

More Than a Memory: A Study of Artistic License in Screenwriting

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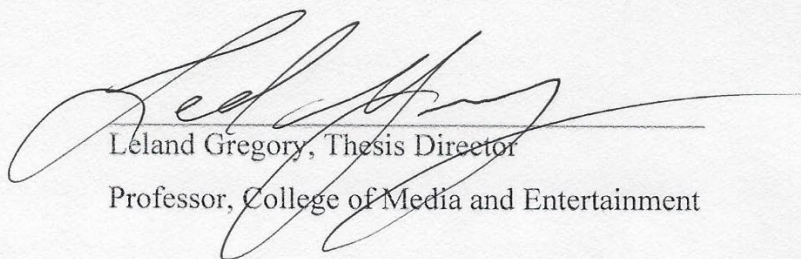
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## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Lynda Marie Underwood. Death was not the final chapter in your hero's journey. Rest easy.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the Honors College at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) for awarding me a 2022 Transfer Fellowship. This work would not have been possible without the financial and emotional support of the Honors College and my Honors advisor Judy Albakry.

I give ultimate praise to my wife, Tabitha, and our three children: Mike, Keith, and Kevin. You are the force that drives me to be a better person. I love you!

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my brother, Tim, for allowing me to share his story with the world. His strength, vulnerability, and courage are an inspiration to me in the best and the worst times.

## **Abstract**

When adapting a memoir or life story for television and film, the screenwriter is not required to follow a straight-line telling of the story but must stay true to the core meaning of the original experience. In the creation of an adaptation, screenwriters use artistic license for dramatic effect and character development within a time constraint.

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## Introduction

Many will enter college not knowing what major degree they intend to seek. I have known my desired career path since the age of five after seeing *Back to the Future* on the big screen with my father. This would begin ACT I of my life. As the sounds of Huey Lewis & The News exploded from the massive speakers on the wall, I was completely immersed in the beautiful escapism of cinema. From that day forward, I knew I wanted to be in the movies. The joy I felt that day has never subsided, and my passion for film continues to burn thirty-eight years later.

My father was a domestic abuser, a racist, a stalker, a thief, a cheat, and a liar. He was also an avid cinephile and my father. I rejoiced at the prospect of a trip to the theater. The ten minutes of navigating back roads from our house on Normandy Drive to the theater were the happiest moments of my childhood. They were also the scariest. Oftentimes, the savage beating of my mother was followed by a trip to the movies with my father. The pattern continued until my mother divorced my father in 1989, the same year *Back to the Future II* was released in theaters. Despite the horrendous torture my father perpetuated against my mother, she did her best to ensure my brother and I had visits with him. One of these visits included a trip to the theater to see *Back to the Future II*, which would lead to the greatest regret of my life. The moment “TO BE CONCLUDED” splashed across the screen, my nine-year-old brain decided I wanted to live with my father in Mississippi.

I fought my mother at every turn until she finally relented and granted my catastrophic wish. For the next nine years, I would be my father’s punching bag. His fists flew with bad intentions. My father would always reward me with a trip to the video

rental store after the particularly bad beatings. Once I learned I could take a mean punch, I would purposely push him too far in the hopes of catching a light shellacking. The prospect of bringing home a film I had never seen was worth the risk of my possible annihilation from this Earth. I escaped that prison of my own making on my eighteenth birthday by relocating to Smyrna, Tennessee. Upon arriving in Smyrna, I landed a high-paying job in the computer room at Walden Book Distributers. The late-night shifts were a ghost town where I would spend hours watching movies and television. The goal at this point in my life was to learn filmmaking at Middle Tennessee State University, and I was saving up for the cost of tuition. However, another tragic turn in life would move the goal posts significantly and begin ACT II of my story.

When I left Mississippi for Tennessee, I was confident the worst part of my life was over. There were no doubts I was going to find a good job, a nice place to live, and begin my college education. Within six months of arriving in Smyrna, I had achieved two of the three. A college degree was the only objective still out of reach. I would spend the next five years incarcerated, on probation, or avoiding active warrants. In 2005, I learned that I would become a father. I surrendered myself to the Rutherford County Jail the next day. Time seemed to move ten times slower than normal on my final day in that place. My last day incarcerated was the last day I operated as a selfish human being. I was determined to not just exist normally in society, I was going to be a pillar of my community and a respectable father to my unborn son.

I married the love of my life and mother of my child, bought a nice home, and had two more children. I volunteered in the community and built myself a nice reputation as a reliable, thoughtful person. I also became well known outside of my community. I

created two podcasts that charted in the top five iTunes charts. I became friends with writer director Kevin Smith and spent time in his Hollywood Hills home talking about film. I traveled to New York and performed on stage with the famous podcast *Tell 'Em Steve Dave*. I performed on the vinyl record birthday celebration of *Impractical Jokers* superstar Brian Quinn. My life felt like a Hollywood movie, but there was still one giant unchecked box on my hero's journey to redemption. I needed a college degree.

In 2020, my confidence level was at an all-time high. I applied for Motlow State Community College and took the required Accuplacer exam. I did very well on the English section. I failed to score the required points in the Math section. I immediately applied for the next available test and would spend eight hours a day for six weeks teaching myself math. I aced the exam and attended Motlow Community College where I achieved an Honors degree in Mass Communication. Soon after, I was awarded the Honors Transfer Fellowship to Middle Tennessee State University where I am studying screenwriting and filmmaking. Working with Professor Leland Gregory has been an amazing gift to me as a writer, and I am honored to have him guide me through this expedition of exporting my life onto the written page. This thesis project is an integral step in my career as a screenwriter and filmmaker.

## Artistic License in Screenwriting

In the creation of a screenplay based on a true story, artistic license is used to enhance characters and drive narrative structure in the necessary time allotted. Books have an unlimited number of pages to engage the reader. In his highly touted book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, Syd Field says a single script page is equal to one minute of screen time (22). Internal monologues and long conversations give depth to the characters. A film or television show has a finite number of minutes, making character development more difficult.

When a screenplay is adapted from a book or an article, the screenwriter will know that events may need to be removed, added, or shifted to drive the main storyline (Field 256). Artistic license is used to deliver an entertaining script that remains authentic to actual events and adheres to a strict time limitation. A screenwriter's contract will often dictate a feature film to be no longer than 128 pages (Field 12). If one page of script equates to one minute on screen, then a studio produced film is around two hours. In her 2006 book *Screenwriting for Dummies, 2nd Edition*, Laura Schellhardt says ten minutes of a feature-film, or ten pages of script, are the most important (225). The first ten minutes, or ten pages of the screenplay, is a critical portion in a screenplay when the consumer is either immersed in the story or oblivious to it.

Character development needs to happen fast, or you will lose the attention of your audience. In his 1997 book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and The Principles of Screenwriting*, Robert McKee discusses Joan of Arc's story. It has been written many times over with a wide range of dispositions. William Shakespeare writes her as a crazy person. Bertolt Brecht pens her as politically motivated. George Bernard Shaw paints her

as quick-witted. Hollywood screenwriters portray Joan of Arc as a romantic hero (25). Love and romance are core ideas that a vast majority of human beings easily relate to. Joan of Arc's character experiences much needed depth by adding a romantic element, but the dramatic need does not change. She still defends France against England in the Hundred Years' War (Lanthers). A romantic relationship gives the screenwriter a necessary tool to develop Joan's character within the first ten minutes of a film.

In a 2016 interview with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, *French Connection* director William Friedkin says, "I think you asked Sonny how accurate is the film, and he said about ninety-five percent accurate. And what he meant by that was the film is an impression of what happened in those ten months. An impression done in one-hundred minutes" (00:03:00-00:03:37). Book adaptations will often require the screenwriter to compress months, years, or decades of time into approximately one-hundred minutes.

In summary, books provide deeper character development and personal insight of characters through long conversations and internal monologue. Books have an infinite number of pages to provide intimate character-building details. A screenplay has a dictated number of pages the screenwriter must adhere to. Artistic license is used to compress time and expedite character growth by simplifying events and conversations. Screenwriters will also use artistic license to heighten drama but will always stay true to the core meaning of the book from which the film is being adapted.

## Examples of Artistic License in Screenwriting

### 127 Hours

*127 Hours*, directed by Danny Boyle and released in 2010 by Warner Bros. Pictures, is a film adaptation of the 2004 book *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* written by Aron Ralston. In his book, Ralston is trapped when a rock falls and pins his arm against a canyon wall. After spending 127 hours stuck in the canyon, Ralston is forced to amputate his own arm.

In the beginning pages, Ralston meets two women named Megan and Kristi in Utah's Blue John Canyon. During an awkward walk to a Blue John Canyon wall, Ralston tells the women about a pool of water at the bottom of Neon Canyon located in a different part of Utah. When Ralston, Megan, and Kristi descend the canyon wall, they do so vertically and separately (9-15).

