Lucy finding out about the affair create the most drama and how do I make the breakup between Lucy and Craig difficult to the point where she also must choose i.e. Jess or Craig? It was important for me that Jess eventually chooses Lucy and that it was a result of her actions, rather than Lucy's. How and why Lucy chooses Jess or rather *accepts* Jess, was still unclear to me at this point.

With these questions in mind, I began my first draft. The role of the father, Richard, was a new concept I was exploring to give him a role in Jess's resentment towards Lucy. My aim was to find a way to use his consciousness to heighten the stakes of the affair between Jess and Craig. Could Richard discover Jess and Craig in a compromising position? And what does it mean if Richard finds out? How does Jess feel towards Richard knowing she committed such a betrayal?

This led me to Richard's death and the question of timing i.e. how does his death change the way Jess responds to Lucy and Craig? What does his death mean to Jess and if it's significant, how do I tie that into the major turning points in the story i.e. Why does it matter that Richard is sick and dying at the same time when Jess is knowingly destroying Lucy's life? A clue to this is through a new triangle; Jess, Lucy and Richard. Richard's treatment of Jess vs Lucy is a significant clue as to why Jess is the way she is and what became a second act turning point when we learn the depth of their competitive nature when it comes to their father's affection.

Painting Jess as the protagonist was still causing an issue for me, especially as she had become somewhat of an unsympathetic character. This became the most obvious as I wrote the ending. I found it particularly difficult to find a reason why Lucy forgives Jess after what she had done. To get to the point where Lucy in some way deserves what she gets, I had to go back to the start and ask myself 'what does Lucy need?' and 'what does Jess need?'. Jess needs to be loved and accepted and that is what propels her towards Craig. Lucy's need to be admired and praised leads her to use questionable methods to get it i.e. encouraging the advances of a colleague or presenting a false facade of her and Craig's relationship.

The synopsis above is where I landed with the first draft having worked very closely with the relationship triangles. There are still many questions about Richard's role in the family and where I take Jess and Craig's relationship to create a change in Jess and Lucy's relationship.

c) How did your screenplay develop from first draft to second draft?

(i) Synopsis

Jess (23) is a lonely soul in a family that values success over substance. She has spent most of her life living in her sister Lucy's (26) shadow, never living up to her sophistication or confidence. Her father Richard (53) is the only gleaming light in her dull life, the only one to understand and share her passion for competitive running. When Jess finds out that everything she has worked hard for is finally paying off, the only person she wants to tell is Richard, but she can't. Richard has long been battling with cancer and now he lies asleep in bed, unlikely to ever

wake again.

When Lucy returns home to the delight of their mother, Carol, Jess latches on to the one thing that gives her control in a family that constantly takes it away: Lucy's fiancé, Craig, who seems to be battling his own deep-seated issues with Lucy. Jess sees an opportunity to have a slice of the privileged life that Lucy has long enjoyed by manipulating Craig's affections into a sexual attraction.

When Richard wakes, all of Jess's hopes come crumbling down. The person who was supposed to be Jess's ally is exposed as the person at the centre of everything wrong with the family, the source of all the toxic behaviour from Carol and Lucy, the person that condones prioritising Lucy's needs over Jess's.

This story of parental oppression and sibling jealousy is a complicated look at the pressures of a conventional society in rural New Zealand. Where upholding your own reputation is more important than being who you really are. When Jess's world comes crashing down and the only person that sees her is the one person that could threaten to damage the family for ever, Jess must choose how far she is willing to go to get the family she deserves. Is she prepared to destroy the people she loves or will she admit defeat and once again disappear into Lucy's shadow?

(ii) Development

The 'dramatic question' set up at the start the action line/s (or "plot")

The most valuable feedback I received when workshopping my first draft was this idea about 'destroying' the family, and that it was necessary to create change. So, when I started beat sheeting for my second draft, this is where I started; with the question of 'what does Jess have to do to make her family *see* her, to prioritise her just as much as Lucy'.

What was lacking in my first draft was a clear setup at the beginning that Jess has been oppressed by her family, has been made to feel insignificant. And so, I made the decision to start the story earlier, before Lucy arrives home, when it is just Jess and Carol. This provided an opportunity to show how Carol treats Jess when they are alone and how she treats her when Lucy

comes home.

