

THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

Motivational short stories to help you live
a life worth watching!



STARRING: YOU!



WINNER
BEST PICTURE



WINNER
BEST DIRECTOR



WINNER
BEST ACTOR /
ACTRESS

DIRECTED BY **YOU**

EDITOR **YOU** GRAPHIC DESIGNER **YOU** KEY GRIP BY **YOU** GAFFER BY **YOU** CASTING BY **YOU**
PRODUCTION BY **YOU** WRITTEN BY **YOU** STEADYCAM BY **YOU** AUDIO CREW **YOU** CAMERA CREW **YOU**

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First Edition

THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

Motivational short stories to help you live a life
worth watching!

BY: EUGENE OWENS

**To my wife Jennifer...there are an
impossibly long list of things that
could be said here that people
likely wouldn't read, so I'll just sum
it all up in two words...thank you.**

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Why am I writing this?

With a billion choices for my own movie...why would I take months out of my life to write something that has maybe a 1% chance of becoming a success?

The short answer: because I had to.

Something, somewhere deep down wouldn't let go, like a dog locked onto a frisbee, its teeth boring holes in the plastic, and finally I was forced to succumb to its wishes.

This concept of my life being a movie of my own making became so real to me that I could see the elements of it everywhere I looked.

I could see the power that I held by putting it on paper.

The hero, villain, setting, plot, costumes, lighting, and sound.

All the elements were there in my daily life, and it made me think long and hard about the movie I had starred in up until this point, and what I wanted the rest of the film to look like.

This notion has been incredibly powerful for me as I search for where I belong and where I am best suited in the world.

It hit me that I didn't need to ask anybody for it.

I didn't need to talk to anybody about it.

I could just do it, and I could start right then and there.

That kind of power is both freeing and intoxicating.

It's also terrifying because you can no longer make excuses once you understand it.

You can no longer say something is just the way that it is.

If I showed you where I was as a person when I started this book, you wouldn't believe that it was the same guy typing this final page. As a pessimist for the majority of my life, my negativity had all but destroyed me. I kept thinking that the more time I had sober (eighteen years as of publication), the more life owed me for all that time spent without my kryptonite.

It didn't, because it didn't owe me anything.

Zero.

If I wanted it, I had to earn it.

It forced me to work harder.

Get up earlier and stay up later.

It forced me to confront the things holding me back and take actionable steps to try to get better. I hope this book finds those of you whose movie is not what you hoped you'd be watching.

I hope you see the power you have in every scene, and I hope you find inspiration in the stories that follow.

Maybe you are spurred on to new heights at your job and become the next VP at your company.

Maybe you walk in, quit your job, and go play acoustic guitar at pool bars up and down the East Coast for the summer.

Maybe you finally commit to the landscaping business you've

been dabbling in, excited to finally be the boss.

Or maybe you just go for a walk, see beautiful roses blooming in someone's yard, and ask them if you can smell them. Not someone you know, someone totally random, so it's at least funny and awkward for both of you.

All I really want for you is to understand that every scene matters.

They all play a role.

Each and every one. EMS

INTRODUCTION

Crossroads.

Fork.

Crux.

Pivot.

Every day 8 billion people face choices about how to move forward with their lives.

Some are small and insignificant.

Jeans or sweats.

Toast or bagel.

Some are large.

To marry or not to marry.

To take the job offer or stay put.

And some are life and death.

To keep drinking or quit.

To fight depression or give in.

If we were to press pause on our lives and have the luxury of a rewind button, we would be able to watch, in crystal clear color, thousands of times in our lives when we stood with two or more doors in front of us to walk through...and we damn sure wouldn't pat ourselves on the back for every choice we ended up making in the past either.

This book is about those choices, those moments where our lives can go one way or another. It's about those moments where you can run or dig in your heels.

It's about those times when you can keep the status quo or you can take a leap into the great unknown.

In every one of the stories that follow, you the reader are dropped into that person's life right at that choice, right when they have a decision to make about how to move forward.

They have the choice to rewrite their script, change the lighting, or negotiate a better deal.

They have the opportunity to make their movie something special...to make it something that people will line up around the block to watch!



THE MOVIE

You're in a movie right now.

Welcome to the set!

It's the _____ show (your name here).

You're here to...well, to do it all.

Today, we are in beautiful _____ (wherever you're at now).

or

Today we are in the worst city in the world, _____ (let's say you're not crazy about where you are in life).

And you're the director.

Here's your chair.

By the way, you're also the producer, the star, the villain, and the head writer.

You're the whole production.

Here's your clapperboard (it's the thing that snaps close when you're ready to yell action).

YOU ARE EVERY PERSON ON THAT CREW, BECAUSE THIS MOVIE IS YOUR LIFE.

You're even the gaffer.

That person's job is to light the scene for the director of photography.

You're providing the electricity, shining your lights on what you

want the camera to focus on.

This book is all about helping you understand that you are in charge of every element of your own production. While you can't control variables like car accidents, diseases, or other unpleasant surprises that life serves up, you can always rewrite your approach to how you handle them in the movie.

At any point in time, if you are unhappy with how things are going, you can simply yell "CUT!" or "ACTION!" and make a change in the scene.

Is addiction beating you down every day?

"CUT!"

Go to treatment, go to a meeting, talk to someone sober online, and get some advice.

Does depression have its talons stuck deep into your brain?

"CUT!"

Watch something positive on YouTube or call someone for therapy.

Are you tired of the soul-sucking screen you sit in front of every day?

"ACTION!"

Take a class, work on your dream project.

People will argue it's more complex than that.

There are years of indoctrinated beliefs to grind through and life experiences that don't allow for such a simple solution.

I call B.S. on all of that, and all of the excuses that people make along with it.

I am the Michael Jordan of making excuses.

I am the Tom Brady of procrastination.

I am the Kelly Slater of self-doubt.

I can't make any money at this.

I'm not smart enough.

It's too scary.

I'm not good enough.

I'm not connected enough.

And the list can go on to infinity.

The stories that follow are lives that are being lived full of fear, regret, and excuses.

But every one of the people in them can make a new choice.

They can create a better future, and the first step is the knowledge that they are in total control.

By the way...I am on the same journey as you and them.

Sick and tired of being sick and tired, I yelled CUT! and started to type this book.



There was nowhere to hide from the sun when you were working on a roof.

It was hot...melt your shoes hot.

And it wasn't even noon yet.

Jim hammered the shingles, one after another, flecks of asphalt grating against his skin, his fingers trying to deftly manage a hammer and nails without putting the latter through his skin.

Day three on the job.

Day seven since he got out.

Day ninety-seven without a drink.

Day ninety-seven without a drug.

The crew of guys he was with were okay.

A lot of them had the same story as him.

Eight of the ten had done time for a wide range of stuff, but all could work well with their hands and were willing to suffer through Dante's Inferno in the sky for cash to take home at the end of the day.

He didn't have any family to go to; his parents, a decade previous, had sent him out the door and told him never to come back.

Both of his ex-wives wouldn't speak to him.

No kids.

This time, it had been another DUI.

A few months in, and then he was thrust back out into a world that didn't want him. His entire life savings, totaling a whopping \$1247, were tucked in a paper bag under the couch at his friend Evan's apartment that he currently called home.

Evan wasn't any better off than him; he was just as much of a screw-up, but he had been off the booze and drugs for a year now, and something was starting to shift for him.

He had let Jim stay at the apartment but told him he couldn't bring any of that stuff near there.

Jim wiped the sweat from his brow, his face red from the exertion. His blonde hair had grown fearless while locked up and had no discernible shape or pattern. The cornbread-colored facial hair was patchy and looked as if he hadn't tried to even it out in months.

Which, of course, he hadn't.

He looked over at Rico, who hammered nails with the enthusiasm and tenacity of an N.F.L. player hitting a tackling dummy.

It was a sport to him.

The guy was absolutely amazing.

Sweaty, exhausting, repetitive work, but every day, with a smile.

It was infuriating.

The foreman, a small man built like a silverback gorilla with all upper body strength, yelled up to the crew that it was time to take a break, his voice pitched like he had a severe blockage in

his sinuses.

The company was cautious about not overworking guys in the sun, not so much for their safety but more out of a fear of personal injury attorneys and a dreaded workers' comp suit.

No matter the reason.

He would take his break.

No complaints.

He walked back to the truck and grabbed the plastic bag with the stuff he had brought: a towel, two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and a bag of nacho cheese chips.

That's what they said on the package: NACHO CHEESE-FLAVORED CHIPS.

Nothing name-brand for him.

He took a bite of the sandwich and popped open a can of grocery store cola.

COLA-FLAVORED DRINK.

He sat under the tree in the yard and cursed under his breath.

The homeowner pulled up to the house in his new BMW, a sleek-looking SUV with custom wheels on it to match the matte blue paint.

Mr. Big Shot walked around and handed everyone \$50, telling them thank you for enduring the heat to get the job done.

When he got to Jim, the man held out his hand to shake Jim's and then planted the fifty in it.

"Thanks for everything today. I know it's brutal up there."

"Thanks, you get used to it," Jim grumbled.

The man walked away, his head high, his shoulders pulled back, a posture Jim hadn't been in for as long as he could remember.

Confidence, positivity.

The man exuded it.

Jim sat back down under the shade of the tree and huffed.