The film adaptation shows Ralston, Megan, and Kristi's walk to the canyon wall to be relaxed and flirtatious. The path they take into the canyon is a horizontal crawl instead of a vertical descent. They remain within proximity of one another and maintain eye contact the entire time. In place of the mundane ending to Ralston, Megan, and Kristi's time together is a dramatic drop from the canyon wall into a beautiful, clear blue underwater lagoon (00:11:00-00:12:47).

The screenwriter takes elements of Aron Ralston's story and used artistic license to make the story more compelling. They merge Ralston's real-life experience in the beautiful lagoon at the bottom of Neon Canyon with his time at Blue John Canyon. Changing the awkward interactions between Ralston, Megan, and Kristi is needed to romanticize Ralston and heighten the audience's empathy for him.

## **Apollo 13**

*Apollo 13*, directed by Ron Howard and released in 1995 by Universal Pictures, is a film adaptation of the 1995 book *Lost Moon* written by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger. The book tells the tale of the troubled Apollo 13 mission to land on the surface of the moon. The most famous line from the film is “Houston, we have a problem.” Jim Lovell transmits the memorable phrase to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) after an explosion occurs in Apollo 13’s oxygen tanks (00:50:14-00:51:00).

In the book, Jim Lovell says, "Houston, we've had a problem" (95). It is a small difference that does not change the context or seriousness of the situation. The quotes are similar enough to mean the exact same thing, but “Houston, we have a problem,” rolls off the tongue. It sounds more natural than “Houston, we’ve had a problem.”

Another iconic moment in the film happens when the astronauts are dying from carbon monoxide poisoning. NASA employees engineer an impromptu air filter for the astronauts to build using the vessel’s lunar lifeboat module (01:28:10-01:29:15). The fact is the lunar life module as an air filter in case of extreme emergency was a plan that NASA formulated in 1964 and practiced in 1969 (80). In a 2001 interview with NASA, Apollo 13 astronaut Thomas K. Mattingly says, “Turns out on Apollo 13 we didn’t do but one thing out of the entire mission that had not been simulated in some way before. Movies and everything makes it look like we invented a lot of stuff” (Wright).

In a 1998 interview transcribed by NASA, *Apollo 13* technical advisor Davis Scott discusses another small change in the film. Shortly after the explosion in the oxygen tanks of Apollo 13, the film shows a NASA employee sitting at a machine with several indicator lights. Many of the lights are blinking red or yellow. The blinking effect

of the lights is added to catch the audience's attention (00:55:55-00:56:20). The fact is that the lights on the panel are off until a malfunction occurs. Then, it will display a solid light to indicate a problem. Scott says the filmmakers were aware of the proper operation of the panel lighting but admits the audience would likely have missed the point if not for the artistic license taken (Woods). The different dialogue, the lunar module air filter ad-lib, and the blinking lights are all used to build dramatic tension. They are small changes that do not alter the truth of the events shared by NASA and the crew of the Apollo 13 space mission.

## **Argo**

*Argo*, directed by Ben Affleck and released in 2012 by Warner Bros. Pictures, is a film adaptation of the Wired.com article "The Great Escape: How the CIA Used a Fake Sci-Fi Flick to Rescue Americans from Tehran" written by Joshua Bearman in 2007. The article tells the story of the rescue effort run by Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent Tony Mendez. The Americans being rescued presented falsified documents to Iranian security at the airport and were able to sneak out of the country.

The facts can be found in the 2013 article "'Argo': What Really Happened in Tehran? A CIA Agent Remembers" written by Marcus Rosenbaum for National Public Radio (NPR) online. In one instance, an Iranian security guard walked off with one the American's fake documents. The American feared that his documents would not be verified and says it felt like the guard was gone for an extremely long time. However, this was simply a case of the guard taking a tea break during his shift. The guard returned, stamped the documents, and let the American pass through the security checkpoint area.

Mendez and the rescued Americans admit the end of the movie is all Hollywood hype but say the chase scene accurately represents the tension felt as they waited for hours inside the Iranian airport (Rosenbaum).

The film shows Iranian airport security matching passports and document numbers with the individual presenting them (01:30:50-01:36:40). The fact is the papers could be verified, but there was no way for security to check in real time with the technology available to them (Rosenbaum).

In the film's final act, the plane carrying the Americans gains speed on the runway as police vehicles and armed military vehicles race to catch them. The armed men and police pull their vehicles beside the plane but cannot get in front before it takes off into the sky (01:40:20-01:42:05). The fact is no cars chased the plane (Rosenbaum).

The technical abilities of the Iranian government and the chase scene are completely fabricated for the purposes of dramatic tension. Adding the paperwork match element holds legitimacy because the falsified documents are the weak point of the American's escape plan. If one of the six Americans is discovered with fake papers, the entire airport would go on lockdown. As mentioned earlier, the subjects of the article indicate the tension felt during their escape is accurately represented.

### **The Basketball Diaries**

*The Basketball Diaries*, directed by Scott Kalvert and released in 1995 by New Line Cinema, is a film adaptation of the autobiographical book *The Basketball Diaries* written by Jim Carroll in 1978. The book is a memoir exploring Carroll's struggles with drug addiction during his time as a high school basketball player.

In the film, Carroll takes a mixture of unknown medication. The result leads him to quit the basketball team and drop out of high school (00:49:00-00:54:30). Later in the film, Carroll is shown drinking alcohol in a bar as he watches the 1966 All-Star game on the television (01:08:55-01:09:40).

The fact is Jim Carroll never drops out of high school. In 2015, Kit Fluker of the New York Public Library Manuscript and Archive Division compiled information from Carroll's personal diary purchased from the Carroll estate. These diaries, known as *The Jim Carroll Papers*, reveal Carroll graduated from Trinity School in 1968 (2). On top of not dropping out, Carroll never watches the game from home. He actually plays in the game (Carroll 152-155).

Another change is the decade in which the film takes place. Jim Carroll's life story takes place in the 1960s but the film presents it as happening in the 1990s. The filmmakers use the time change to connect the 1990s Generation X audience to Lovell's story through the shared lens of drug addiction. The fact of when the story took place is less important than personalizing the experience for the 1990s Generation X audience.

### **Dead Man Walking**

*Dead Man Walking*, directed by Tim Robbins and released in 1995 by Gramercy Pictures, is a film adaptation of the book *Dead Man Walking* written by Sister Helen Prejean in 1993. The book is a memoir of Sister Helen's time spent as a spiritual advisor to death row inmates Robert Lee Willis and Elmo Patrick Sonnier.

In the film, Sean Penn's character is man named Matthew Poncelet. Penn's character is a combination of Robert Lee Willis and Elmo Patrick Sonnier. The intent of

the film is to capture the essence of Sister Jean's journey with the death penalty. The filmmakers use the amalgamation of Willis and Sonnier to compress time and tell her story in the allotted time on a Hollywood film.

### **The French Connection**

*The French Connection*, directed by William Friedkin and released in 1971, is a film adaptation of the book *The French Connection* written by Robin Moore in 1969. The book tells the story of New York City detectives Sonny Grasso and Eddie Egan as they work to dismantle a drug cartel.

The most famous scene in the film is a high-speed chase through the busy streets of New York City (01:10:35-01:12:55). The fact is the chase never happened. In his 2016 interview with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Friedkin says without the added chase scene, the finished product would be a boring film about police surveillance (00:03:37-00:04:08). By placing the exciting car chase at the seventy-minute mark of the film, Friedkin creates a needed sense of satisfaction for the audience.

### **Goodfellas**

*Goodfellas*, directed by Martin Scorsese and released in 1990 by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, is a film adaptation of the book *Wiseguy: Life in a Mafia Family* written by Nicholas Pileggi in 1985. The book is the story of Henry Hill, a New York City mobster who testifies against the Lucchese crime family.

One change in the film is the timeline surrounding the death of Lucchese crime family member Billy Batts. Upon his release from prison, Batts insults another mobster

named Tommy DeVito. The book describes DeVito planning the kidnapping and murder of Batts for weeks (129-133). In the film, the Billy Batts murder happens seconds after DeVito is insulted (00:52:50-00:57:10). Scorsese compresses time by removing weeks in between the insult and the murder.

Another change made for the film involves the Air France Heist. In the book, the mobster crew hire a prostitute to sleep with a security guard as a distraction for the crew to steal his keys (108-121). In the film, the security guard is a recurring character named Frenchy. He is a low-level mobster in the Lucchese crime family who tips the crew off (00:18:44-00:19:40). Making Frenchy the catalyst for the Air France Heist compresses time and removes an unnecessary character from the story.

### **Into the Wild**

*Into the Wild*, directed by Sean Penn and released in 2007 by Paramount Pictures, is a film adaptation of the book *Into the Wild* written by Jon Krakauer in 1996. The book tells the life story of Christopher McCandless, who journeys into the Alaskan wilderness and suffers a tragic death at the age of twenty-four.

The book covers McCandless childhood and high school years, but the film excludes them. The thesis of the film revolves around McCandless' fatal decision to venture into the wilds of Alaska. Removing his early years compresses time and allows the filmmakers to immediately immerse the audience into the harsh winter of Alaska. This increases the focus of the audience and increases the emotional response to McCandless' final days alive.