The key relationship line/s

The complicated relationship line of Jess and Richard is something I'm still struggling with. What I've tried to get across in my second draft is how much Jess *wants* Richard to wake up. When she finds out she has been accepted into the 'Elite Runner Program', the only person she wants to tell is Richard. The most painful part of this story for my classmates was the idea that Richard could crush Jess in such a way that everything she believed to be true about their relationship, came crashing down around her. The one thing that brought Jess and Richard together becomes the same thing that Richard uses against her. Because it is such a strong action on Richard's part, I needed to find a reason for his foul treatment. Hence the development of the photo frame - Lucy's graduation photo versus Jess's marathon photo. Richard wants the best for Jess and the only path that leads to success in his opinion, is education. This idea that Richard believes in duty over passion is a thematic idea I am still developing.

The arc (or transformation) of the main character/s

Finding sympathy for a character who is actively pursuing her sister's fiancé is a tall task. In my one-on-one sessions with Andrew, I concluded that it was OK for Jess to be the villain in the story, and that ultimately that path would lead to heroism. Jess's actions towards Craig - seducing him, turning him against Lucy - is exactly how Jess has learned to survive in a family that ignores her. Jess is a game player; it is what she knows and she's good at it.

By giving Jess this conniving characteristic, it gave breadth to the moments where she was disarmed, taken off guard. It meant I could create suspense around the idea that Jess is capable of anything. And so, when Richard wakes up and ignores Jess, I had a great variety of options for how Jess could act out, how she could get revenge on Lucy.

The ending (and its link to the 'dramatic question' set up at the start)

When I was creating my beat sheet, I kept asking myself the same thing: If Jess needs to destroy the family, then what happens once it is destroyed? There are several moments in the story when the point of view shifts from Jess to Lucy. The ending felt like another moment where that was

necessary.

With that in mind I explored ways in which Lucy could make the decision to create change. The most obvious choice was to explore her need to be admired and praised. And so, I asked myself, if Lucy *didn't* get any of those things, what would happen? What if Jess gets all the attention? What if Carol decides to treat them equally? Would that be enough to make Lucy realise that the balance has always tilted in her favour. By putting Lucy in the position of feeling ignored, it gave Jess an opportunity to do what Lucy hadn't done for her: stick up for her, save her from her own misery. And thus, created a sense of change.

Playing with the expected elements of your story's genre

During the beat sheet and writing process, I found myself getting stuck on certain genre elements of the story. Each time I would get stuck, I would find a film or television show that directly addressed those elements. For example, watching *Mad Men* helped me write complicated scenes about family life, where no one says exactly what they mean and therefore their internal struggle becomes ever greater. This idea of not being able to say what you mean, can lead to major outbursts of erratic or devious behaviour therefore *Mad Men* helped me craft the scenes where Jess goes to extreme actions to punish Lucy.

I'm also writing a story about forbidden love. While Jess is knowingly entangling Craig, Craig believes everything Jess is doing to be sincere. Therefore, I struggled to find ways that would make Craig feel attracted to Jess, enough that he would consider cheating on Lucy. And so, I watched Jane Campion's film *Bright Star* about the love affair between John Keats and Fanny Brawne. What I gravitated towards and understood to be similar to the relationship between Jess and Craig, was Fanny's affinity to being liked and desired. Fanny was a natural flirt and knowingly flirted with John even though she knew they were ill-suited. As of the time, their blossoming relationship was behind closed doors, incredibly subtle and romantic and I wanted that feeling of forbidden but romantic love to translate across to Jess and Craig. Although Jess and Craig's relationship is less about love and more about escaping, I wanted to draw out the moments when they were together, fighting their instincts to touch and show their true desires.

d) How did your screenplay develop from second draft to polished second draft?

(i) Synopsis

Jess (23) is a budding professional athlete living in the shadow of her older, better educated and more successful sister, Lucy (26). After a year of looking after her terminally ill father, Jess's mother Carol decides it is time to call Lucy home. When Lucy arrives with high school sweetheart and new fiancé, Craig (26), Jess suddenly finds herself back in the background, competing for attention.

When Jess discovers Lucy and Craig's relationship is not the rosy picture Lucy would have everyone believe, Jess sees an opportunity to change the oppressive dynamic in which they have grown up in. But as Lucy resists Jess's attempts at a closer relationship, Jess finds herself further drawn towards Craig, where their relationship edges dangerously close to romantic. Carol, trapped between two demanding daughters, finds herself torn between the role of the dutiful wife who plays by the rules and the matriarch who encourages anarchy.