He'd have a good attitude too if he had that guy's money.

Where would you even start?

Certainly not up on that roof. Not with \$1247. Not living on someone's couch.

THE EDITING ROOM

I'm embarrassed to say, more than any story in this book, Jim is very much like me, and I would guess he's like a lot of you reading this.

I'm also proud to tell you that because of the hard work I've put in, I don't think like Jim anymore.

Not all the time like I used to, anyway.

Everyone is going to have some negativity at some point, something that's irritating or distasteful to them.

It's the steady beat of negativity, negativity, negativity, spewing out like toxic waste that is the real cancer eating away at billions of people around the planet today.

I don't have X.

So and so has Y.

Billy's there and I'm here.

Tammy got this and I have that.

I opened the book with CUT because, more than any other chapter, it's the idea you need to apply right now to your life.

_____ happened to me, and now I can't...CUT!

_____ did this to me, and now I can't...CUT!

CUT!

Scream it from the mountainside.

Scream it in your backyard.

Would you watch a movie where the entire film was the person complaining about what was missing from their lives?

I watched that movie for more years than I'm comfortable saying here. I lived it.

On camera, complaining, moaning, groaning.

It sucked.

It's not about telling someone that there are people that have it

worse.

That's probably the worst response to negativity in the world.

So what if other people have it worse?

They aren't me and aren't going through my problem!

It's not about sugarcoating it either.

There are real problems, painful ones that can upend our lives. There are small ones that poke at us, constantly reminding us that they're there.

The change in mindset is not about downplaying them, it's about understanding that a continued dark and stormy outlook on them will NOT help you find a solution to them.

And they will continue.

Solutions are just problems that have grown up and gotten their act together.

Stop negativity in its tracks.

Yell CUT! Now!



ACTION

“That’s a great-looking stroke!” Amanda yelled to Summer, who moved so swiftly through the pool, it would have been easy to mistake her for a dolphin, especially in her slate gray one-piece.

Summer pulled the goggles over her cap and smiled at her coach, her eyes bright with energy and clearly pleased with her time.

Amanda looked at Johanna in the next lane over, who had finished several seconds behind Summer.

Johanna was angry and splashed the water in front of her, clearly displeased with being second fiddle again.

Amanda kneeled down in front of her and held her thumb and forefinger an inch apart from each other.

“You’re this close, Johanna. There’s a gear missing. When you find it, look out world.”

This seemed to satiate Johanna and she jumped out of the pool and headed for the hot tub, high-fiving her coach on the way past.

Swimming was in Amanda’s blood.

Her parents had both been Olympians.

3:30 was her usual wake-up time, even without an alarm, almost as if she had been pre-programmed with it before she joined the outside world.

In twenty-seven years, she’d missed less than a dozen days.

She never achieved the type of competitive success that her parents had, but it never bothered her; she simply found the next best thing, which was to coach others. She loved to get kids excited about swimming and keep them excited all the way through their college years.

But she was starting to grow tired of working under managers and athletic directors, who, under their layers of bureaucracy, had stripped away a lot of the fun that came with what she loved to do most.

So she sat in front of the spreadsheet and pored over the numbers.

The town she lived in now, a small college town, was starting to boom with families who stayed after graduation, setting up their lives in a place where they could freeze a part of their youth.

With that growth came opportunity, and one had found its way to her door just a few weeks earlier.

A former scuba diving center was for sale.

Amanda drove past it every day on her way to the pool. She had long dreamed of having her own swim school, a place that was hers, and doing nothing every day but talking about her favorite topic in the world.

Her parents could get her halfway there, but the thought of the risk kept her up at night.

What if she lost their money?

What if the school didn't work?

What if she had miscalculated the number of potential

customers and memberships?

What if a competitor opened up in town?

The what-ifs were stacking up so high she couldn't see over them anymore.

They towered in her dreams...skyscrapers of fear and doubt.

No one would think less of her if she continued doing what she was doing.

It wasn't like she needed to share this dream with everybody.

She toggled the arrows on the keyboard, indiscriminately moving the highlighted cell around the spreadsheet, trying to make sense of the numbers.

They line up...but.

But...

She heard her phone ring and saw it was her mother.

"Hey Mom, what's up?"

"Hi honey, I hadn't heard from you about the pool. Are we going to look at it today? The agent can meet us at five. She said there are two other groups touring it today too. If you want to do it, you're going to have to decide fast."

Her eyes cut back to the spreadsheet. The numbers worked.

They worked.

No buts.

"I'll be there."

THE EDITING ROOM

Action.

Without it, the movie can't get underway.

The actors can't act. The cameraman has nothing to film. The sound guy has nothing to record. By its very nature the word wants to do something. It wants to get moving. It doesn't want to stand still.

Yet one of the biggest problems we face as a society is a failure to take action!

I'd like to be the first to volunteer as one of the leading culprits.

I'm a strategic thinker by nature.

I weigh out variables, try to connect the pieces, and understand where problems might arise. I do this to my detriment on nearly every project I work on. There's a fine line between analyzing something and outright rejecting actually beginning the process or activity. I am ashamed to say that I am in the latter category more often than not.

We will never know the optimal moment to take action.

It's simply incalculable.

There are millions of things that could go wrong, stuff we couldn't even dream up that could derail us at any second.

This means that the optimal time to start anything is right now.

People who bought properties in the depths of the financial crisis made tremendous sums of money because, as the old axiom from Warren Buffett goes:

“Be fearful when others are greedy, and greedy when others are fearful.”

By this accounting, there's no wrong time to begin.

You can get burned coming in too late to something as easily as you can get burned coming in too early.

There will be 0% surety in anything, whether it is relationships, jobs, new businesses, or pursuing a far-flung dream that seems impossible and unlikely to be achieved.

As I said at the beginning of the book, when I got sick and tired of being sick and tired, and I simply couldn't listen to myself complain about my current scenario any longer, I started writing this.

I don't know if this is right or wrong because I have yet to see the whole movie play out.

But I started, and that's all that matters at the end of the day.

When you get that itch, it's your brain telling you that it likes something and wants to be fed more of it.

That itch, that voice, is something deep inside you calling out, screaming at you at the top of its lungs to pursue something that moves you.

The world has enough people who are faking their way through it.

The world has enough people who played it safe.

The world has an overabundance of people who wish they would have done something differently or taken a risk

they didn't take, in favor of a still insecure and unknown future. When we ignore the little voice in our heads and hearts, we do so at great personal peril.

People think the risk of pursuing a wild dream is actually in the act itself, but the real risk lies in not pursuing it.

That one will stalk you selectively throughout your life, especially in periods of personal turmoil, reminding you of what you could've possibly been had you pursued that "harebrained scheme."



THE SCRIPT

The course catalog for next year came out on a sunny Friday afternoon, the kind of weather that made you want to do anything except sit inside and look at a course catalog.

All 211 pages of it.

211 pages of opportunity.

If you wanted to learn Japanese, you could do that.

If you wanted to learn physics, you could certainly try to do that.

A world of knowledge from the best and brightest minds in each field available with a simple registration.

And here she was, stuck in one section at the front of the book.

Pre-med.

Year 2.

Amber Carson had been pre-ordained to be a doctor, the same way some people were destined to be movie stars, singers, or athletes because of who their parents were.

Amber's parents were surgeons.

Her grandfather was a surgeon.

Her grandmother was a nurse.

Her brother and sister were rising stars in the new world of AI and robotics in medicine. So, there was never much question about what she would do with her life.

The day she got accepted to her parent's alma mater was the happiest day of their lives.

They were three for three with their children.

The future of the field would still run through the Carson clan.

Amber stared at the pages and tried to focus on the words, but all she could hear was people shouting and having fun outside the windows, enjoying the beautiful day on campus.

She put the book on the table and walked to the refrigerator for a snack. An apple landed in her sight, but she looked one shelf down and saw a cupcake from Marissa's birthday last night. A raspberry iced tea was in the door, and she grabbed it for good measure.

She took the indulgences out and sat back at the table, her eyes trying to focus on the choices in front of her.

Organic chemistry.

Immunology.

She took a long sip of the tea, then made half the cupcake disappear in two aggressive bites.

Genetics.

Physics.

Ethics.

For laughs, she flipped to the middle of the book, closed her eyes, and picked a point on the page.

Expressionism.

Okay, maybe the universe didn't know her as well as she thought it did.

She flipped through the pages toward the back and tried the "pick any old spot" trick again.

Introduction to Baking.

Okay then, we're getting warmer.

She had watched cooking shows with her mother since she was a little girl. It was their guilty pleasure at night, and on the weekends she would help her father man the grill for family barbecues. He would lift her up and let her flip the meat or check the temperature, and when she got old enough, use the big knife to chop or slice the finished product.

A chef.

She laughed out loud and finished her tea.

A chef.

She was a doctor, though.

She was always going to be a doctor.

But...Chef Carson.

Ooooh.

The alliteration hugged her tongue like a long-lost friend.

Chef Carson.

Then, as soon as the high had rocketed through her, she came crashing back to earth.

Doctor Carson.

Doctor Carson.

That's what it had always been.

That's what it was always going to be.

THE EDITING ROOM

If you are reading this, how many scripts have you followed in your life?

How many times have you been an actor whose only job was to shut up and memorize their lines?