Another change made for the film involves a sixteen-year-old girl named Tracy. The book describes a short period of time McCandless spends at a campsite where he meets Tracy. She develops a harmless crush on him. He emphatically denies her advances and leaves the campsite (44). The film shows McCandless also having romantic feelings toward Tracy, but he does not act on them (01:33:20-01:44:30).

By adding depth to Tracy and McCandless's relationship, the filmmakers give McCandless the ability to fight against his carnal nature. The audience recognizes the awkwardness of Tracy's age and feels good when McCandless chooses to do the right thing. This increases the audience's empathy for him as he withers away and dies later in the film.

### **October Sky**

*October Sky*, directed by Joe Johnston and released in 1999 by Universal Pictures, is a film adaptation of the book *Rocket Boys* written by Homer Hickman, Jr. in 1998. The book is a memoir of Hickman's time building rockets in high school.

In the film, Homer receives a science fair award for one of his rocket designs. As he shakes hands with people in attendance, legendary rocket scientist Wernher von Braun shakes Homer's hand and wishes him luck. Before Homer realizes what has happened, Wernher von Braun disappears into a sea of people (01:20:20-01:30:20).

The fact is Homer never met Wernher von Braun. In the book, Homer is stationed in an auditorium with his rocket design for the science fair where he meets the judges of the competition. One of the judges works for Wernher von Braun and informs Homer that von Braun is on the premises. An excited Homer sets off to find von Braun but has no

lock. When he returns to his table, Homer sees the judges have awarded him first place for his rocket design. He also learns Wernher von Braun visited Homer's table in his absence (547-548). Creating a passing handshake between von Braun and Homer eliminates any disappointment the audience would feel from Homer missing the chance to meet his hero.

### **Walk the Line**

*Walk the Line*, directed by James Mangold and released in 2005 by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox is a film adaptation of the book *Cash: The Autobiography*, written by Johnny Cash in 1997. The book tells the life story of country music legend Johnny Cash.

In the film, Johnny Cash proposes recording an album live at Folsom Prison. A record label executive strongly advises Cash not to do so, citing the possibility of Cash's Christian fanbase turning on him for performing in front of murderers and rapists. Cash defies the record company and records a live album at Folsom (02:11:10- 02:17:00).

The fact is Cash was performing prison shows years before he recorded *Live from Folsom Prison* album. In his autobiography, Cash says, "The prison albums were natural ideas. By 1968, I'd been doing prison concerts for more than a decade" (269-271). The filmmakers inserted the record label executive's opposition to a prison album to give Cash an opportunity to defy authority. It adds another layer to Cash's rebel persona in the moments building to the film's climax at Folsom concert.

## Maxwell's House: A Miniseries

*Maxwell's House* is a limited series television show based on the turbulent true story of the author's life. It is written in three parts, with each season containing three episodes. A significant time gap occurs between each season. Strong elements of these screenplays include likeable heroes, a violent villain, interesting character arcs, and meaningful emotional change for the heroes at the conclusion of each season. A trifecta of episodes completes a season, and when viewed as a whole, represents the equivalent of the beginning, middle, and end of a three-act structure.

In the beginning, we meet the Maxwell family: Marie, Keith, Tim, and Brian. Marie is the hero of season one. In the 2005 screenwriting manual *Save The Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*, Blake Snyder explains the title of the book, and how a good screenwriter can get the audience behind the hero of the story. The trick is to have the hero complete a noble task like saving a cat to let the audience know this is the person they should be cheering on (Snyder 121). The audience needs to support and empathize with Marie immediately. To accomplish this, her character is given the choice to risk her life in order to save the life of an injured kitten in the first ten minutes of *Maxwell's House: Season One, Episode One*.

Keith is the violent villain of *Maxwell's House*. In the 1996 book *Elements of Screenwriting: A Guide for Film and Television Writing*, Irwin Blacker says violent conflict can be a tool for good script writing (11). The author of *Maxwell's House* delivers a brutally honest depiction of domestic violence. The ultra-violent depiction of domestic violence in *Maxwell's House* transforms the emotion of the audience from sympathy to empathy.

Despite being the negative force, a crucial component to Keith's character is the exhibition of a behavior in contrast to his evil nature. In the 2006 book *Blueprint for Screenwriting: A Complete Writer's Guide to Story, Structure, and Character Development*, Rachel Ballon says an audience is intrigued when the villain displays a multi-dimensional personality (54). Keith is extremely violent, but he has a charming personality, spends quality time with his children, and shows concern for a family living in a homeless encampment.

One of the most important elements of *Maxwell's House: Season One* is a shift of power between the hero and villain (Snyder 149-150). Marie begins powerless against Keith but gradually gains the confidence to fight back. This is known as a change in status. Status refers to the power dynamic between the main characters. Keith loses his position of high status as he no longer dominates the action of the story (Schellhardt 90). At the conclusion of *Maxwell's House: Season One*, Marie transitions from low status to high status when she physically attacks Keith and threatens to kill him.

Tim is the hero of *Maxwell's House: Season Two*. He overcomes his injuries but finds himself in a domestic violence situation. The main character of a story needs a specific goal they are trying to achieve. Giving the hero an identifiable goal engages the audience and holds their attention (Ballon 32). Tim reluctantly takes on the burden of caring for Marie and Brian's family while trying to find peace and happiness in his immediate family life. His goal is to be the patriarch of the Maxwell family, but he must overcome the perils of his own domestic violence situation.

Brian is the hero of *Maxwell's House: Season Three*, and ultimately the hero of the entire mini-series. The original goal for Brian is to be in the movies. He discovers it at

the age of five and continues to pursue it throughout the entirety of Marie and Tim's character arcs. Brian's overall hero's journey begins in the very first episode titled *The Battle of Normandy* when he sees *Back to the Future* on the big screen. It concludes in the final episode titled *In the Name of the Mother* when he attends MTSU film school and makes his first movie.

### **Season 1, Episode 1 - The Battle of Normandy**

Meet the Maxwell Family who live in a small house on Normandy Lane. Keith, a handsome and charismatic man prone to violent mood swings. Marie, a beautiful and timid woman who bears the wrath of Keith's fits of rage. Tim, a strong and confident nine-year-old boy, and his brother Brian, a whiny 7-year-old boy. Marie, Tim, and Brian risk their lives to save a cat from certain death. Keith takes the boys to a local arcade and teaches them how to steal games with a quarter connected to a string. Marie is desperate to pay past due bills and calls her mother asking to borrow money. Keith finds out and hits Marie in the face with the heavy rotary phone base.

### **Season 1, Episode 2 - A Tim to Kill: Part I**

Tim is involved in a life-threatening accident and spends six months in the hospital. Tim returns home but suffers a series of life-threatening seizures. Marie barely clings to sanity as she cooks, cleans, and caters to an injured Tim twenty-four hours a day. Tim has an especially bad seizure that lands him in the hospital. Keith ignores his responsibilities, and instead of visiting Tim in the hospital, he takes Brian to the movie theater to see *Back to the Future*. Brian falls in love with cinema and declares he is going

to make movies when he grows up. Keith steals candy and popcorn on the way out of the theater and gives it to a homeless family. Marie hires John Grisham to represent Tim in a lawsuit against the state of Mississippi.

### **Season 1, Episode 3 - A Tim to Kill: Part II**

Marie leaves Keith and takes the boys to Nashville. Keith follows her to Nashville and rents an apartment across the hall. He performs pathetic, romantic acts to win back Marie's love. John Grisham represents Tim by day and writes *A Time to Kill* by night. At trial, Tim is awarded 2 million dollars in damages. John Grisham presents Marie with a signed copy of *A Time to Kill*. She works third shift at a hospital and allows Keith to babysit. He secretly loads the kids in the car after she leaves and stalks her as the kids sleep in the back seat. After seeing Marie with another man on her break, he drives back to the apartment, turns off all the lights, and waits for her to return. She arrives home, and he beats her unmercifully. He leaves her lifeless on the kitchen floor and searches for the copy of *A Time to Kill*. As he rips pages from the book, Marie picks up a VCR and smashes it across the back of Keith's head. He tries to stand, but she hits him again even harder. A streak of blood is left behind as he crawls his way out of the apartment. Marie says she is buying a gun, and if he touches her again, she will kill him.

### **Season 2, Episode 1 - The Brothers Grimm**

An eighteen-year-old Brian flashes back to a childhood memory of making a promise to his fourth-grade teacher Mr. Bailey. Brian fulfills the promise when he shows Mr. Bailey his high school diploma but is told to come back when he graduates college.

Tim gets married, becomes a victim of domestic violence at the hands of his high-school sweetheart, and is swindled out of his John Grisham settlement money. Marie has become indigent, lives a hermit's life in an upstairs room of Tim's house, and shows beginning signs of dementia. Brian and Tim's relationship is fractured after a physical confrontation. Brian fills out an application to Middle Tennessee State University but is arrested for simple possession of marijuana before he can submit it.

