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Telling My Own Story in My Own World

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TELLING MY OWN STORY IN MY OWN WORLD

by
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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved By

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to all victims of sexual assault who need to be reminded that they are not alone.

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I would also like to give acknowledgment to my classmates who took part in three table-reads and offered me invaluable insight on the structure of the plot and the development of the characters.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a project based on creativity resulting in a feature-length screenplay titled *Meet Me Halfway*. The script is preceded by a process paper discussing the challenges I faced and how this process has affected me as a writer.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I always liked to play pretend with my younger sister. We acted like we had super powers and were charged with saving the world. This was my favorite past time as a kid, and I continued to do it until I was about twelve. Eventually, though, my sister and I grew up, and there came a time when we would never again play super heroes. My sister moved on to become a competitive dancer and eventually decided to attend school for exercise science, but I would say that I never quite grew up. I continued to play pretend and tells stories through my career as an actor. It was the only path in life that I felt would make me happy, but there was still a piece missing. A part of me needed to do more than just be a tool in telling the stories. I needed to tell my own tales.

I wrote my first story at five-years-old and began writing for the screen when I reached age eleven. I've written many short-films, two of which were realized through the Indie Memphis Film Festival. I'm very proud of my previous works, but I had a bigger story to tell. I felt that this one in particular would occupy significantly more than ten pages, and I proved myself correct. At 105 pages, Emilia's story has been told, and I am ecstatic to share it with the world.

WHY SEXUAL ASSAULT?

As a survivor of sexual assault myself, I wanted to reach out to men, women, and all other genders of all ages to let them know that they are not alone. The best way I could do that was to tell a bit of my story through Emilia.

I was molested by my step-father from the time I was eight until I was thirteen. Even though Emilia's perpetrator was someone her own age and mine was a parental

figure, we were both made to feel as though we were alone, trapped in our own mind and body. Despite the fact that she does not remember her experiences, she still has to carry the weight of the abuse with her just as I do. Now, this is not to say that every victim of sexual assault feels the same way. All survivor's experiences and feelings are unique, but as Emilia stems from my imagination, her feelings echo mine.

Emilia's story was by no means an easy one to tell, but it is one that needed to be shared. We have to tell these difficult stories in order to remind people that there is hope. Emilia survived and moved to retake control over her life. I created her to serve as an inspiration for people who need her. I created her so that people like myself have someone to look up to.

THE RULES OF WRITING

As stated above, I have written screenplays before. None of them were any longer than twenty pages, and I had no training on how to properly write a script. Because of this, there were many technical rules of which I was completely unaware. I already knew that there was a certain template I would be expected to follow, but I had no idea that it was so incredibly specific.

I was already aware of the concept that each page represents a minute of screen time, but I did not make the connection that every little formatting detail would tie into that. For example, numbers must be spelled out, and, generally, there can be no more than five lines to a paragraph of action.

There are also rules outside of the minute a page idea that must be followed. They are in place to ensure that scripts conform to industry standards. An example is that slug

lines must be formatted as such: “INT. EMILIA’S BEDROOM – NIGHT”. There can be absolutely no deviation from this.

Another part of writing is less of a rule and more of an implied expectation that all action must be written using active verbs like “ran” as opposed to words like “is” or “are.” An example of this can be found on page 101 where I originally wrote “Maci is on the porch.” After I learned the active verbs rule, I changed it to “Maci stands on the porch.” It is such a small, simple detail that would go unnoticed to the untrained eye, but it is necessary to create a work of a professional level.

All of these rules and more are in place so that all screenplays produced within the industry look and read the same way. Because it is uniform the fact that it is only being read and not shown does not inhibit the work of art. On the one hand, I understand this need for uniformity. It makes it easier for the work to be understood by readers without the risk of miscommunications about where the location is or which character is speaking, but on the other hand, this concept of uniformity is very counterintuitive. Writing is a form of self-expression in which the writer makes his or her own rules, yet they are confined by a set of technical expectations that they must follow in order to even be considered for opportunities in the professional world. This is extremely limiting. There are people who do not have access to education in the way that I and many others do, but they have wonderfully important stories to tell. Because of industry standards though, these writers will almost never even be remotely considered for writing positions because they do not know all of the technical aspects that go into writing a screenplay.

GETTING THROWN FOR A LOOP

Going into this project, I purposefully avoided holding expectations of what I thought the process would be like. I feel that this approach allowed me to be more open-minded in receiving criticism about my process and my work; however, in the beginning, there were a few things that came up that I was not fully prepared for.