No improvisation necessary.

I'd bet just about anything that almost everyone reading this has been there.

Something pre-ordained.

Something penciled in by the universe.

Into college with a script you didn't pen.

Into life with a script you didn't sign on for.

If you wrote it differently, right now, what would the main character do?

If you took out your keyboard and pressed the keys with a renewed vigor that can only come from the lightning strike of inspiration, what would that scene look like when the hero starts their quest?

If you're reading this from a place you don't recognize...a place you don't want to be...what would the "aha moment" look like to free you again?

I never had this moment, never had something that I was "supposed to be."

My parents were incredibly open (likely overly so) about what I wanted to be.

I had some lofty ambitions, to say the least, but my parents never made me feel ridiculous for dreaming them.

And so, I dreamt.

With no meat behind them...daydreams without direction.

Sure, those are fun to think of, but if you don't put anything behind them, then they are useless.

For me, the challenge has always been the actual crafting of the script, not just the rewrites of it.

An overabundance of possibility, leading to a wicked bout of analysis paralysis, crippling the person into the easiest possible decision in front of them.

I can make the character go anywhere in the world and do damn near anything, and time and time again, I choose the simplest default for them?

Who's watching that movie?

There is a script waiting to be written or rewritten for each of us, and the best part is that it can be anything, and we can start at any time.

I started mine when I started my first book.

What are you going to do to start a new script today?



THE NEGOTIATION

Gabe looked at his bank account and sighed.

That can't be right, can it?

He looked again.

Nope, still there.

Or, maybe better to say, still not there.

His guitar sat in the corner of the van, and he stared at it, the case covered in stickers that were warped and faded from so many shows.

Salt Lake City.

Boston.

D.C.

He smiled at the city names.

D.C. was an incredible show, the small crowd belting his songs back at him, the energy feeding him as he attacked the strings.

He felt like a king that night and could still feel everything about it permeate his soul. He was almost something, so close to the finish line he could taste it, but here he was still living on four wheels, crisscrossing Walmart parking lots and campsites when he could splurge.

His friends and family had started to drop hints that they thought the fun was over, that the future needed security.

Look at David.

Look at Kyla.

He knew people that made it...but they got lucky. Didn't they?

They, they, they.

What about me, me, me?

Why couldn't he just focus on his own problems?

Why couldn't he stop comparing himself to others?

Austin.

Jacksonville.

Savannah.

His mind raced against him, pacing faster than he could.

He reached back into the van, took the guitar out, and plucked a few strings.

Curling his fingers around the neck, he strummed A, then G, then C.

He sang a few words.

His throat felt hoarse and gravelly.

He cleared it and tried again, slamming the strings harder this time, anger running through the bronze.

Oh man, that feels good!

A shiver shot up his spine, and he felt goosebumps roll up his arms.

He knew he had something.

He knew that somewhere inside him was a superhero waiting to burst out of the phone booth.

But what would future Gabe think of having the audacity to demand the ridiculous?

How many more shows were there before the “big break?”

Would 65-year-old Gabe forgive him for all these years on the road, chasing, failing to store away nuts for the long winter ahead?

No, of course, he wouldn’t.

He would say where’s my 401K, my IRA.

He would demand receipts and proof of purchase.

Future Gabe needed these things negotiated for him now.

The weather outside was perfect, 73-degree SoCal, a slice of heaven on earth. Tonight’s show was in West Hollywood.

Glitz and glamour for some, dive bars for others.

But he couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe the right person would be there tonight.

Maybe some executive would go slumming to “feel the city”, and they would be three vodka tonics deep and hear his voice. The heavens would open, and they would rush to him after the set with a fresh contract, millions of dollars ready to be deployed, and an apartment that the studio kept for its new talent.

No more van.

No more campsites.

Real showers.

Real kitchens.

The dream.

So Gabe put his guitar back in the case and walked in the back door of the club.

THE EDITING ROOM

“Don’t quit your day job.”

“Don’t be a fool; save up a little more.”

“You’ll thank yourself down the road.”

While you were reading this, time slipped away.

It’s not coming back.

Here’s your gentle reminder from the first chapter.

The world possesses no obligation to give you what you want.

The kind-hearted people who want the best for you are trying to protect you from the cruelty of the jungle.

They want to negotiate on your behalf.

Your parents, spouse, family, and friends want to be the mediators in your negotiation with life.

And they mean the very best they could.

Their intentions are pure as virgin snow.

But sometimes you have to negotiate your own deal.

No agent.

No manager.

You.

In the trenches.

Taking fire.

You are responsible for your negotiation with life.

When you go in and demand what you want, what you're owed, what your true value is, life will come to you.

It ALWAYS bends to the person who doesn't take less than they are owed.

So tell it that you have no interest in being anyone else.

Tell life that you're worth something.

Tell life that you demand the good stuff, the great stuff, the exceptional, the grandiose, the unreasonable!

Tell life that's the deal, and it is non-negotiable.



THE DIRECTOR

Derrick could still taste 11:57 p.m. on his lips.

It tasted like it had tasted for the last two decades, and there was a big part of him that thought today's decision was rash.

Of course, it would be that part of him that had that opinion.

No one ever wanted to be cast aside for good.

A break...just a break was all that was needed.

It was talking to him, like an old friend giving advice. It wanted to stay. It was willing to bargain. It would take it easier on him. It wouldn't push so hard like it had in the past, where it needed all of the attention.

No, it was comfortable to sit on the sidelines for a while.

But Derrick didn't want to hear it anymore.

He wanted to stamp 11:57 p.m. on March 1st on his soul.

He wanted March 2nd to be a fresh start.

He grabbed the notepad and a pen and started jotting down thoughts like he was possessed.

Something had a hold of him, something that he couldn't pin down. He didn't know where it came from, but words rolled out onto the page without thought, like they were being passed through some sort of cosmic conduit from the ether onto the paper.

He wrote down everything.

Good stuff, bad stuff, and really bad stuff.

When he was done, he felt exhausted and sick to his stomach.

To write it down made it real.

It made him aware, and it hurt.

He couldn't bring himself to read the pages right away, they were simply too painful, so he shut the notebook and put it on the counter, then walked into the kitchen to grab a drink.

The first sip of his new life.

Orange juice sans anything.

Orange juice free of mayhem just like the citrus farmers intended.

He felt empowered by the tart fruit, like the C in Vitamin C stood for Courage.

He passed the first test.

Unafraid now, Derrick walked back to the notebook and opened it.

He started to read, and tears fell down his cheeks.

A horrible father.

A terrible husband.

A lackluster friend.

Yet, somehow, knowing it made him feel better.

There was something to apologize for, and there was something to get better at.

There was a fresh place to start from.

He looked outside the window at the snow falling past the glow of the porch lights, and he felt his breath slow. The snow felt clean, and he watched the final traces of the grass disappear before his eyes, the world now a canvas of white in his backyard. The chill of the winter air pressed against the glass, and he shivered standing next to it.

When he pictured what this day would look like (if it ever came), he never thought about the weather.

Oddly, it wasn't a detail that stuck.

He pictured something more triumphant. He pictured a scene where he smashed all the bottles in rage, he pictured a scene where he screamed to the heavens above that he was done.

It would be cinematic and bold.

The weather was never relevant, but he didn't know if he could've scripted it any better.

The snow made him feel safe, like a cold, white blanket was being pulled over him. Two inches, with thirteen more on the way. There was nothing in the house to tempt him, and it felt like the universe's way of telling him to take this first day for himself and lay low. It felt like a day to stare hard into the mirror and be grateful that there was still a person to stare back at.

It felt like a day to be reborn.

Relationships to rebuild.

Debts to pay.

Work to be done.

And on the other side...the man he was always supposed to be.

THE EDITING ROOM

LIVES OF QUIET DESPERATION...the new American dream.

How many people are suffering right now with things that no one else knows about?

It's not a trick question.

The answer is everyone.

When we look at others in the grocery store, at work, or at school, we don't get the luxury of seeing inside their heads.

We don't get the "behind the scenes" look until much later in the person's movie, so people usually suffer in silence.

We hear the often-recited line, "I never knew _____ was going through that. He/she seemed so happy."

That's because their war is being fought with a one-person army.

It's important to remember that as the director of your film, you're always capable of starting over.

As the director, you can bring in a supporting cast to help you. You can find others who are struggling with what you are and lean on them for help. All you have to do is put them in your film, and you don't have to fight your battles alone anymore.

You can dictate what happens next.

You're the boss.

It doesn't have to be a one-person show.

A one-act play.

You're in complete control.

You can stop the madness, the desperation, and the fear.

You're the director.

It's your movie, and unless you want it to look like something that no one in their right mind would pay to watch, you need to make some changes.

And fast.



Terrance kicked an empty soda can as he walked along the sidewalk, his head hung low, stepping over pieces of trash that lined the road.

There was nothing to do in this neighborhood.

No amenity centers with fancy pools, playgrounds, and fields.

No glass backboards.

No park benches that didn't have a homeless person sleeping on them.

There was asphalt and concrete, both of which were cracked and faded from years of disrepair.

There was graffiti everywhere. Some of it was art, guys with natural talent striving to find an outlet for the world to understand them, but there were also vandals who preyed on any building or sign with an open surface.

There were things to do here, just nothing good.