When their father, Richard (53), suddenly wakes from his deathbed, all progress made by Jess to change the dynamics of their upbringing, is shattered as Lucy and Carol are quick to submit to Richards traditionalist ideals. Feeling neglected and misunderstood, Jess seeks out Craig's affection in an act of rebellion against Carol and Lucy's fake facade. When Lucy discovers their betrayal, the family is thrown into uncharted territory. With a father whose death seems imminent and a mother who is in denial about her family's dysfunction, the survival of the family unit is uncertain.

Set in a conventional society in rural New Zealand, where upholding your own reputation is more important than being who you really are, this is a story about a family on the cusp of change. Facing the death of their oppressive patriarch, Jess's longing for the type of family that will accept and encourage her passions, leads her into the arms of Craig, risking her relationship with the only people who matter to her, her family. The family's ability to withstand grief and deception will be the catalyst to their survival and Jess must choose how far she is willing to go to get the family she deserves.

(ii) Development

The key achievements of my second draft was in the first act setup and the quick pacing of the second act. I also received feedback that Jess, my protagonist character, offered a lot of depth and had a strong sense of purpose. What became clear during the workshop was the work that needed to be done on the third act, where it still lacked a conclusion that felt satisfying and answered the dramatic questions that were setup in the beginning.

The ending (and its link to the ‘dramatic question’ set up at the start)

This was by far my biggest challenge, I had spent much time creating characters that felt real and relatable, as well as developing a plot line that was full of suspenseful moments, but I had not taken the time to ask myself what my characters needed most. I had set Jess up as the disturber of the peace and therefore my task for my third act beat sheet was to make sure I gave Jess dramatic actions that would continue to push the family (and the audience) to a place of no return - where it was either change and come together, or stay the same and be torn apart. For me, the first step was deciding whether I wanted the family to be together and through the feedback of my class members and going off my gut instinct after 10 months of developing these character, my decision was to keep the family together.

The arc (or transformation) of the main character/s – or their resistance to change I had made the decision that the family needed to come together therefore there needed to be enough cause in the setup to show that they were stronger together, however Jess is the only one that knows this. In my second draft, I did a lot of work setting up the relationships but what I neglected to develop was my antagonist characters, Lucy and Carol. As an exercise to better understand these characters, I created individual beat sheets for the first and second acts, based on their own emotions and actions. Lucy, I learnt, was her father’s daughter in that she did not know how to live in a world without rules and boundaries. She had taken her father’s rules for life and treated them as absolutes. Thus, she isolates herself from anyone or anything that is unpredictable and therefore has become a very fearful person. Carol on the other hand, is much more like Jess, in that as soon as the rules are removed, she becomes more spontaneous. Her resistance to change is borne out of a moral concern where Richard has been the upholder of all

moral values and without him, Carol doesn't trust in her own strength of character to decide what is best for Lucy and Jess.

While learning about both Lucy and Carol, I had an epiphany; Jess and Lucy are competing for Carol's love. All of this helped me to find new moments in the storyline where I could show how the three women, as a unit, is stronger when Richard isn't around. And stronger in the sense that they can say the things that they wouldn't otherwise say when Richard is present. When they were together, they were more likely to tell the truth and expose their weaknesses.

The action line/s (or "plot")

There were two changes in the action line that were decisions made from consideration for pace. The first was to bring forward Richard's death, so that it happened soon after Lucy discovers Jess and Craig's betrayal and therefore heightens the drama in the triangulation between Jess, Lucy and Carol. The second major change was including the funeral. The decision to end the story at the funeral was based on the key characteristics of a family drama - where plot is often based around a major family event. Like most intense family events, there is opportunity for unpredictability due to the heightened emotions. For Jess, the funeral offers a last attempt at changing Lucy, to make her understand that Richard's moral compass was not always right. It's also a moment for Carol, because in this moment, both of her daughters are broken and while Jess is the main instigator for change, Carol is the first to embrace it.

There are several key elements I plan to work on further to develop Jess, Carol and Lucy's relationship. The first is Lucy, and how she fluctuates between wanting to change, and feeling unable to. The second is the relationship change between Jess and Lucy when Richard wakes. Specifically, I would like to find a way to highlight how their dynamic changes in Richard's presence and how this has a damaging effect.

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