### **Season 2, Episode 2 - Death of a Used Car Salesman**

Brian is arrested and incarcerated enough times to montage his mugshots. He celebrates his twenty-first birthday incarcerated at the Rutherford County Correctional Work Center (RCCWC). Three weeks later, Keith suddenly passes away, and Brian is released from RCCWC on a three-day furlough. His release to attend the funeral in Memphis is predicated on the condition that Tim is criminally responsible for Brian's actions during the furlough. Marie is in rough shape mentally and physically, but she attends Keith's funeral. They bond over Brian's jail stories and memories of their childhood with Keith before Tim's accident. Tim drops Brian back off at the jail, and after Brian has been returned to his cell, Tim pays to place \$100 into Brian's commissary account.

### **Season 2, Episode 3 - The Birdman of New Salem**

Brian, now in his mid-twenties and fully institutionalized, embraces being a scoundrel and uses fake social security numbers to avoid arrest. He meets Taby, a twenty-year-old woman. They quickly fall in love and get married. Tim, now divorced and

remarried, lives a comfortable life with his new wife and three children. Marie also lives with Tim and is slipping further into expected dementia. Brian turns himself into the county jail on New Salem Highway, where he spends the next six months in a concrete Hell. Tim allows Taby to move in with his family after she learns she is pregnant, but he does not allow Brian to live there after his release from jail.

### **Season 3, Episode 1 - Pump Up the Volume: Part I**

Brian, now in his late thirties, lives with Taby and their son Mike in a one-bedroom apartment. He sits on a plane and flashes back to Tim giving him a VHS copy of the film *Clerks* from director Kevin Smith. Taby maxes out their only credit card to buy Brian a plane ticket to Canada, and he leaves the South for the first time in his life to play charity hockey with his hero Kevin Smith. He drives from Smyrna, Tennessee to Red Bank, New Jersey regularly to play hockey with Kevin Smith over the next year. During these trips, he meets Kevin Smith's best friends Bryan Johnson, Walt Flanagan, and Brian Quinn. They invite Brian to be a regular guest on their mega-popular podcast *Tell 'Em Steve Dave* (TESD). Tim works a high-paying job that he hates and is showing signs of a mental breakdown. Despite living twenty minutes away, months have passed since Brian last visited. Marie is diagnosed with a brain tumor and scheduled for surgery.

### **Season 3, Episode 2 - Pump Up the Volume: Part II**

Brian explodes in popularity from appearances on *TESD*. He starts a production company out of his living room and commands thousands of downloads with every show he releases. He takes a show booking the same week as Marie's brain surgery and tells

her he will see her when he gets back. Tim quits his high-paying job to act as a full-time nurse for Marie during her long recovery from brain surgery. Two days after the surgery, while Brian is still away, Marie suddenly passes away. Tim witnesses Marie's death and spirals into depression. Brian's fame is short lived and his podcast numbers dip to almost nothing. He faces intense backlash from his *TESD* appearances. The police converge on his home in the middle of the night when an angry *TESD* listener calls in a fake kidnapping. Brian erases his online presence and shuts down his production company. Taby gets a job that pays more than double what Brian is earning. Tim and Brian scatter Marie's ashes and make a promise to live life in search of happiness and health. Tim turns down a high-paying office job and opens his own lawn care business. Brian quits his desk job and applies for a grant to attend MTSU film school.

### **Season 3, Episode 3 - In the Name of the Mother**

Brian, now forty-two years old, flashes back to memories of Keith taking him to the movie theater. he ties his love of movies to a juxtaposition of Keith's pure joy and vehement rage. Now a student at MTSU, Brian stands behind a film camera on the set of a student film he is directing. Mike also attends MTSU film school and is on set as a part of the class. Brian returns to RCCWC where he creates the first media production class in the state of Tennessee. Taby is now the warehouse manager at her place of work. She saves enough money for the down payment on a home. Tim expands his lawn care business and lives a life of luxury with his wife and kids. They all meet once a year at the spot where Marie's ashes were scattered to celebrate her memory.

## Reflection

As I reflect on my thesis project for the Honors college at MTSU, I am one semester away from receiving my bachelor's degree in Video and Film Production with Honors. I dreamed of being a filmmaker at the age of five. I dreamed of attending MTSU when I graduated from high school at eighteen years old. More than two decades later, at the ripe age of forty-two years old, my childhood dreams became reality when I was offered the Transfer Fellowship from the Honors college at MTSU. I am forever grateful to the Honors college for allowing me to attend film school and giving me the freedom to work on a creative project. The road to completing my thesis project was fraught with unwarranted stress, but the freedom given to me with the project was enough to carry me through the most stressful of days.

In the beginning, I was overwhelmed by the scope of the project. As a transfer student, it took me a few weeks just to get a feel for the campus. I was struggling to lock down a thesis topic, and having to immediately find a professor to be my thesis advisor without ever meeting a single professor at MTSU was terrifying. My initial thesis advisor was extremely smart and talented, but I found each conversation with him led me further away from an achievable creative thesis project. I was fortunate to meet Leland Gregory in Scripts for Media class, where I found a love for screenwriting and a thesis advisor. After I had a vision for my project and a thesis advisor, my anxiety waned considerably. As I write this reflection, I have zero stress related to the completion of the project and look forward to defending its merit.

Evaluating the relevance of the coursework, I am reminded of several valuable tools I added to my filmmaking toolbox. Many of these tools make me a better

screenwriter in general. I used a tool from the screenwriting textbook *Save the Cat!* in this thesis work when I literally had my mother save a cat to make the audience care about her. My hero is likeable and changes by the end of the story. My villain has not changed at all. My story has an arc and is told in a concise manner. I also learned an incredible amount of valuable information not used in this thesis. Several of the screenwriting books I read for research covered career-specific concepts like selling a screenplay and hiring an agent.

The most important lessons learned during my coursework relate to artistic license. It was extremely important for me to tell my life story in a compelling, respectful, and cinematic fashion. Through this thesis project, I was able to learn and apply crucial methods used in an autobiographical adaptation. There are some small changes made to drive the narrative and build characters, one example being the scene where Keith teaches the boys how to steal games with a quarter on a string. The factual truth is it was my grandfather who gave us the stringed quarter, but having Keith do it is much better for the screenplay. It builds on his scoundrel character and ties into the narrative of him taking the kids to fun places after he physically beats their mother. There is also one massive change to the factual story of the Maxwell family.

I was taught on day one of my first screenwriting class that every main character must be important to the story. If they can be removed, and the story does not change, they are an unnecessary addition to your screenplay. I knew going in that my sister Amanda was completely unnecessary to the narrative, and I even felt she would take away from the story being told. If not for the many experts telling me that truth is more

important than fact, I would have shoehorned a detrimental character into my story simply because they existed.

To summarize, my time spent completing a creative thesis project for the Honors College was well worth the effort. Despite a rough start, I was eventually able to find a vision and have a tremendous amount of fun building my creative project. I have grown exponentially as a writer and have a much better understanding of the filmmaking industry. I am very proud of what I was able to accomplish with the guidance of Leland Gregory, Judy Albakry, and the Honors College at MTSU.

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## Appendix

MAXWELL'S HOUSE

"A TIM TO KILL: PART I"

(THIRD REVISION)

Written by

Brian Maxwell

Based on a true story

EXT. HOUSE - DAY

A single-family home in the beginning stages of disrepair.

A small, hand-carved wooden sign hangs from a nail hammered into the front door. "Welcome to Maxwell's House" is painted in bright, blue letters.

MARIE, a woman in her late twenties with piercing eyes and angelic brunette shoulder-length hair, exits the house through the front door. She wears heavy makeup to cover bruises.

MARIE

Move it or lose it, boys.

BRIAN, a seven-year-old boy with curly brown hair, places one foot out the door.

TIM, a nine-year-old boy with short, dirty blonde hair, grabs Brian's shoulder and pulls him back.

TIM

Shotgun.

Brian balls his fists and stomps his feet.

BRIAN

It's my turn.

INT. CAR - DAY

A dented station wagon leaks oil on the cracked, concrete driveway. Marie turns the key and cranks the engine.

The passenger-side door pops open, and Tim climbs into the front seat next to Marie.

BRIAN

IT'S MY--

The car door slams. Brian screams and sobs.

She leans over Tim and cranks the handle to lower the window.

MARIE

Get in the car.

Tears drip from Brian's face as he softly weeps. His head falls limp like a baby with undeveloped neck muscles.

BRIAN

It's my turn.

He climbs in the back seat.

Marie backs the car out and drives away.

EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - DAY

Two outdated gas pumps and a payphone sit idle in the parking lot of a boarded-up building.

Marie parks the station wagon next to the payphone. She picks up the receiver and presses zero.

MARIE

Collect call.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Tim turns around in the front seat to face Brian.

TIM

You're a baby.

Brian kicks the back of the front seat.

BRIAN

It's my turn.

TIM

You can sit up here.

Brian climbs halfway into the front seat, but Tim pushes him back.

TIM

Psych.

Brian flails his body around the back seat.

EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - DAY

Marie holds the payphone receiver to her ear.

MARIE

I know, mama.

She shifts the phone to her other ear.

MARIE  
I'll pay you back--

Her head tilts back and she closes her eyes.