The neighborhood featured homes in various stages of disrepair and, in most cases, well beyond it. Caved-in carports with missing shingles and bright blue tarps that served as makeshift roofs dotted the streets. Weeds grew tall in the yards, and bitter men and women stood on staircases, ready to lash out at anyone who crossed into their orbit.

Few had made it out of the jungle.

Two years ago, a guy named Jamal was recruited to play football at a big-name school, Sundays a real possibility in his

future one day. But his mind never left the streets, and when he returned home on breaks, it wasn't long before he was back in trouble, and the scholarship he had bled for was stripped from him and replaced with court-ordered directives.

There was one house, though, at the end of North State St., that stood out like a lighthouse along a rocky shore.

The yard was mowed, and there were flowers planted in the beds.

There was no trash anywhere to be found on the property.

The Martin family lived there and had since the foundation was dug.

Errol Senior was the superintendent at a local factory that machined parts for imported cars. No one in the neighborhood was more respected, even by the guys who respected no one. He had three sons, all within two years of each other, and his wife was a beautiful soul who regularly fed the entire neighborhood with grand cookouts that left all that partook happier for having done so. His sons were left alone in the streets, and Errol dropped them off daily at their private school outside of town on his way to work.

Terrance stopped and stared at the house in quiet reverence as a car rolled past him, the bass so loud it shook the concrete he was standing on.

A kid from his class, Dex, yelled at him from the passenger side window.

"Get in, T, we got things to do."

Whatever it was, it wouldn't be good or even remotely legal.

Mr. Martin walked out into the front yard and gave the boys in the car a look, and suddenly, the music dropped a few decibels. The older man nodded in their direction and walked to the garage at the side of the house.

As Terrance started to get in the car, he heard his name from up the driveway.

"Terrance, I thought you were doing this yard today? Let's go, son; I need this done now."

Dex looked at him and laughed.

"T, we will make 100 times what that old man is about to pay you. Come on, let's get it."

Terrance stood there and felt like his body was being torn from both sides, his world pulled apart by opposing forces, the black hole of the neighborhood sucking him deeper in, while this one star fought valiantly to pull him from the maw.

THE EDITING ROOM

Who's in your movie right now?

Top three people...Go.

Top three people at work...Go.

Top three people involved in your hobby (gym, church, bingo)... Go.

It's well recited, this notion that we are an amalgamation of the people we come in contact with the most.

You can't help but have them bleed into you: their fears, their foibles, their fixations.

You'll walk like them and talk like them.

The question then becomes, like Terrance, who do you want to feed that part of you?

Whose energy do you want to have on your set?

Who's working toward the same thing you are?

If you are not surrounding yourself with people who want the same things in life that you do, you will not get the things that you want. It's a painful thing to learn because it often means pausing friendships, skipping family functions, and leaving the cushy in favor of the uncomfortable.

If you want a meaningful change in your life, I'm sorry to tell you that you may need to find a different group of people to spend your time with.

You will need to find new people to emulate and draw inspiration from.

You will need to get out into the world and bump into new ideas and new personalities.

All of that is uncomfortable...especially for introverts, who can find the idea of casting a wider net when it comes to their circle of friends not only terrifying but cringeworthy.

Find a friend who's going to push you out of bed in the morning to go to the gym with them.

Find a friend that's going to share their work with you, while you share your work with them, each acting as a sounding board for the other's ideas.

Don't be afraid to see what other people have to offer,

especially when there's the possibility for you to grow as a person from the relationship.



LOCATION

Mary looked at the to-do list on her refrigerator and groaned.

It had been forty-seven days since he left.

It was strange that she managed to keep count so accurately, as staying focused on anything for that long had never been her strength.

She was adept at many things, but relationships were never one that she had managed to crack the code for.

If there is a way to screw up, she had it figured out.

It wasn't that she didn't want something like that: picket fences, Pinterest boards, and some form of doodle dog.

She loved all those things, loved the idea of them, but something was missing.

Every time she had found someone nice, she had enjoyed it for a season, but it quickly grew uninteresting. She needed interesting, and she craved it with every fiber of her being. Growing up, her life had been the polar opposite, and she refused to make her adult life that way.

Nine different cities since graduation.

Nine different stories.

Not all of them pretty, but different nonetheless.

Different was good.

No.

Different was great.

When there was an opportunity to take a risk, she did it.

Something was still missing though; something that it felt like the tenth city probably did not hold.

You never knew, though, and that's why you went.

You went because there were new streets, restaurants, rivers, lakes, and clubs. There was a new hobby to pursue, a new person to be.

This year, it had been Minneapolis, but after the long winter's nap, she was ready for warmer climates.

Her phone dinged, and she looked across the room at it sitting on an end table. She walked over to it sluggishly and picked it up. The preview on the phone showed his name and a message that would only open with the phone being unlocked. She huffed at the additional step needed and entered her passcode.

The message pulled up:

Can you meet for coffee today?

She hovered her fingers over the keys and couldn't decide whether it was worth responding to or simply ignoring.

I'm busy... Delete

Sorry, I can't... Delete

What time? Send

She chastised herself almost immediately.

Forty-seven days, and now she would start this all over again?

A voice deep inside her sang into her ears.

Thirty-six years old, not thirty-six years young.

What was she running from?

Maybe coffee today would turn into dinner tonight, and then breakfast tomorrow morning. Did she want to have breakfast with him?

She looked at the to-do list again while she waited for a response.

Give notice to the leasing office.

Cancel gym membership.

Take clothes to donation drop off.

Get the oil changed.

Call and confirm that the new place will be ready to move in.

THE EDITING ROOM

Location is the greatest magician in the history of mankind.

Location promises everything with no commitment to deliver on its promises.

We can go from place to place, consumed and excited by what we see there, until we realize, generally quite quickly, that we have to bring ourselves to the new place also. That's a painful and costly revelation for so many of us.

It can be a fix; there's no disputing that.

It can solve problems almost immediately, granting the recipient the great gift of distance. But there's more than one

type of location.

There's:

- Location for adventure
- Location for location's sake
- Location for escape

And maybe, more than we realize, a combination of all three intertwined.

Mary kept hunting, but she never got away from Mary.

As the saying goes, “No matter where you go, there you are.”

You have to bring you.

It's a package deal, which means that when you go somewhere new to start over, be aware that changing the zip code doesn't guarantee you a new outcome. Sometimes, it just means a new climate, a new grocery chain, and more of the same in every other facet of your life.

Where you shoot the film is not as important as the substance of the material or the character's journey.

The prettiest backdrop in the world isn't a solution for a terrible script or a star with personal problems.



THE VILLAIN

David in accounting.

Simone in H.R.

And the worst, without question: Oscar, the C.O.O.

Ruby couldn't remember how she ended up at Watch Works, a chain of 101 retail showrooms dedicated to the altar of horology.

A friend of a friend type thing, something that was supposed to just be for the season.

That was five years ago now.

And here she sat—from Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., like clockwork—finding new and exciting ways to promote watches on social media, all of which looked nearly identical to her and provided so little utility that she couldn't figure out what the point was or why people were so invested in them, both emotionally and financially.

She didn't wear a watch.

On purpose.

For spite.

Spite of course being one of the best reasons to do anything.

She didn't attend company functions, and if she did, she ghosted out of them at the perfect time...every time.

Today was the worst of all.

Wednesday.

Staff meeting day.

Bring your favorite watch quote to work day.

Eat donuts day.

That part wasn't bad; it made the whole thing more palatable.

So, they gathered at 11 a.m. on the dot every Wednesday morning; today, the same as any other, except it was raining outside. Not light rain. Torrential downpour rain. Pull off under an overpass rain. Cracks of thunder shattered the sky above, and everyone crowded around the windows to watch bolts of lightning split the sky in the distance.

"Meeting in two, let's go!" Oscar yelled across the room.

Ruby trudged over the sporty-looking gray carpet like it was quicksand.

Her phone buzzed, and she pulled it out of her pocket.

Ugh.

Tara.

Her "best friend" and former business partner.

That can wait.

She had monopolized enough of her time as it was anyway.

Hell, she probably wouldn't be stuck here on this 11 a.m. voyage to the dark side if Tara had stuck with the boutique. No, Mrs. Play-It-Safe couldn't see it through to the finish. She had to bail out before they had accomplished anything at all.

Ruby ended up \$10,000 in the hole after the shop closed and was now scratching and clawing to get that paid back before the interest sunk her.

Tara simply cut a check for her half of the loss...rather, Darron cut the check.

She exhaled hard and kept moving forward.

"Ruby, what are you doing?! Let's go, we are going to start late!" Oscar yelled again.

Ruby thought about this grand vision for a second, where she gave her boss the finger and then walked out, smashing every clock on the wall on the way.

But she didn't.

Instead, she kept walking into the conference room, right past David, who shot her a passive-aggressive grin, and Simone, who had written her up last week for being late to the Wednesday meeting...by two minutes.

Her phone vibrated again. Her mother this time. Perfect.

Keep it coming.

Tara's upset that you won't return her calls. She doesn't deserve the silent treatment, Rubes. Rubes. After thirty-three years. Rubes.

She had asked for twenty-eight of those years not to be called that. She wore it on a name tag. My name is Ruby.

Not Rubes.

Not Uby.

Not Rubis.

Ruby.

Simple, two syllables.