In the past, whenever I wrote a screenplay, I did so with the intent of one day directing it. That meant that I included camera and editing instructions that are not supposed to be included in the speculative script. This is a script that is intended to either be sold or act as a representation of their skill in order jobs on specific projects like television shows or movies. Some information that should be omitted from a speculative script should be transitions like “CUT TO:” and other specific camera instructions. I am now aware that such information falls under the director’s, cinematographer’s, designer’s and editor’s jurisdiction and that there are actually different versions of each screenplay for the different phases of production. Since I have created a speculative script, I used only the technical terms expected such as slug lines. There are no editing instructions.

Perhaps what shocked me the most was the sheer amount of detail that goes into forming a well-rounded feature-length screenplay. It is not necessarily that it was more than I expected. I just had not really considered how large of a commitment it was. At times it was extremely overwhelming. For my first draft, I was really just trying to get the story on the page. My goal for the second draft was to clean it up, and turn it into a finished product. I thought I had done a fairly good job, but in reality, I had left many important questions unanswered and had many plot holes. A few of the many issues that needed to be addressed were:

- What happened between Dana and Dr. Novak that originally ended the relationship?
- Why did Elijah follow Emilia for so long if he thought she would remember and go with him?
- Since Maci is obviously not happy to be in the halfway house, why is she there?

These questions alone were pretty discouraging. On top of these were a mountain of other changes that had to be made. It actually put my entire process on hold for a period of time. I was not being sensitive to the criticisms I had received, but rather I was intimidated by the number of issues that there were. The two largest tasks that needed to be done were rewriting the details of the entire ending and completely changing the main subplot by adding a new character. I really struggled with pushing through the overwhelming feeling caused by these challenges, but I found that focusing on one thing at a time made it seem much more doable. I was able to eventually push past it and produce a work of which I am very proud.

LEVELING UP

When I began this writing journey, I knew that my skills would need some intense honing before I could create a work that was of the quality that I was aiming for. This meant that I would face numerous obstacles that would either force me to improve my writing skills or put a halt to my process.

The obstacle that was the most difficult to overcome was breaking the habit of writing in a formal style. Initially, I was taught to write very professional looking essays. That meant including no contractions, making sure that each sentence is a complete

thought with proper structure, ensuring that verb tense remains consistent throughout the work, avoiding questions, using no slang, etc. For the sake of writing this screenplay, I needed to abandon that way of writing, especially when forming the dialogue.

In my first and even second drafts, every character spoke with almost the exact same speech pattern. They rarely used contractions, spoke in grammatically correct sentences, and used completely coherent thoughts to express themselves. This is highly unrealistic, as everyone has their own unique way of speaking. Everyone comes from a different background. Everyone receives a different level of education. Everyone comes from a different region where they hear particular colloquialisms. Even people's families will have words and phrases that are specific to them. All of these factors influence how an individual speaks. When writing the dialogue for each of my characters, I failed to take all of this into account. Cason is a character where this problem really reared its head. In his monologue that begins on page 44, he offers information about his past to Emilia. This provides the audience with the information that Cason came from a pretty harsh upbringing, and while it is not explicitly said, it can be inferred that he did not have the means to obtain a college education. This lowers the likelihood that he would have the proper speech pattern that I had given him. In the second draft, Cason talks about his mother dying on page 35 and 36. He states "A few months ago, I was skimming through a newspaper. There was her name and picture in the obituary section. She was found having died of an overdose with that man." The words "skimming" and "having died" are a bit too formal for what Cason would actually say. It can be seen on page 45 in my third draft that he now says "I found out that she died of an overdose a few months ago. Her and that man." This is much less wordy and closer to how a person in the real world

would express this thought. After three different times of reading through the entire script looking for instances like these, I practically rewrote almost all of the dialogue for Cason, Noah, and Maci. Mrs. Beatrice, Emilia, Dr. Novak, and Dana only needed some minor adjustments.

Elijah's dialogue was another challenge all on its own. There is not a single line of his that went without change. Up until the third draft, Elijah spoke in an elevated, poetically evil pattern that did not align with the world I had created. He sounded too planned and not natural enough. He would use phrases like "my sweet" and "my dear Emilia" that were jarring and took the readers out of the story. After much experimentation, I found the middle ground that I was searching for. I was able to make Elijah fit within the world I had built while still being the monster I originally intended him to be.

Upbringings and levels of education are not the only aspects of life that affect people's speech. Physical circumstances are a very large factor in how a person speaks. A person who has been sitting on the couch for an hour will probably speak in a calm way while someone who just ran a marathon will likely will likely have a short and choppy way of speaking. There are a few instances in the screenplay in which Cason and Emilia are physically assaulted by Elijah. Originally, the abuse that these characters suffered did not have a large affect on how they spoke. They were still using complete sentences and did not appear to be even out of breath; however, someone who had just been beaten, especially to the degree that Elijah beats Cason on page 90 and 91, would not be speaking coherently. The adjustments that needed to be made to address this issue were fairly easy.