MARIE  
I know, mama. I--

She shifts the phone back to her other ear.

INT. CAR - DAY

Tim leans over the seat and makes his lower lip tremble.

TIM  
Are you gonna cry?

BRIAN  
Stop it.

Tears stream down Brian's face.

Tim reaches into the floorboard and grabs an empty McDonald's Happy Meal Halloween bucket and shoves it in Brian's face.

TIM  
Cry me a bucket.

Brian slaps the bucket away.

BRIAN  
I'm telling.

TIM  
Telling that you're a baby.

The station wagon shakes as Brian thrashes around.

EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - CONTINUOUS

Marie shakes her head.

MARIE  
He's their father. Hold on.

She presses the receiver to her chest.

MARIE  
KNOCK IT OFF, YOU TWO.

She returns the receiver to her ear.

MARIE  
If I pay the phone bill, I can-

Her shoulders slump. She takes a deep breath.

MARIE  
I'm sorry, mama. Thank you. I'll pay  
you back.

Marie hangs up the receiver and returns to the station wagon.

INT. CAR - DAY

Brian sits limp in the back seat with a river of tears and snot covering his face.

Marie collapses into the driver seat of the station wagon and slams the door. She looks at Brian and then at Tim.

MARIE  
What's wrong with him?

Tim smiles and shrugs his shoulders.

TIM  
I don't know.

She puts the car in drive.

MARIE  
You two will be the death of me.

EXT. CONVENIENCE STORE - DAY

The tires of the station wagon spin in place and throw gravel as they struggle to gain traction.

The station wagon abruptly stops at the exit of the abandoned convenience store parking lot.

It sits idle for a beat and drives off.

EXT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

Metal beams frame a glass door that sits between two wall sized glass windows. A neon "OPEN/CLOSED" sign hangs on the interior of the door.

A barber pole hangs on the metal frame of the store-front window. Red, white, and blue helix stripes rotate up the pole in a slow, consistent pattern.

A small asphalt parking lot with four parking spaces connects directly to the building. Two spaces have signs reading, "Employee Parking Only."

A shiny, high-end sports car and a newer model sedan sit in employee spaces. Marie parks the station wagon next to the sedan.

EXT. ADJACENT LOT - DAY

Grass stands three feet tall and blankets the ground. Plastic grocery bags, aluminum cans, and other litter hide in the grass like easter eggs.

BIRDS perch on nearby tree branches and powerlines. They chirp and sing.

CITY EMPLOYEE, a man in his 30's, parks a truck and trailer in a corner of the grass field.

A half-ton industrial mower with an attached front rotary wheel of thick, sharp blades sits on the trailer.

He unloads the mower from the trailer, positions it at the far side of the lot, and engages the rotary wheel.

A deafening roar thunders out from the spinning blades. Birds fly away in different directions.

Severed grass and mutilated trash blast out from the discharge chute.

A two-foot-wide metal attachment with "SAFETY GUARD" written in massive red letters remains on the trailer.

INT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

Wooden chairs and coffee tables echo each other on opposite sides of the carpeted area. Hairstyle books and magazines rest on the coffee tables.

Brian nestles into a wooden chair and flips the pages of a hairstyle magazine.

Carpet covers the floor between the door and a reception desk. Shelves of Paul Mitchell hair care products surround the desk.

RECEPTIONIST, a skinny woman in her 20's, talks on a brick-sized wireless telephone.

The voice of RADIO DJ rings out from a portable radio on Receptionist's desk.

RADIO DJ

This is a brand-new jam from Michael Jackson, every celebrity you can think of, and a few you ain't never even heard of. They call it... *We Are the World*.

A checkerboard of white and black ceramic floor tiles cover the remainder of floor space.

Tall mirrors line the wall parallel to a row of barber chairs. Fluorescent light reflects and bounces off floor tiles and mirrors.

The reflections dance across the sheen surface of vinyl barber chairs. A set of combs, scissors, clippers, a spray bottle, and a polyester barber cape accompany each chair.

Tim sits in a barber chair.

TIM

I want a rat tail.

BARB, a woman in her 30's, picks up a spray bottle and retrieves a comb from a jar filled with clear blue liquid.

She smiles, raises her eyebrows, and looks at Marie.

BARB

Rat tail?

MARIE

I guess.

Barb subtly shakes her head and sprays water onto Tim's hair.

MARIE

A rat tail...

Marie scrunches her face, pulls her upper lip back, and bares her teeth. She raises her arms. The index and middle fingers on both hands curl to mimic rat claws.

MARIE

For a little rat.

Her hands dart up and down, fingers twitching. She rapidly clicks her tongue and scurries to Tim. She tickles his cheek.

TIM

Cheeeeeeeeeese!

Barb points her spray bottle at Marie.

Marie holds her hands above her head.

MARIE

Don't shoot.

TIM

We surrender.

Brian pokes his head out from a hairstyle magazine

BRIAN

I want to surrender too.

Tim, Marie, and Barb share a laugh.

Marie makes her way to Brian and takes a seat next to him.

BRIAN

I want this one.

Brian places the magazine in Marie's lap and points at the picture of a handsome young man modeling a mullet.

The magazine page advertises a front, side, and back angle of the mullet style.

MARIE  
I'll bet you do.

EXT. ADJACENT LOT - DAY

Tall grass covers half the lot. Shredded litter and sheared grass paint the other half.

City Employee disengages the rotary wheel. The powerful rumble of spinning blades gradually calms to a hush.

He climbs down from the driver seat and retrieves a yellow jug labeled "DIESEL."

A small amount of fuel leaks from the jug as he fills the mower's tank.

INT. BARBER SHOP - DAY

Barb brushes hair off Tim's neck and shoulders. She spins the barber chair and picks up a hand mirror. The hand mirror catches the reflection of Tim's rat tail.

Tim grins and peers at his rat tail in the double reflection.

TIM  
Awesome.

Marie hands Receptionist a \$10 bill. Receptionist places the bill into a cash drawer and pulls out four \$1 bills. She hands the bills to Marie.

Tim hops off the barber chair and races past Marie. She hands two \$1 bills to Barb.

BARB  
Thanks, hun.

MARIE  
Ready to ride, Clyde?

Tim and Brian wrestle their way out the door. Marie follows.

EXT. ADJACENT LOT - CONTINUOUS

One lane of uncut grass stands in the field. A steel manhole cover lays in the tall, thick grass.

City Employee positions the mower and cuts the final lane of grass.

EXT. BARBER SHOP - CONTINUOUS

The roaring noise of heavy machinery echoes through the air. Tim opens the front door of the station wagon.

BRIAN  
It's my turn.

Brian yanks Tim's arm.

TIM  
Quit it.

MARIE  
Knock it off, you two.

TIM  
I'm older.

Brian begins to cry. He stomps his feet and flails his arms.

TIM  
Don't cry. It's ok. You can sit up front.

Brian immediately stops crying and springs into the front seat. Tim climbs into the back seat. Marie sits in the drive seat.

EXT. ADJACENT LOT - CONTINUOUS

The powerful mover blades vigorously force cut grass out the discharge chute. City Employee runs over the camouflaged manhole cover.

The sound of a canon blast rings out. A two-inch triangular piece of the mangled manhole cover launches from the discharge chute into the air.

EXT. BARBER SHOP - CONTINUOUS

The small weaponized piece of the mangled manhole cover shatters the window next to Tim. Blood and glass rain across the interior of the vehicle.

The makeshift cannonball splits Tim's head open and embeds itself in his skull. Tim's body falls limp.

Marie fumbles with her seatbelt. She finally disengages it and climbs over the front seat into the back seat.

Barb and Receptionist run out from the barber shop into the parking lot.

BARB

Oh my God.

Receptionist hurries back inside.

Barb makes her way to the station wagon and opens the back door.

Marie climbs out of the car, Tim's lifeless body cradled in her arms. Blood drips from Tim's head. A waterfall of tears stream from Marie's eyes.

Receptionist returns with the wireless to her ear. Her eyes stare into the distance, and her lips quiver.

RECEPTIONIST

He's hurt so bad.

Barb retrieves a blanket and lays it on the pavement. Marie places Tim onto the blanket.

Receptionist moves the phone from her ear to her chest. She looks at Marie and Barb.

RECEPTIONIST

Is he breathing?

City Employee sprints to Marie. He hands her a white towel. Marie's trembling hands press the towel to Tim's gaping wound.

BARB

I don't know. I think so. Tell them hurry.

Receptionist moves the phone back to her ear.

RECEPTIONIST

I think he's breathing. You have to hurry.

Barb balls her fists and locks eyes with City Employee.

BARB

What happened?

CITY EMPLOYEE

I... I don't know. I don't...

A faint symphony of police car, fire truck, and ambulance sirens in grows louder and louder until the army of emergency vehicles arrive.

Brian, splattered with blood, remains in the front seat of the Buick. He stares out his window at the bright, spinning lights.

MEDICS exit the ambulance and rush to unload the gurney from the rear of the vehicle. They roll it to the blood soaked blanket where Tim rests.