Her frustration was interrupted by Oscar.

"Can you tell us where you are with the master spreadsheet, Ruby? We are looking to get that out to all our stores by the end of the week. They need to know our entire lineup."

"Almost done," she said, staring at all the heads turning back to look at her.

"Great. What does that mean exactly?"

She bit her tongue and jumped a little at the pain, unaware of how hard she had dug in.

"50 percent."

"Great, that's great," Oscar said.

Lunch finally came, and the meeting mercifully ended without another acknowledgment of her presence. Happy to escape without another word, she disappeared into the parking lot and down to her car, where she cranked her music and laid her head on the wheel, the dejection weighing so heavily on her she could scarcely lift it back up.

She heard a commotion a few cars down and a voice she recognized instantly.

Jason.

And now the icing has been applied to the top of the cake.

Her ex.

Ex-everything.

Friend, lover, boyfriend, soulmate.

He high-fived his friends, and they carried on like the world was the happiest planet in the cosmos.

She leaned her seat back as far as it could go and closed her eyes, wishing that the car was a DeLorean and could magically transport her to a new life with the flick of a switch.

THE EDITING ROOM

Who's the villain in this story?

Who's the villain in your life, the antagonist, out to foil the hero/heroine at every turn?

Bosses, coworkers, family, friends, partners, spouses, neighborhood cats. Who has wronged you?

The list is likely immense.

I know for me, it used to be a mile long.

Everyone did something to me.

Everyone caused me to be where I ended up.

Except...it was all my fault.

I was the villain.

I held the protagonist back.

It wasn't the admissions person at school or the teacher in the

class I failed. It wasn't the judge, the cop, or my boss.

It was me.

And man, that hurt.

Uncomfortably hurt.

There are villains out there, for sure.

But there are villains inside, too.

They are right inside the castle's walls, hungry to help your life crumble into pieces.

No one on the outside wants your demise as bad as you do sometimes.

Stop being the villain.

Start being the hero.



THE HERO

With a name like Hendrix, people always thought he would be cooler than he actually was when they met him.

His dad was cool.

That was how he got the name.

He played guitar in bands and worshipped the pick and strings like they were a deity.

Hendrix, though, couldn't play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" or sing a note.

Music had never done anything for him, and he knew it killed his father.

It was books for him.

The quiet.

The peace.

His brain was a tornado of trivial knowledge.

He would devour everything he could, spending hours in the library, going through shelves on topics that had nothing to do with him. It was just there for the taking, and he wanted it.

All of it.

He knew a little bit about everything but was skilled in nothing in particular.

That made him a prime candidate to be sitting in this room.

The nondescript office had a dozen seats and was filled with other people dressed like him but from all walks of life.

Everyone looked smart.

Smarter than him.

A spindly-looking man with a long neck like a giraffe thrust his head around the corner.

"Hendrix."

Hendrix never had to worry about it not being him when he heard the name.

It happened once at the doctor's office, but the man who got up was older and hard of hearing, so Heinrich had sat back down quickly.

Hendrix saw all the eyes in the room on him, and he folded his magazine up and put it back on the coffee table.

Seven more facts from that little glossy gem on skiing.

He filed them in his brain and walked toward the door.

"Love the name," the man said when he walked in.

Hendrix nodded a thank you, unable to speak as he turned the corner and found three smartly dressed people sitting on high-backed rolling chairs. In front of them was his seat, a grey metal folding chair with flecking paint and the ass print of a thousand other failures before him.

What was he doing here?!

"Hi Hendrix, what a great name, by the way," the woman in the middle chair said to him.

He nodded a thank you, too nervous to speak, a drip of sweat falling down his neck.

"You don't have to be nervous. If you made it this far, you have the same chance as everyone else in that room. Remember, three of you make it, so at least it's a 25 percent chance," the woman chuckled.

The men at her flanks echoed the laugh perfectly and shuffled notecards in their hands.

"Ready, Hendrix?" the man to her left asked.

All Hendrix could do was nod.

How could he answer questions if he couldn't speak?

"Ex...excuse me, could I just get a sip of water, please?" Hendrix stammered.

The woman smiled, obviously not unfamiliar with the pressure the person in the metal chair was under.

The spindly man appeared suddenly to his left with a cup of cold water, and Hendrix nodded a thank you.

Then he set the water on the floor and signaled that he was ready.

"Okay, all the questions you can answer in sixty seconds," the woman said. "Max will ask you one, then Jared will ask you the next, and so forth."

Hendrix nodded and wiped the sweat from his palms on his khakis.

"Sorry, ma'am, can I stand up? I would be standing on the

show...I mean, if I was on the show."

She smiled at him.

"Of course. We do it on purpose to make you a little uncomfortable. You'd be amazed at how few people ask to stand."

Hendrix stood up behind his chair and put his hands on the back.

A wave of calm washed over him now, and he felt different.

Different than he had ever felt in his life.

Suddenly, he was right where he was supposed to be.

And just beyond this sixty seconds was his chance at immortality. A podium with his name scribbled on it, the bright lights of the cameras in his face.

He would become the greatest contestant in history.

Even Jimi himself would be impressed with what he was about to accomplish if he were still alive.

The woman held her stopwatch up.

"Ready Hendrix...and go!"

THE EDITING ROOM

The moment you've been waiting for has arrived.

You're up...it's showtime.

How did you go into this defining moment with the lights shining bright?

Did you go in like the hero?

Did you see the win before you took the field? Sometimes, you will lose.

Okay, a lot of times you will lose.

But when you win...

There is nothing more satisfying.

The voices of doubt die off.

The haters crawl back into their caves.

The blood dries up, and the sweat is washed away.

The tears are replaced with bright eyes full of passion.

When your moment comes, and it's time to don your cape and defeat the villain, will you be ready for it?



STAGE FRIGHT

Jasmine looked around her room and sighed.

She had slept here for seventeen years, nine months, and forty-five days.

This was the most comfortable place on earth for her.

She touched the trophies that lined the shelves, fidgeting with the books, flipping through some absently, and then returning them to their place.

She looked at the photographs all over the walls...the good times.

There was a picture at Niagara Falls of her family huddled under their ponchos on the Maid of the Mist, bright unrehearsed smiles across their faces.

She looked at her luggage on the floor and instantly began to regret her decision. The community college in town had just about everything that she needed. The first two years of college were all the same everywhere anyway.

Why had she chosen to go so far away?

She heard her mother's voice from down the hall, telling her it was time to go.

Maybe they could wait just another half hour; there was traffic anyway at this time of day.

There was a poster over her bed, one that she had had for at least ten years now. She'd looked at it every day over that span when she walked into the room, laid her head down at night, or sat at her desk doing her homework.

It was a photo of an astronaut suspended in the blackness of space, the Earth behind them like they were falling into an ocean of blue.

Her dreams would still be there if they left tomorrow.

Maybe the dream was stupid, unachievable, and ridiculous for someone from where she was from.

She left her bags on the floor and walked down the stairs, refusing to glance at the mirror in the hallway for fear that it might try to change her mind. Her mother was in the kitchen, pouring herself a cup of coffee for the road, and looked at Jasmine with her trademarked glare when she saw she didn't have her suitcase in hand.

"Honey, we have to leave. You know it's a long drive, and you want to make sure you get unpacked so you can get a good night's rest before orientation."

"I don't think I should go, Mom," she said, staring at the floor, unable to meet her mother's eyes.

Her mother looked at her quizzically.

"What do you mean you shouldn't go?"

"I think I made a mistake, and I think I should go to school here for two years and then transfer to the program. The money is too much to ask you guys to pay, and I don't think it's worth it."

"That's what you truly believe?" her mother asked.

"Yes," she mumbled.

Her mother took a sip of coffee and smiled at her oldest daughter.

"So you're telling me you can look at that poster on your wall every day for the next two years without remorse?"

Jasmine didn't say anything.

She wanted to, but her mouth felt like it was glued shut.

Her mother challenged her again.

"Do you believe you can look at that poster every day for the next two years without feeling regret or remorse? Do you think a lifelong dream can be cast aside so easily without ramifications?"

Jasmine didn't have an answer.

THE EDITING ROOM

Sometimes, our chance to shine comes with some incredible roadblocks, none potentially more detrimental to us than comfort and familiarity.

That voice that keeps us right where we are, stable, safe, and secure.

It's trying to help.

It's not actually trying to hurt us.

It knows what's familiar, and it knows the best outcome to guarantee our survival in our current form.

But all of this is stage fright.

The same thing actors get when they are ready to go on stage for opening night.

The same thing athletes get when they are ready to take the field.

We experience this phenomenon in every single decision we make.

What stage fright does, if we let it, is paralyze us from growing and getting to where our dreams are trying to take us.

If Jasmine succumbs to stage fright and lets it keep her off the stage, she will suffer a lifetime of regret.

There's no regret if she goes and doesn't cut it.

Maybe there are extenuating circumstances or something she is just fundamentally missing that will keep her from achieving her dream.

But the most important thing is for her not to let that thing that keeps her from achieving it be her fear of starting.

When has stage fright paralyzed you?

What kept you from taking the road less traveled at the end of the day?

How many deals did you have to strike with yourself to come to that decision?

If you're writing and directing this movie, is it interesting if the hero stays put?