I simply added ellipses to represent pauses, parentheticals to give detail as to how the line should be read, and stuttering. This can be seen in the example below.

BEFORE

Cason

I was walking home and this guy pulled me into an alleyway. I have no clue who he is. He said I made a move on his girl.

AFTER

Cason

(breathy)

I was walking... home and this guy pulled me into... an alleyway. I have no clue... who... who he is. He said I made a move on his girl.

Even though this work is still at a stage where the dialogue remains words on a page, in the second version it is easier to picture the pain that Cason was feeling and how much of a struggle it is to get those words out.

These three different tasks regarding the dialogue of the screenplay came together to form the biggest challenge that I faced during the whole writing process. I do not think that I perfectly conquered these challenges. I am sure that in regards to making voices more unique and specific there will always be room for improvement. Overall, though, I do feel that I was successful in making the necessary adjustments to make the final

project more realistic. In doing so, I also feel that I forced myself to be more creative in constructing dialogue and have become a better writer for it.

While the dialogue was the largest challenge that I tackled, it was not the only one. In the first and second draft, the pacing of the movie was inconsistent throughout the work. There were moments when it really was not moving at all—like when Emilia first started working at the sub shop. There were moments where the pace was rushed—like everything after Elijah had made his first official appearance. I was told by multiple readers that the ending was rushed and had been written as though I was ready to get it over with. After this was brought to my attention, I gave the work a careful read through, and I could clearly see what they meant. The resolution I had created for Cason and Emilia was too short, Elijah’s resolution was anticlimactic as it did not show much action, and the resolution between Dana and Dr. Novak was practically nonexistent. Clearly, I had a lot of work to do.

In order to solve the issue with Cason and Emilia’s resolution, I extended it over a few different scenes instead of having it all crammed into a few short pages. I completely restructured Elijah’s resolution. Instead of putting it in a montage format, I showed him being arrested and taken away by the police. I also have Emilia and Officer Liza discuss Emilia’s choice to prosecute Elijah for everything he has done. This is based on the idea of planting information for the audience and having it pay off at some point during the script. When this idea is implemented, it often results in a more satisfying ending than if too many questions are left unanswered.

The solution for fixing the resolution between Dana and Dr. Novak was actually to rewrite the entire subplot. This is where I found my next challenge. From the time that

I created these two characters, I wanted them to be made for each other. Unfortunately, I let this cloud my judgement. I never explained what happened that caused them to break up in the first place, and I had them get back together with no change within the relationship. There was no resistance between them at all, so in order to give them a solid resolution, I had to give them a problem to resolve. This meant creating a balance of hope and fear for the readers to experience.

In order to create more fear that the two would never find their way back to each other, I added a new character named “Waylen.” As Dana’s current boyfriend, he would serve as a character who could potentially interfere with Dana and Dr. Novak from reuniting. He offers Dana safety and comfort when she is stressed but, like every other character in this screenplay, he is imperfect. He reacts very defensively when Dana mentions potentially still having feelings for Dr. Novak. He makes the choice to end the relationship which really hurts Dana. This is not a way of forcing her back into Dr. Novak’s arms. On the contrary, she is extremely hurt and is reminded of how Dr. Novak kicked her out of their house. There is also a moment when Dr. Novak tries to shut her out again as well. This makes her question whether she even wants to be in a relationship at this point in her life or not. These new obstacles provide the audience with much more fear than when the couple just had awkward silences and longing glances.

While dialogue and the balance of hope and fear were particularly difficult for me to master, the challenge of the largest scale was making sure that the screenplay was relying more on action than on dialogue to push the plot forward. This expectation actually forced me to restructure most of the screenplay from the original draft. In the earlier drafts, much of the screenplay was written in a way that closely resembled a stage

play. The latter is often limited by their budget and how much they can realistically portray. For example, showing a full-scale battle in an intense war on stage is extremely challenging and expensive if not completely impossible. Because of this, they often have characters tell what happened as opposed to showing it. With the development of CGI, though, it is entirely possible for a film to do. There were many instances during my screenplay when I used more of the stage play method of writing. The audience was told what happened as opposed to being shown.

There were many minor and a few major changes that needed to be made in order to fix this. An example of a minor change is when Mrs. Beatrice made conversation to Dr. Novak about how she was shocked that they had to sedate Emilia to get her x-rays. With the new structure, the readers actually see the sedation happen. The largest change that had to be made in this regard was showing Noah actually die. In trying to leave the audience guessing who the bullet hit, I decided not to show Noah dying. Instead, I did the reveal in a montage as the paramedics zipped him into a body bag. This resulted in a fairly anticlimactic ending and was not nearly as cathartic as I had hoped. In light of this, I rewrote the ending to show Noah dying in Dana's arms. This is one of the most dramatic changes that my screenplay went through, but these little details make it a better work overall.