A medic grabs Marie's shoulder and moves her out of the way.

MEDIC

Don't worry, ma'am. I'll take good care of him.

Medic reaches down and places his hand on the crimson red towel pressed against Tim's damaged skull. Another medic gently helps Marie to her feet.

City Employee and OFFICER BEANE stand near a police car in front of the barber shop. Officer Beane shakes City Employee's hand.

EXT. ADJACENT LOT - CONTINUOUS

City Employee walks to his truck parked in the adjacent field. He climbs into the driver seat and starts the engine.

The truck and trailer drive away, taking the two-foot-wide metal attachment with "SAFETY GUARD" written in massive red letters away from the scene.

EXT. BARBER SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Red and blue lights dance as they bend and bounce off the barber shop windows.

The double doors of the ambulance stand wide open.

Tim is strapped to the gurney, head wrapped in a helmet of gauze. Medics lift him into the ambulance.

They close the ambulance doors.

MEDIC

We're taking him to Le Bonheur.

Marie stands stoic. Her wide eyes do not blink as she stares at her blood-soaked hands.

The ambulance drives away with lights spinning and siren blaring.

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - EVENING

Rows of metal chairs with blue cushions fill a large room. Bright fluorescent lights gleam off freshly mopped floors and lustrous wall paint.

Several soda and snack vending machines line the wall.

Marie wears green nurse scrubs. Brian sits in the chair next to Marie. His head rests on her lap.

BRIAN

I want to go home.

MARIE

I know, baby.

Brian's voice begins to tremble.

BRIAN

Where's Dad?

MARIE

I don't know, baby.

SURGEON, a man in his 50's, enters the room. He wears a white lab coat and holds a clipboard.

Marie brushes Brian off her lap and into his chair. She stands and frantically meets the Surgeon.

MARIE

Is he alive?

SURGEON

Yes.

Marie legs wobble. She stumbles backward and falls into her chair. Brian lays his head in her lap.

BRIAN

Can we go home now?

SURGEON

He suffered a basilar fracture of the parietal bone.

Marie clutches her chest.

Surgeon kneels down and shows the clipboard to Marie. He points to an X-ray photo of Tim's broken skull.

SURGEON

His brain is swelling, and the swelling is causing his brain to press against the broken bone.

Surgeon circles a shaded area of the X-ray.

SURGEON

We need this swelling in this area to go down before we can start putting him back together.

Surgeon stands.

SURGEON

We're doing everything we can to get you back there to see him. If anything changes, I'll have a nurse find you.

Surgeon removes his hand from Marie's shoulder and exits the waiting room.

KEITH, a clean-shaven three-hundred-and-fifty-pound man stands six-foot-four and wears dirty coveralls. He stomps across the waiting room floor to Marie, his fists clenched.

Brian's head remains in Marie's lap.

KEITH

The fuck did you do?

Marie covers Brian's head with her arms.

MARIE

We were getting a haircut. I don't know--

KEITH

I don't want to hear it.

MARIE

I--

KEITH

Bitch...

Keith unclenches his fists. He raises his right hand and shows Marie the back of his hand.

KEITH

I should slap the shit out of you.

Marie leans in and covers Brian like a mother bird incubating her egg.

KEITH

Who told you to leave the house?

MARIE

I...

KEITH

Spending my money?

MARIE

I'm sorry--

KEITH

Yeah, you are.

Keith lowers his hand.

KEITH

Ain't sittin' here all night waitin' on some asshole to tell me I can see my goddamn kid.

BRIAN

I want to go home.

Keith yanks Brian into his arms. He holds Brian like a running back carries a football. Brian cries.

BRIAN

Ow.

KEITH

Man up.

Keith squints his eyes and glares at Marie.

KEITH

Something happens to my boy; I'll bury  
you next to him.

Keith exits the waiting room with Brian.

Marie places her face into her blood-stained hands and sobs.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Keith, now with a full-grown beard, enters the room.

Tim sits on the edge of a hospital bed. A 6-inch scar runs  
across his shaved head. Marie sits in a chair next to the bed.

KEITH

Let's go.

MARIE

We have to wait on the doctor.

Keith opens a cabinet and removes a handful of surgical gloves.  
He shoves the gloves into his pants pockets.

KEITH

Six goddamn months, they still looking.

MARIE

Keith -

KEITH

For what?

Keith shuffles to Tim. He tickles the scar on Tim's head.

KEITH

Your brain gonna pop out?

Tim shakes his head.

TIM

Quit it.

Keith grabs Tim's arm.

KEITH  
Boy, don't pull away from me.

MARIE  
Keith--

He releases Tim's arm and points his finger at Marie.

KEITH  
Not another word.

Keith stomps to the door. He yanks it open and sticks his head partially into the hall.

KEITH  
CAN WE GET A FUCKIN' DOCTOR IN HERE?  
THANKS.

He slams the door.

KEITH  
These bloodsuckers charge by the  
minute?

Surgeon enters the room. He peers at Keith for a beat. His eyes move to Marie and smiles.

SURGEON  
How are we today, Mrs. Maxwell

MARIE  
Tired. Ready to go home.

Surgeon removes a stethoscope from his neck, places it on Tim's chest.

SURGEON  
Deep breath in.

Tim takes a deep breath.

SURGEON  
And out.

Tim exhales.

SURGEON

You ready to go home, big guy?

Tim nods his head.

KEITH

Can we hurry the fuck up please?

Marie shift in her chair.

MARIE

Keith. Don't.

Keith's eyes widen. His nose scrunches. He grits his teeth.

KEITH

Don't fuckin' what?

Surgeon sets the stethoscope down on a rolling dinner tray. He positions himself between Keith and Marie.

SURGEON

Everything looks good. We'll have you out of here in five minutes.

Keith bites his lower lip.

KEITH

I'm goin' to the car. You got five minutes.

Keith exits the room.

Marie rises from her chair.

MARIE

I'm sorry.

SURGEON

That's ok.

Surgeon pulls out a pad and scribbles out four prescriptions. He hands them to Marie.

SURGEON

You are free to go.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - DAY

A NURSE pushes Tim in a wheelchair. She stops a few feet from the entrance.

NURSE

Good luck.

Tim stands. Nurse turns the wheelchair around and pushes it back into the hospital.

A car horn blares in the distance. Keith sits in the driver seat of the station wagon. Brian sits in the front-passenger side.

KEITH

LET'S FUCKIN' GO.

Marie rushes Tim to the car. They sit in the back seat.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

An MR. THOMPSON sits on a hospital bed.

Surgeon enters. He retrieves a clipboard from the end of the bed.

SURGEON

Good afternoon, Mr. Thompson.

He reaches his hand toward his neck area. He looks down and surveys the area.

SURGEON

Where the hell-

INT. CAR - DAY

Keith holds the steering wheel with one hand. He reaches into his pants with the other hand.

KEITH

Got you somethin', boy.

He pulls out Surgeon's stethoscope. Surgical gloves shoot out like practical joke snakes from a peanut can.

KEITH

Bet you can hear all kind of shit with this thang.

He flips the stethoscope into the back seat.

BRIAN

I want it.

Marie shakes her head.

KEITH

I'm gonna drop y'all off, and then I  
got some shit to do.

Tim places the stethoscope to his chest. He vigorously inhales  
and exhales.

MARIE

Can you take the boys? I'm exhausted.

Keith pulls into the driveway and parks.

KEITH

No. They can help you clean house.

Marie closes her eyes and sighs.

MARIE

Come on, boys.

Brian, Marie, and Tim exit the vehicle.

Keith drives away.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

PEPPER, an older poodle, sleeps on the middle cushion of an  
oversized orange sofa. Stacks of pizza boxes, beer bottles, and  
dirty laundry clutter the room.

A metal frame coffee table sits between the couch and a wood  
grain thirty-two-inch console television. An episode of *Gunsmoke*  
plays on the tv. Marie turns it off.

MARIE

Let's get this place cleaned up.

Brian lifts the top of a pizza box.

BRIAN

I want pizza.

MARIE

Maybe after we clean up.

BRIAN

PIZZA.

TIM

PIZZA.

They smack their forearms together and hi-five.

MARIE

Maybe.

MONTAGE

Marie, Tim, and Brian form a line from the living room to the kitchen. They pass trash person to person.

Tim holds a trash bag open. Marie lifts Brian and flies him around the room like an airplane as he collects beer bottles.

She flies him to Tim. He drops the beer bottles into the trash bag.

Marie and Tim life furniture. Brian struggles to maneuver a vacuum cleaner twice his size.

Marie loads clothes into a washing machine. Brian and Tim drop piles of dirty laundry at Marie's feet.

Pepper drags a pair of Keith's overalls to the pile. Marie scratches Pepper behind the ear.

Marie, Tim, Brian crash into the orange sofa. Pepper climbs to the top of the couch and watches the sun set

END MONTAGE

Marie sits in the middle of the couch. Brian and Tim rest their heads on her legs as the nap.

Tim jolts to his feet.

TIM

I feel weird.

His right arm stiffens. His eyes roll back in his head. He crashes to the ground.