Stage fright is only temporary, and it is strongest when you are standing at the crossroads.

It's life's crossing guard, and its only job is to get you across

the street safely. Its job is to make sure you don't do a wheelie across the crosswalk or play chicken with the traffic (which is what every leap of faith you take in life is).

It's vital to understand that stage fright will only be there until you take the first step, and then it will wash away forever.

And the best part is that if you fail, provided you didn't die during that failure, you have the opportunity to do it again until you get it right.



The field felt empty, even though thousands of people still milled about in the stands.

Noah sat on the bench with his head in his hands, tears smeared across his cheeks.

He felt like he was welded to the metal.

He didn't want to face the cameras, the reporters, his teammates, or fans.

He wished that he could blink and everyone would disappear.

Poof!

It wasn't that easy.

No amount of wishing would make it so.

He felt three guys pat his back and squeeze him.

"It's okay, brother, next year."

"You're still the best."

"It's on every one of us, not just you."

Each word of kindness made him sink further like weights were being cast around his neck.

Care-batrosses.

So close.

So...so close.

His coach sat beside him, whispering words of encouragement into his ear.

He couldn't process them, but he felt something in them.

Compassion. Empathy.

There was no blame.

No anger.

And he wept harder, his face buried in the towel.

Then, the team's owner came and knelt in front of him.

It wasn't about tonight. It was about the dozen years before tonight.

The championships.

The good times.

No, this time didn't work out.

And that was okay with the owner.

Noah mustered enough strength to work his way to the tunnel, each step feeling like a thousand- mile march, his cleats clacking against the concrete walkway.

His agent appeared as if by magic from a door on the left and hugged him. More words of encouragement.

Then, his girlfriend from a door on the right.

A long embrace.

More tears.

She whispered in his ear, and he felt better.

The tunnel was so quiet he thought that the whole world could hear it.

That was the loser's locker room.

Quiet.

At his locker, he picked up his phone. Thirteen messages.

All the boys.

His mom.

His dad.

His uncle and aunt.

He put his head against his locker and exhaled.

He walked over to the water bottles the trainer had laid out, grabbed one, and chugged it down like he had been on

a deserted island for years. The water was cold and delicious, almost too cold. The kind that choked you up.

More teammates came by and hugged him.

He didn't know if he had been hugged this much after a win.

THE EDITING ROOM

Finding the right people to be your support network, your rock, is crucial to making the film great, even if they're not people who are in the opening credits. These are your support staff, the people in the background who help make the production a success through all the little things they do.

The right people are out there even if you don't have them on your team yet. I still find in this world that is seemingly overrun with hatred, callousness, and selfishness, that by and large people want to help one another, regardless of race, creed, religion, orientation, or political preference.

Who's on your team in life?

Who has your back?

Who's there to pick you up if you fall?

Your crew is everything.

They are honest with you through the good times, but they are never there to give you an unearned "yes."

No one needs those people in their life.

"Your work is the best."

"You're doing an awesome job."

Sometimes the work sucks, and sometimes you are doing a terrible job.

The right crew member calls you out on that. They don't let you off the hook easily, even if it means you're irritated with them for it.

Without a great crew, you have a hero with nothing to do.



LIGHTING

Mercedes walked into her eleventh-floor apartment, threw her purse on the counter, exhausted and drained from the day, and stared at the backdrop of the city splayed out in front of her.

Client after client.

Meeting after meeting.

Problem after problem.

It was an onslaught today.

She cracked a can of peach sparkling water and walked out onto the patio.

Here she was, living the high life, a life she had worked herself to the bone to achieve, and she still felt horrible.

Fendi, Prada, Range Rover.

None of them could fix her woes.

Even her cat didn't look interested in her today, but in all fairness, the cat never looked interested in anyone.

Doom and gloom were all around; even though the sun shined so bright on Biscayne Bay, it looked like the water and the sky were one.

She looked at herself in the mirror.

For her late thirties, she felt like she was still doing pretty damn well.

Single and never married, career had been #1 the entire way.

But she started to feel lonely, and that loneliness had crept into sadness.

Then the sadness became a roiling sea of despair.

And now she couldn't enjoy anything.

She went to the refrigerator and poured a glass of chardonnay. Nothing fancy, just something to help infuse a little mellow into her mood. She flopped onto the couch and flicked through her phone. It dinged with messages from friends looking to see if she wanted to join them out that night. Dating requests flew in from guys who wanted nothing more in the whole universe than to take out a woman as beautiful as she was.

She had everything and nothing.

The cat wandered by her, apparently somewhat aware of the suffering its owner was enduring, and since the cat didn't know any other way of getting food in this place, it purred up alongside the woman.

THE EDITING ROOM

Lighting makes a movie go round.

It sets the tone for the audience.

Is this going to be serious, or can I laugh?

Am I about to jump out of my seat in terror or cry my eyes out?

Where are you shining your lights?

Are you picking up on the great things you are already involved

in?

Do you notice the family and friends around you?

Do you see that you have a job, maybe a great one, that keeps the roof over your head?

Do you see that you have your health, your looks, and your hobbies?

It's easy to overlook these things.

They are there in our lives every day.

There's no threat of losing them.

And when there's no threat of losing something, it's shockingly simple to lose sight of what is special about the thing.

Familiarity breeds contempt, but more than that, it breeds invisibility.

Gratitude helps us keep things in focus.

It's the light that shines on the good things in the world around us.

It keeps us from falling into a pattern of selfishness and darkness, because it is always illuminating the things that we already have.

I find it super easy to overlook the great things I have in my life when I start to get down on myself.

Great wife, kids, family, friends.

Surfing, sobriety, and a roof over my head.

And breath.

As long as you have that, you always have a chance to get it right.



SOUNDTRACK

Travis sat on his couch and could feel his blood boil as he watched the woman on the screen talk.

Graphics flashed across the top right corner, and the ticker at the bottom ran the bad news on a loop, a track meet filled with misery.

"How dare they?!" he shouted at the TV.

"How could those idiots in office let that happen to us?!"

The phone rang.

"What's up, Curt?" he said to his oldest friend.

"Man, did you see what Billy did yesterday at work?"

Travis shook his head, further irritated at the mention of the man's name.

He'd never had a good run-in with Billy.

Ever.

It bothered him that Curt always told him about Billy.

It was like he took pleasure in knowing it made Travis angry.

"No, man, I told you I don't care about that guy."

"Listen, you gotta hear this, though. He left work in the middle of the day to get his car washed. Something about company pride or some nonsense like that."

"Why would I care about that?" Travis said, seething.

"What's your deal?" Curt demanded.

Travis hit mute and delivered a diatribe of curse words at his friend. "Nothing. I just don't like Billy. I don't want to hear about him."

"Whatever man. I'll call you later."

And Curt was gone.

Travis switched the TV to his playlist and flooded the room with primal screams, deep fits of rage pouring into the tiny space.

And he screamed them back.

At the top of his lungs.

Violent.

Angry.

Bitter.

THE EDITING ROOM

What do you put in your ears every day?

Whose message are you repeating?

Whose worldview are you parroting?

Whose view of yourself are you ingesting and then internalizing?

Your soundtrack is everything.

If your days are spent devouring the news, you will end up

angry and agitated all the time, fearful that people who don't believe the same things as you are devoting all their time trying to dismantle you. If you listen to doom and gloom, you will adopt those feelings. If you believe the world and all its people are terrible, it will drag you down like an anchor.

If you listen to people who complain incessantly, you will find that you race to compete with them.

Who's had the worst experience of the bunch?

Who's the furthest from where they want to be?

Who's boss, colleague, friend, spouse, did them the worst?

Who can make a beverage with more tart? Pile it on, baby.

You have to tune this stuff out.

Like it's a fight for your life...because it is.

In my battle with depression, I have to inundate myself with positive messages. No news.

No social media.

Positive videos on YouTube.

Les Brown. Tony Robbins. Alan Watts. Jim Carrey.

All day in the background.

Your soundtrack is make or break, and the stakes are as high as possible.

It's your life.

And the constant bombardment of negativity can strip it from you...quickly.



COSTUMES

The collar on the new shirt dug into his neck, and as soon as the tie moved into position, he felt strangled, his breath struggling to catch itself.

This was it.

Leo looked at himself in the mirror and sighed.

Was this really it?

Walking into the kitchen, he poured a bowl of cereal and stirred at the sugary flakes, the spoon clanging against the bowl. When he finished, he put the bowl in the sink, not even bothering to pour out the milk.

Yep, this was it, the death of one thing, the start of the next.

His rain jacket was on a hook by the door, and he slung it over his shoulder and walked out, the latch clicking into place behind him, so loud in the empty hallway that it echoed.

A reminder that the time had come.

At first, his feet didn't seem to want to move. They felt stuck to the ground, his brain seeming to acknowledge that any steps down that hallway meant the start of a new chapter.

A chapter that he didn't want to write.

Finally, he moved toward the elevator and pressed the button, an orange light illuminating the down arrow. While waiting, he looked at the vase on the table against the wall. The flowers were plastic, and the entire thing looked depressing, like someone who might need medication designed it.

At the very least, someone ready to move on from that job.

When he hit the ground floor and walked outside into the bustle of the city, the smells overran him.

Hot dogs. Pretzels. Diesel fumes. Garbage.