Not all of the challenges I faced were huge conceptual problems like the ones mentioned above. There were also some minor issues that still forced me to be creative but did not warrant making huge changes to the work as a whole. One of these was finding creative and interesting ways to convey the passage of time. I had originally used phrases on the screen such as "Two weeks later" and characters sleeping. This was

adequate, but I knew that I could do better. I settled on having Noah intermittently mark off a calendar, having Emilia's wounds heal, and showing time lapses as night turns to day and clock hands move. Finding these solutions was not as time consuming as the conceptual changes that I needed to make, but I was forced to think outside of the box.

These challenges proved to be frustrating at times, but they forced me to be more creative and expand my writing skills. I have learned from them and will keep the solutions I created in my arsenal of tools as I move forward as a writer.

BEYOND THE FINISH LINE

I did learn many specific rules and tactics of writing during this process, but this project was about more than just learning how to write a good screenplay. The idea was also to learn about who I am as a writer. While I still have a lot of exploring to do, this process has been a huge launching point that I am so glad I committed to. There were a few invaluable discoveries that I made on this journey. The first of which is the fact that I should only work on one major writing project at a time. Trying to find balance between my other school assignments and my thesis was extremely challenging. There is one main contributor to this. I am the type of person who feels compelled to put everything I have into everything I do. This results in sub-par time management skills which then leads to stressful, sleepless nights and even some occasional tears. While I am constantly trying to improve my time management skills and find a balance to life, I do not want to have to sacrifice the time I can dedicate to the projects that I love, so moving forward, I intend to focus on a single piece of work at a time.

This does not mean that I intend to work nonstop on a project. Another extremely important lesson that I learned on this project is that stepping away from a project can be necessary. Over the two-year course of writing this screenplay, there were times when I experienced intense burn out. Had I tried to push through it without taking a break, the process may have been shorter, but the end product would probably be of a much lower quality. I would much rather take my time creating a valuable piece of art instead of just pushing out meaningless words on a paper.

These two discoveries regarding how I interact with the writing process will ultimately result in me producing works at a slower rate than many of my peers. It may even slow me down enough that I will sometimes feel discouraged. This was something that I definitely experienced during this process. Pushing past this though will result in me successfully creating impressive and meaningful works of art.

Another very important aspect of writing that I learned was that writing actually has to be a team effort. One of my weaknesses is being unable to take a step back from my work to see larger issues that may be hindering the quality of my work. This meant I needed to gather other people's thoughts on my work. To achieve this, I had a total of two table reads where I gathered my peers, had them read for particular characters, and had them give me feedback. This was integral to the process as it brought in multiple new opinions of people that were part of my targeted audience. They also were not professionals, so they tended to notice things that a regular audience would. I had to take into account everything they said and decide which notes to implement and how to do so. My advisor, Alan Arrivé, was another very important team member. He gave me constructive criticism that was difficult to hear at times but bettered me as a writer and

the screenplay as a work of art. Even without the help of these people, I would still be several drafts in, but the work would more than likely be much weaker than what it is now.

While every discovery that I made during this journey is valuable, there is one that triumphs over them all. This one in particular really determines my career path as a writer. Many people who serve as writers in this industry write scripts and sell them for other people to direct. I really do not think that is the path I will take. With every script I have ever written, including this one, I write with the intent to eventually direct. I have very specific ideas about how the story should be told, what shots should look like, what directions actors should take with each character, and other important elements that go into making words on a page appear on a screen. I honestly think I would be unable to relinquish control of something that I worked so hard on to someone else. Maybe this view will change with time or as opportunities appear, but that is where I stand as of now.

THE NEXT STEP

Writing is something that I have always loved to do. This project has only solidified that fact about myself. There were some moments where I did not think I would be able to get it done, but those fears proved to be baseless. I am honored to be the person telling Emilia's story, and getting to know her and the others has been a wonderful experience.

All of this begs a pretty large question: what is my next step regarding my career as a writer? As of yet, I do not have a next project in mind, but when the character is

ready for their story to be told, I will be ready. I now have enough tools at my disposal that I can do them justice.

As far as this project goes, it is a very common idea among artists that a work is never complete. This is especially true in regards to scripts. There is never a finished product, just a last draft. There will always be something that the creator wants to improve upon. I will say that I am extremely ecstatic with where *Meet Me Halfway* is now and am proud to call this work my own. I am grateful about everything that I have learned; however, that in no way means that I am finished with it. I probably will not make any more major changes that alter the story line, but I intend to one day see the script realized into a film. I am well aware that this is ambitious and at a minimum several years down the line, but that I can be patient. If there is anything that I have learned it is that taking my time can lead to amazing accomplishments, and Emilia and her friends deserve something amazing.

APPENDIX A