Marie leaps off the couch.

MARIE

TIM.

He violently convulses.

MARIE

CALL NINE-ONE-ONE.

Brian exits the room.

Marie kneels next to Tim.

White foam forms in the corners of his mouth.

His arms and legs twitch like they are electrified. They bash against the metal legs of the coffee table.

Brian runs into the room. A forty-foot cord connects to the phone receiver in his hand.

911 OPERATOR (V.O.)

What is the address of your emergency?

BRIAN

Two fours skipped lunch cuz they eight already. Normandy.

Tim's body stutters to a stop like a go-kart running out of gas. Welts and bruises form on his arms and legs.

Marie takes the phone from Brian. A mixture of tears and mascara streak down her face.

MARIE

I need an ambulance.

911 OPERATOR (V.O.)

What is the address of your emergency?

MARIE

Four-Four-Eight Normandy Drive.

911 OPERATOR (V.O.)

Help is on the way, ma'am. Please stay on the line.

The phone drops to the ground. Marie places a pillow under Tim's Head.

Brian picks up the phone.

BRIAN

Hello?

911 OPERATOR (V.O.)

Son, can you put your mother back on the phone please?

He extends the phone receiver in Marie's direction.

BRIAN

She wants to talk to you again.

MARIE

JUST BRING THE FUCKING AMBULANCE, LADY!

Brian giggles into the phone receiver.

BRIAN

She can't talk right now.

A symphony of sirens form in the distance. The remote melody grows to an ear-piercing whine.

Red and blue lights flash across the walls.

911 OPERATOR (V.O.)

Can you open the door for me, son?

Brian opens the door. MEDICS push in a stretcher. POLICE and FIREMEN stream through the door. They stand elbow to elbow.

Officer Beane pushes his way into the room.

OFFICER BEANE

How about we clear on out here and give these boys room to work.

Police and Fireman file out of the room.

Medics load Tim onto the gurney and roll him outside.

Officer Beane extends his hand to Marie and helps her stand.

OFFICER BEANE

Just you and the other boy here?

He adjusts his cowboy hat.

MARIE

Yes, sir.

OFFICER BEANE

Come on then. I'll give a ride to the hospital.

INT. POLICE CAR - NIGHT

Marie and Brian sit in the back seat of a police cruiser. Officer Beane steers the car with one hand and holds a CB radio in the other. A mesh panel of steel separates them.

OFFICER BEANE

Transporting two to Le Bonheur.

DISPATCH OFFICER (V.O.)

Ten-four, Chief.

Officer Beane turns the knob on his CB radio to the left. The red power indicator light goes dark.

OFFICER BEANE

You two alright back there?

Brian hugs Marie's waist tight. She stares down at the top of his head.

MARIE

We're fine. Can you check on my son?

OFFICER BEANE

I'm sure they're taking good care of him.

He removes his cowboy hat and tosses it on the seat next to him.

OFFICER BEANE

That's a real bad accident your boy had.

Marie lifts her head.

MARIE

What?

OFFICER BEANE

Damn shame.

Marie stares blankly at Officer Beane.

OFFICER BEANE

Lots of folks tore up about it.

He parks the car under the awning of a hospital entrance.

The words "Le Bonhuer Children's Hospital EMERGENCY ROOM" reflect off the hood of the car.

Marie pulls on the door handle. The door does not open.

OFFICER BEANE

And that's all it was. An accident.

Officer Beane shifts his body sideways in the seat. He picks up his hat and opens his car door.

OFFICER BEANE

Best to just let it be and worry about your boy.

MARIE

Can you let us out please?

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Officer Beane stretches his arms. He dusts off his leg with his cowboy hat.

Marie knocks on the car window.

Officer Beane sighs. He returns the hat to his head and opens Marie's door.

OFFICER BEANE

You two stay out of trouble now. You hear?

He reaches down and rustles Brian's hair.

MARIE

Thanks for the ride.

Brian speaks in spooky, gravely voice.

BRIAN  
Hey, lady. Thanks for the ride.

OFFICER BEANE  
Boy, did you just call me lady?

MARIE  
It's from a movie he likes.

Brian bangs his fists against the car hood.

BRIAN  
I WANT MY CAKE, YOU DIRTY BITCH. IT'S  
FATHER'S DAY.

Officer Beane stares wide-eyed at Brian.

Marie shakes her head.

MARIE  
Boy...

She grabs his arm and drags him inside the hospital.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Tim lies unconscious in a hospital bed. Tubes and wires run from his arms to several different machines. The hums and beeps of the monitors break the silence.

Brian sleeps in a chair next to the hospital bed. Marie sits in a folding chair.

Keith enters. He kicks Brian's feet.

KEITH  
Get up, boy. Let your old man sit down.

Brian blinks his eyes as he adjusts to the light. Keith lifts him out of the chair and sets him on the ground.

KEITH  
Heard you was cussin' last night.

Brian shakes his head.

BRIAN

Nuh uh.

MARIE

He was doing Creepshow again.

Brian contorts his face and shrugs his arms.

BRIAN

Jordy Verrill, you lunkhead.

Keith belly laughs.

BRIAN

Daddy, it itches.

He feverishly scratches his entire body.

KEITH

You got meteor shit on you.

Brian mimics a shotgun in his mouth.

BRIAN

PA-KOW.

He shakes and falls still on the floor.

Keith leans back deep in his chair. He stares at the ceiling.

KEITH

This place is depressin' me.

He kicks Brian in the leg.

KEITH

Come on, boy. Let's go.

MARIE

You're leaving?

Keith scoffs though a smile. He nudges Brian with his elbow.

KEITH

We're going to the movies.

Brian's head snaps to attention. His eyes dance left to right. He springs to his feet.

MARIE

I have to be at work in four hours.

A wall clock displays "3:00 PM."

KEITH

We'll be back. Don't be a bitch about it.

MARIE

I can't miss anymore.

Keith raises the back of his hand to slap her but lowers it at the last second.

KEITH

I said we'll be fuckin' back.

He exits. Brian follows.

Marie wipes tears from her eyes. She pulls out a Yellow Pages phone book and flips pages.

She stops on the "LAWYERS" page and rips it out.

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

A marquee hangs above a brick building. It advertises "LETHAL WEAPON, PLATOON, RAISING ARIZONA, BEVERLY HILLS COP II" in black and white letters.

Keith stands alone at a ticket window. TICKET AGENT speaks through a slot in the glass panel.

TICKET AGENT

How can I help you?

KEITH

One for Creepshow.

TICKET AGENT

Three-fifty.

Keith slides three one-dollar bills through the slot.

KEITH

Looks like I'm a little short. Can you spot me?

Ticket Agent slides the money back.

TICKET AGENT  
Sorry, sir. They count the money.

An ear-to-ear smile creeps across Keith's face. He rifles through his pocket.

KEITH  
Well, would ya lookee here?

He holds up two quarters.

KEITH  
Found 'em.

The quarters rattle around the tray after he drops them in.

TICKET AGENT  
Theater four.

Keith takes his ticket and enters the theater.

INT. MOVIE THEATER - DAY

A concession stand sits just inside the entrance. A large popcorn machine sits idle, half-full of popped corn.

The sound of kicks and punches is broadcast through arcade machine speakers.

Six theater entrances on the left. Six on the right. Above each door is a small marquee that displays the name of the film and theater number.

Keith walks past theater four to the end of the hall. He opens a door with "EXIT ONLY" written in red letters.

Brian enters the theater through the exit only door. He holds an empty soda cup and popcorn tub.

KEITH  
Anybody see you?

Brian nods his head.

BRIAN  
Yep.

KEITH  
Shit. Who seen ya?

BRIAN  
The camping people.

They enter theater four.

INT. THEATER FOUR - CONTINUOUS

A short film with animated food products plays on a massive screen. Cartoon hot dogs, popcorn, and sodas sing songs about the concession stand in the lobby.

PEOPLE sit scattered in rows of seats that cascade from high to low.

KEITH  
Camping people?

BRIAN  
In the tent.

Keith plops into a seat.

KEITH  
Hurry up.

Brian scurries away.

INT. CONCESSION STAND - MOMENTS LATER

Ticket Agent rests his elbows on a glass display case. Inside the case is rows of candy.

A hand reaches up and places an empty popcorn tub on the counter.

Ticket Agent leans over the counter and peers down.

BRIAN  
Free refill please.

TICKET AGENT  
Where'd you come from?

BRIAN  
My mom's vagina.

He places the empty cup next to the empty popcorn tub.

BRIAN  
Dr. Pepper... no ice.

Ticket Agent picks up the empty containers and turns around to fill them.

Brian gazes at a Street Fighter arcade machine.

TICKET AGENT  
Boy... Little boy.

Popcorn spills on the counter as Brian grabs the overfilled tub. He tucks in under his arm and picks up the drink.

BRIAN  
Thanks.

He gingerly strolls across the theater floor. He leans left and right to balance the popcorn and soda.

INT. THEATER FOUR - MOMENTS LATER

The *Evil Dead 2* movie trailer plays on the big screen.