He walked to the subway steps and, with each one, berated himself for his failings. How had he failed so badly that he needed to take this job?

Why did he quit going after what he wanted?

Fear, embarrassment, money.

The list was exhausting.

His dream had been so close, and yet here he was now, wearing a tie and heading to talk about a topic that held zero interest in the world to him.

Now, he was like a circus clown, dressed to impress, the uniform of the day, the costume that all good white-collar workers wore.

His collar was actually white.

He felt sick and stopped at a bench, a man playing saxophone belting notes a few feet away, a variety of denominations in his case.

Leo took a water bottle from his backpack and drank it, trying hard not to hyperventilate.

His dream.

Dead.

Now this...

THE EDITING ROOM

You're on stage every day and are cloaked in costumes of all shapes and sizes, whether you like it or not.

Some of them feel better against your skin than others.

Some make you proud.

Some make you embarrassed.

What you wear matters.

It's important.

But it's crucial that you remember that the costume you are wearing, the character you are playing, is only temporary.

If you are in a job you don't want to be in and the thought of putting on the uniform makes you sick to your stomach, it doesn't have to be forever.

Maybe there is another costume that you are dreaming of.

Maybe your dream costume isn't a costume at all.

Maybe it is shorts and sandals, and you dream of running a hotel at the beach.

Only you know what that is and what it looks like.

Only you know what it feels like when you slip into it.

The world is overrun with people wearing logos of companies they couldn't care less about.

It's oversaturated with people who are pretending so that they can make it through the day.

Imagine a world where the vast majority of people found the perfect costume.

How much happier would everyone on the planet be?

How much happier would you be?



DELAYS

Zoe flipped through the app, the pictures on the screen no longer processing for her.

Her dog looked up at her from the carpet and wagged his tail excitedly as she stood up from the couch.

She scratched his head and then moved to the dresser to get her workout clothes.

The dog lowered his head dejectedly, circled the spot where he was standing, and landed back on the floor with a thud.

“Sorry, Henry, I’ve gotta go to the gym. I’ve been paying for this for three months now and haven’t stepped foot inside.”

Henry didn’t acknowledge her this time and instead pressed his head onto her foot.

Ding.

A text message from her best friend Sally popped up on her phone.

Everyone’s meeting at O’Brien’s tonight, then down to Front Page afterward.

Both places were about as interesting to her as a football stadium, but Sally loved them, and Miles would be there. That was something, even if it never got off the ground.

Gym though.

Gym first.

New life.

New look.

New, new.

Go.

The phone rang again.

"Really," she said to Henry.

She looked at the caller ID.

Her boss.

Saturday? Nope, sorry, Greg.

The phone stopped ringing, and Zoe sighed, her concentration now completely shot.

She grabbed her shorts from the dresser, so new they still had tags on them, and pulled them on.

*These don't feel as good as the first time I tried them on.
Maybe I should wait and get a new pair.*

"Okay boy, I'm ready. Quick stretch, and I'm out the door."

The dog cocked his head to the side and then flattened it back to the floor when he realized that out the door meant without him.

The phone again.

Her mother.

She answered this time.

"What's going on, Mom?"

"Oh, honey, listen, you remember my friend Peggy I went to high school with."

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"Well, she will be in town next week, and I wanted to bring her by your place for dinner."

"I'm trying to get to the gym right now, Mom."

Her mother huffed.

"That's fine. Please let me know a night that works best for you. It should just be two or three hours."

Zoe hit the end button without saying goodbye and put her head in her hands.

Instagram notifications darted across the screen.

Her co-worker Gisele, the drama queen to dethrone all other drama queens, sent her a DM with a frantic message about a personal crisis that she had to have someone to talk to about ASAP.

She was exhausted, and she hadn't spent one minute at the gym.

And she wasn't likely to today.

THE EDITING ROOM

Every movie has delays.

Tons of them.

Weather, budget, catering, or star problems.

This chapter is for every global citizen carrying the assigned pair of digital handcuffs in your pocket or purse right now.

We are smack in the middle of a worldwide heist.

You're being robbed.

Your time, the most precious gift you have, is being stolen by algorithms, marketers, engineers, and executives.

They don't care that they stole your time from you because that's how they make their money.

Every notification, every ad, every post is designed to steal from you, except what they steal cannot be replaced.

You can't make more of it, and you can't get it refunded to you.

This crisis of time theft costs an incalculable amount every day.

How much is being stolen from you?

Years?

And for what? What did you get for the exchange?

Nothing.

Not a damn thing.

What aren't you accomplishing because of the unrelenting wall of distractions you run into daily?

Set boundaries, silence notifications, and exercise discipline when surrounded by these digital outlaws.

Don't let another day go by when your dreams are put on hold because of a drama-filled co-worker or a flurry of cuddly animals on your news feed.



Lucas boarded the train in Gare du Nord, Paris, and found a seat in the third car from the front. He wedged his bag into the overhead compartment and stretched his long legs before he sat down in the tight space. There was no one next to him, and he hoped it would stay that way for the two-hour ride to London, his final stop before heading home to Chicago.

He wasn't ready to leave.

After all, there was nothing overly pressing to head home to.

Well, real life technically.

It was calling and didn't seem interested in being sent to voicemail.

But what would another month hurt?

For thirty days now, Lucas had been on the road in Europe, starting in Greece and working his way west. Thirty days filled with trains, new foods, and the pinnacle of humanity's quest to conquer the worlds of arts, science, and architecture.

Now he was hooked.

Something about the museums and culture had burrowed deep into his soul, and he found himself obsessed with the people and places, poring over texts on art history and the marvels of the old world on the long train rides between cities.

He told himself that it was just shiny object syndrome.

Everyone felt good when they backpacked through Europe.

It was the ultimate feel-good elixir, a magic potion of new languages, street signs, and landscapes. Everything needed to fuel a young man's dreams.

But it felt like more than that.

He felt comfortable here. Everywhere he went, he felt at home.

At the Parthenon, he made friends with the curator of the museum there, a gregarious man named Nikos with thinning black hair, who had spent his career engrossed in the world of his ancestors. Nikos had taken a shine to him, saying that Lucas reminded him of his son when he was in college. He had toured the young man around the sites in Athens and leveraged his network of curator contacts to go behind the scenes in Rome at the Colosseum and the Pantheon.

Those were the most exciting moments of his life.

As the train moved out of the station and headed north, he watched the city tick by, lost in his thoughts.

Ten minutes in, he felt his phone vibrate and looked down to find an unknown number on the caller ID.

He nearly ignored it, but something made him decide to pick it up.

"Lucas, my boy, how are you?!" Nikos said.

"Doing great, Nikos! Wish I was still in the islands with you."

"It might be your lucky day then. How would you like to come back for an extended stay?" "Wait...what?"

Another laugh, hearty and full of life.

"You heard me. We're hiring for a new position. It's entry-level, but you would be my right-hand man, helping me on everything here."

Lucas was speechless.

The knocking door never really came when you were expecting it.

It was never going to be on your schedule.

"Well, are you not excited?" Nikos asked, his enthusiasm untempered by the perceived lack of it on the other side of the line.

"No, I'm thrilled...and honored."

"But...?" Nikos asked.

THE EDITING ROOM

Improvisation is one of the great parts of any film.

We don't see it, and we don't know that it's happening, but if you talk to a director or an actor, they will tell you things come up organically all the time, and changes need to be made on the fly.

Improv can make things funnier, scarier, or heighten the stakes, all from a small change that no screenwriter or director could ever have seen in advance.

And that's life for all of us.

We are constantly required to be masters of improv.

When we see someone who we deem to be a success in life for

whatever reason, we are not seeing all the times they dropped everything and had to change directions.

In improv, there are games you play on stage.

“Yes, and,” is a popular one, where the actors have to respond to everything their partner on stage does with,

“Yes, and,” then add something to keep the scene going.

Improv in your movie is your way of saying “Yes” to life without complaint and building on what it gives you.

If you are stuck in a rut and can’t climb out of the darkness, improv might be your saving grace.

What is life trying to give you?

What are you actively saying “NO!” to?

What happens if you change your answer?

Okay, life...you want me to do ____?

Yes, I will do that.

And now you’re off in a totally new direction.

You’re out of the rut.

You’re back on the road, and to add to the fun, you’re on a real-life adventure.

Maybe, you were doing a terrible job of following the script anyway.

Maybe, it was time to scrap it and just go wherever the scene wanted to take you.



THE CLIMAX

Emergency.

Surgery.

Neither word enjoyable on its own.

Put them together, though?

Even worse.

There was no way to see it coming.

Obviously, if she had, she would have tried to avoid it.

No, it happened, and nothing could be done...except those two words.

Oddly, it was the wheels rolling that bothered her the most.

One was squeaky, like someone had forgotten to tighten it.

Wouldn't that be something, to go careening off into a wall or down the hallway?

Doctor, we're going to need another emergency surgery.

She felt herself smile inside the mask. She always enjoyed smiling. It felt good, so she tried to do it as much as possible.

But still, here she lay.

On a rickety gurney where the combined student debt of the people running alongside her was likely north of a million dollars.

A million dollars so they could run beside her, a perfect

stranger.

That made her smile.

All these people to take care of her.

She rolled past others waiting against the walls, sitting in earth-toned furniture designed by someone with a degree in interior design to help keep everyone calm while they waited to die or for others to die.