BEGIN INSERT THEATER SCREEN

ASH WILLIAMS chops the head off a DEMON POSSESSED WOMAN. Her head flips and rolls in the air.

END INSERT

Brian sits next to Keith.

BRIAN  
Cool.

He hands over the popcorn and soda.

INT. MOVIE THEATER - EVENING

Brian and Keith exit theater four.

KEITH  
Tuck your shirt in.

INT. CONCESSION STAND - MOMENTS LATER

Keith sets the empty popcorn tub and cup on the glass counter. He flashes his wide smile again.

KEITH

Can I get a refill on these? Dr.  
Pepper... no ice. Thank you so much.

Ticket Agent turns to fill the popcorn. The smile on Keith's face turns to a scowl.

He reaches behind the counter, removes several boxes of candy from the display case, and stuffs them down the front of Brian's shirt.

EXT. MOVIE THEATER - MOMENTS LATER

Brian holds the filled popcorn tub. Keith takes a sip from the soda.

They round the corner to the rear of the building.

A tattered blue tent sits near a patch of woods.

HOMELESS MAN, a thin man in his 30's, and HOMELESS WOMAN, a thin woman in her 20's, stand next to a rusty grill with a small fire in it.

HOMELESS CHILD, a seven-year-old girl, sits on a dirty blanket. She plays with broken *He-Man* action figures and a naked Barbie doll.

KEITH

Howdy.

HOMELESS MAN

We wasn't bothering nobody.

Homeless woman cowers behind Homeless man.

KEITH

Didn't mean to scare ya.

Keith tugs on Brian's shirt. Boxes of candy cascade down like quarters from a slot machine jackpot.

KEITH

Thought your girl might like some.

He picks up a package of Milk Duds and offers them to Homeless Child.

KEITH  
These are my fav'rits.

BRIAN  
Those are gross.

Keith squints his eyes, scrunches his nose, and stares at Brian.

HOMELESS GIRL  
Can I have some?

KEITH  
You can have 'em all, little lady.

Brian stamps his feet.

BRIAN  
I want some.

Keith grips Brian's arm and squeezes tight. He speaks through clinched teeth.

KEITH  
Eat the popcorn when we get home.

Homeless Girl stuffs Milk Duds into her mouth.

HOMELESS GIRL  
Thank you.

HOMELESS MAN  
Thank you.

HOMELESS WOMAN  
Thank you.

KEITH  
Happy to help.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Tim sleeps in the hospital bed. Marie sits in the chair.

The wall clock displays "6:45 PM."

Marie picks up the room phone and presses numbers. She raises the phone receiver to her ear.

INT. HOUSE - NIGHT

Keith lies on the orange sofa. The half-filled tub of popcorn and soda cup sit on the coffee table.

The Andy Griffith Show plays on the tv. Brian sits in the floor and plays with World Wrestling Federation action figures.

The sound of the ringing telephone echoes from the kitchen.

KEITH

Get the phone.

Brian hops to his feet and runs into the kitchen. He returns with the leashed phone receiver and extends it to Keith.

BRIAN

It's mom.

Keith sits up. He grabs the cup and sucks down the last bit of soda. He places it back on the table, sighs, and takes the phone from Brian.

KEITH

What?

MARIE (V.O.)

I need the car to go to work.

KEITH

Tell 'em your kid's dying.

MARIE (V.O.)

I can't miss any more-

KEITH

TELL 'EM TO KISS MY ASS THEN.

He throws the phone across the room and lies back down.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Marie holds the phone receiver to her ear.

MARIE

Hello?

A beat.

MARIE

Hello?

CLICK. Dial Tone.

She replaces the phone to its base. Tears stream down her cheeks.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Tim sits up in the hospital bed, free of any tubes or cords.

Marie packs their belongs into a bag.

Brian enters the room.

BRIAN

Dad's in the car. He said hurry up.

Marie hugs him.

MARIE

Did you have a good time at the movies?

Brian smiles and nods his head.

BRIAN

I saw boobies.

Marie laughs.

MARIE

Boobies?

BRIAN

Yep. And then she got...

He raises his arms and arches his back.

BRIAN

...killed by the lake monster. HA HA  
HA.

She laughs again.

MARIE

Sounds like fun.

He spins around and punches the air.

BRIAN  
It was awesome.

Tim climbs down from the hospital bed.

TIM  
Sounds dumb.

BRIAN  
You're dumb.

Marie picks up the bag.

MARIE  
Ready, Freddy?

BRIAN  
Eddie Spaghetti.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT - DAY

Keith sits behind the wheel of the station wagon. He lays on the car horn as Marie, Tim, and Brian exit the hospital.

They shuffle to the car. Brian and Tim sit in the back. Marie sits in the front passenger side.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

KEITH  
'Bout fuckin' time. What were you doin'?

MARIE  
Talking to the doctor.

He jerks the gear shift to the Drive position.

KEITH  
And it took that fuckin' long?

He floors the gas pedal. Tires screech as rubber peels against pavement.

INT. GROCERY STORE - DAY

Grocery items sit on organized shelves. Twelve CASHIERS work the cash register of a numbered lane with conveyer belts.

CUSTOMERS form lines at every lane. Some load groceries from carts onto the conveyer belt. Others wait their turn.

A time clock hangs on the wall with timecards next to it.

Marie enters through a motion sensor glass door. She rushes to the clock and picks up her card.

MIKE BELL, a white man in his 40's, wears a dress shirt, necktie, and a "STORE MANAGER" nametag. He steals the card from her hand.

MIKE BELL

We need to talk.

MARIE

I'm already late.

CASHIER (O.S.)

Manager to seven.

MIKE BELL

That's what we need to talk about. I've got to let you go.

He slides her timecard into his shirt pocket.

MIKE BELL

If you come back later today, I'll have your paycheck ready.

CASHIER (O.S.)

Can I get a manager to seven please?

Marie grabs Mike's arm.

MARIE

It won't happen again. I promise.

MIKE BELL

But it will happen again. I'm really sorry about what happened to your boy, but I need people who are here.

CASHIER (O.S.)

WE NEED A MANGER TO SEVEN NOW PLEASE.  
MANAGER TO SEVEN. THANK YOU.

Mike's shoulders sag. He shakes his head slightly and sighs.

MIKE BELL  
I'm sorry. I've got to handle this.  
Good luck to you.

He scurries off to lane seven.

Marie closes her eyes. Her fingers twitch. She breathes erratically.

DARLENE, an obese white woman in her early 30's, hugs Marie.

DARLENE  
I heard what they did to you. Dirty  
sons-a-bitches. You should sue their  
ass.

MARIE  
Keith is going to kill me.

DARLENE  
Screw that asshole. Come on, I'll give  
you a ride home. I'm off anyway.

Darlene retrieves her timecard and sticks it in the time clock. The time clock prints a stamp on her card.

INT. CAR - DAY

Darlene sits in the driver seat of a large van. Marie sits in the passenger seat.

MARIE  
Can we make a quick stop first?

DARLENE  
Whatever you need, honey.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

The structure is a two-story house converted into a business office. Four office chairs sit against the wall of the former living room, now waiting room.

A PARALEGAL sits behind a small desk opposite Marie. A phone on her desk rings. She picks it up and punches a key.

PARALEGAL  
I'll send her in.

INT. OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

JOHN GRISHAM sits behind a solid oak desk. He wears a suit, bowtie, and dress shoes with no socks.

A typewriter rests on his desk, a stack of typed pages beside it. Overfilled bookshelves line the room wall to wall.

He rises and shakes Marie's hand.

JOHN GRISHAM  
Have a seat.

Marie takes a seat. She pulls a file folder from her purse and hands it to John Grisham.

He flips it open, pulls out an x-ray, and holds it up to the light.

The x-ray is Tim's broken skull. Grisham returns the x-ray to the folder and closes it. He tosses it on his desk.

JOHN GRISHAM  
Let me make some phone calls, and I'll  
get back to you in let's say...

He pulls out a ledger and checks it.

JOHN GRISHAM  
...a week from tomorrow.

MARIE  
Thank you.

He rises again and shakes her hand.

INT. OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

Marie waves at Receptionist.

MARIE  
Thank you so much.

RECEPTIONIST

Have a great day. We'll be in touch.

The faint tap of typewriter keys echo in from behind John Grisham's office door.

INT. HOUSE - DAY

Marie enters.

The orange sofa is overturned. Fist-sized holes dot the walls like chicken pox.

Keith stands in the middle of the room. The knuckles on his right hand turn white as he squeezes the ripped "LAWYERS" phone book page. His nostrils flare.

KEITH

You divorcin' me?

He balls up the page and rockets it into her face.

MARIE

I'm not-

His fist crashes into her face. Blood pours from a split in her lower lip. She crumples to the ground.

KEITH

You ain't doin' shit.

He lifts her into the air by the hair and tosses her across the room. She skips off the floor and into the wall.

KEITH

You EVER leave me...

He kicks her in the ribs. She recoils into a fetal position.

KEITH

I'll fuckin' kill you.

GRAPHIC: "TO BE CONTINUED"