She felt a set of doors crash open, and her eyes filled with bright white light.

A man in green scrubs took charge of the room, communicating orders to his crew with explicit instructions to be followed.

She felt pokes and prods, but she couldn't argue, not that she would if she could.

It's probably best to let the million-dollar dream team do their thing.

Her life flashed in her mind, but not the things she'd expected.

What played hurt, and she felt panic stab into her side, a knife twisting deep into her sense of fulfillment.

She had spent so many years stuck. So many years filled with pain, and she wished she had them back.

She wished...

That's all she found herself doing...wishing.

When she got out...or...if.

If?

What then?

What could change?

Nothing.

Seven cruel letters.

N-o-t-h-i-n-g

Or everything.

Ten powerful letters.

E-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g

The nurse put on another mask to replace the first, one last chance to inhale something other than through a tank.

Sterile, cold air.

She gasped and pulled the air deep into her lungs wishing it could stay there forever.

THE EDITING ROOM

There will come a day when we face the final breath, our last thoughts.

The concept of “memento mori,” which is Latin for “remember you must die,” is a powerful one.

Dark and macabre, right?

Wrong.

I call it the ultimate inspiration.

The great shoulder tap.

Excuse me, your shoelace is untied.

Excuse me, you're wasting away every minute of a very fragile existence living well below where you have the capability to be.

That's the reminder...the reminder that you have things to do.

If we are conscious of this (conscious not obsessive), our entire universe will change. It will become the most powerful tool in our arsenal. It will free us from bondage and let us live bigger and bolder than we thought possible, because we know the end result. There is no need to go into the ground with anything left to give.

You don't need money.

You don't need fame.

You just need the knowledge that you took whatever time you got and you maxed it out to a level that made other people think you were mad.

All the spoils will come when you live life that way.

In those last moments, what do you want to watch?

The last thing you get to see.

I want to watch adventures with my wife and kids to exciting places. I want to watch myself dropping into a wave that scares me, flying recklessly down a snow-covered hill with the edges of my board sending plumes of snow high into the frosty air. I want to watch myself trying to do something important with my time, to make use of my talents every day, whether I succeeded at it or not.

I want to watch myself say, “Wow.”

I want to dive into the great beyond with the knowledge that I put my foot to the gas the whole way through to the finish line.

Loved, laughed, lived.

Hard.

Wild.

The last thing I want is to face down that fuzzy space between life and death, where the light comes roaring at you, and start my next sentence with, “I wish.”

THE END

It's over.

Another chapter closed.

Another film in the can.

Who do you want to thank?

Who made this journey better, brighter, and more exciting?

Every movie demands a list of thank-you's to the people who helped get you to this black screen with the tiny white lettering.

The list could be ten pages long.

It could be one.

But at the end of each movie, when the credits roll and you start your next journey, it's worth jotting down what and who made the last one special.

Take note of the things that made you laugh and made you cry.

The people you know you will never see again but were bit players in your film, both for the good and the bad.

Lovers who disappeared.

Friends who did the same.

Enemies who taught you a lesson and then vanished into thin air.

Mentors and teachers who graced you with knowledge,

supported your quest, or set you straight when you veered off course.

There are moments of gratitude to be had for each one of these groups.

It's easy to forget, and it's hard to remember.

Things won't stick like you hope they will, and one day, you will want to remember that person from that job you had in college, or that friend you used to hang out with after work when you lived at the beach for the summer.

And when you're done adding them all up, you'll be shocked at how long your credits play at the end.



BLOOPERS

It's hard to beat a good bloopers reel.

The slips and falls, the wipeouts, the crashes.

The stutters over an actor's lines and the uncontrolled laughter in the middle of a scene.

But in real life, the bloopers reel can have higher stakes.

A bloopers might be something where you or someone you cared about got hurt.

A bloopers may not be all fun and games.

It might be the thing that threw the whole film off track.

How we learn to recover from our bloopers is one of the most important lessons we can have. It means that we are working at getting better. We want to avoid repeating the same mistake, so we try to fix it.

That's real progress.

The pursuit of getting better.

When we quit trying to improve, those bloopers can become catastrophes.

But it's also important to remember that hindsight can be dangerous as we try to analyze our bloopers. We get the clarity of knowing the story's ending before the participants did.

It would be like if the characters in a movie knew exactly how they were supposed to get where they were going.

What would be the point of the movie?

Masochism?

Wait, you mean I don't have to face off with this giant monster, lose my arm and leg, and see everyone in my party die?

I can't believe I didn't know that I could just walk a hundred yards to the left and avoid him altogether.

So, why would you be expected not to have bloopers?

Learn from them, but don't get hung up on them.

Keep filming.

Keep living.

If you don't, then you run the risk of letting one error shut down the whole production.



THE CRITICS

"You suck."

"This is the worst _____ (insert failure here), I have ever seen."

Ah, the critics.

The film is wrapped.

The editing is done.

Now, it's out there in the universe, and you can't control it anymore.

Whatever you set out to do is now in the world's hands.

Your bosses.

Your fans.

Your customers.

Your friends.

And they will tell you exactly what they think because everyone loves to give their opinion.

In our five-star world, people love to tear others down.

"I'd give it zero stars if I could."

When I owned my restaurant, we stockpiled a sizable number of well-earned five-star reviews.

I took a lot of pride in it, and so did my team.

And then, one day, we got a bad one.

Our first one, and it crushed me.

I remember the anger mostly.

I wanted to drive to the guy's house, drag him out of his office or wherever he was, and beat him senseless.

How dare he?

What gave him the right to attack a small business like that?

And then I realized something.

I had dozens of five-star reviews at the time and a single one-star one.

I couldn't control that guy.

I didn't share his life experiences.

I didn't know what had happened to him before he walked into the restaurant that day.

And so it is with any work you put out.

You CANNOT control other people's reactions to your film.

Don't try.

If you do, you'll be disheartened.

There will be people that hate every word of this book.

No problem.

If there's positive, constructive feedback in it that helps me get better, then that's terrific, and I will take it.

If it's not, I'll discard it.

I'll focus on the people who like it, even though that will be easier said than done.

But I'll try really hard.

Your critics, the haters, or whatever you call them, are essential to the journey.

They're the home team fans when you're the away team.

They are political party members that are not your own at a town hall meeting.

They are the family members who don't understand what you are out to do and give you unhelpful feedback that is more focused on what they DON'T have than what you do have.

Take them with a grain of salt, and make it about the work, not about you as a person.

#2 THE SEQUEL

Part two.

Part deux.

Chapter two.

Book two.

II.

How many films are in your series?

The opportunities are endless.

Part after part, film after film, reinventions of the main character.

There is always a fresh set of problems that need solutions.

Maybe they are dropped into a new location.

Maybe they are given a new role.

In your life, in your film, what's the next step?

I assume you read this book because you were looking for a change. You've been sitting on the fence, looking for anything to help you fall to one side or another.

Indecision is still a decision after all.

Here you are, with this chance to write an entirely new outcome for yourself. You can start a new movie.

Did the hero lose the last time?

Okay, great, let's write a new film where the hero wins.

Let's write one where they don't just win, they dominate. A new industry, relationship, or place, real or ephemeral. Here are 120 pages.

It's your new script, and it's blank.

What are you writing?

Me?

I'm writing.

That's it.

I'm giving something that I hope positively impacts other people's lives.

I'm sharing, and it's scary.

I'm speaking, and it's scary.

This is my new film, and I want to watch it.

I want to see what this guy can do.

Is he going to fail...yep.

Is he going to succeed...for sure.

But it's new and exciting, and within the framework of the next twenty-four hours, I can change so many parts as I go.

You can do the exact same thing.

You can change the lighting every day.

You can bring on a new cast and crew.

You can negotiate a better deal and work through bad weather

and delays on set.

You can yell CUT! and you can yell ACTION! and that means you have all the power in the world.

THE END
(For real this time.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After 18 years sober, I developed the concept of looking at the world around me as a movie, to help navigate my own battles with depression. The concept became so helpful to me that I realized it might work for others who were struggling to see how their lives could be bigger than they imagined.

These types of passion projects are nothing new to me and are the fuel that keeps me living with purpose and intention. A few years back, I co-founded a company called Sober and Stoked with one of my best friends Scott French, a partnership which produced an award-winning documentary on action sports athletes in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

After nearly two decades in Ocean City, MD, I now live in St. Augustine, FL with my wife and two kids. When I'm not writing, working, or hanging out with them, I'm in the water surfing, watching surfing, or talking about surfing.

It is my sincere hope that people find inspiration in these stories and use the book as a tool to help them make positive and lasting changes in their lives. Everyone has unlimited potential inside them to create a life the world will want to watch!

THE DIRECTOR'S CUT

What does it mean to live a life worth watching?

Perhaps more importantly than that, how do we live that life?

The Director's Cut explores the elements of your own movie and how you can change any part of it, just like you would in a Hollywood blockbuster, to improve the quality of your life.

Whether it's by changing the Cast, Lighting, or Soundtrack, YOU have the option, as the Director of your film, to yell CUT or ACTION and take the movie somewhere new and exciting.

In these short stories, you'll find characters struggling with any number of problems, but in each instance, they have the opportunity to change something important about their own film to truly create a life worth watching!



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