

## Chapter I: Description of Writing Project

Almost two years ago, I first got the inspiration for Waking Up Normal. When the idea first came to me it was originally a ten-minute film, and at the time I never thought it could be a full-length script. The original plot centered around two men who were planning to rob a bank; one was a security guard and the other a lifelong criminal. But during the robbery the security guard turns on the criminal and kills him, which in turn made him look like a hero. However, because no one knew of the two men's close relationship, the security guard got away with it, and in the end he achieved glory for his "heroism." I began to think about who these people were and why this security guard made the choice to kill his friend. The more I developed the idea, the more I knew it would make a full-length screenplay, and it would be a different screenplay than I had ever written.

I chose Waking Up Normal as my portfolio project for a couple of reasons. I knew I needed to challenge myself; I needed something that would force me to write in a style and genre with which I was not really that comfortable. The majority of the plays and screenplays I have written thus far have been dramatic pieces. This script, however, would not be. The more I developed the idea the more it seemed to fit into the genre of a dark comedy.

When watching films my favorites tend to be those that I can pull meaning from other than what is given to me superficially. My fear was that the idea about which I chose to write would not be the sort of film I would choose to watch. I knew I had to approach this idea in a different manner. I began to study and understand who my main character was and how he became the way he did. Then the more I learned who my main

character was the more I realized the story would be about more than just a bank robbery. It would be about a man and his search for importance, ultimately realizing that it is already in his grasp.

As a writer in school I dream about becoming something and being successful. However, this is countered by the feeling that I am simply a blip on life's computer screen. I am not contributing to society, and therefore I do not really have meaning for my life. Waking Up Normal follows Jim Dandie's life and struggle to mean something, to be important. I believe that in a world dominated by media highlights, fifteen-second stories of fame, and successes that blossom overnight, it is easy to feel unimportant and overlooked. At times, I struggle with the idea of whether I will mean something someday. I can empathize with Jim and understand his desire to matter. However, that need to feel significant can warp one's decisions and attitude toward life.

Many humans (including myself) want to be recognized beyond their circle of friends and family. This is what drives Jim. But, it is not until his life hits rock bottom that he discovers that a meaningful life is not found in fame, but in the ordinary.

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote,

It is a good lesson – though it may often be a hard one – for a man who has dreamed of literary fame, and of making for himself a rank among the world's dignitaries by such means, to step aside out of the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized, and to find how utterly devoid of significance, beyond that circle, is all that he achieves, and all he aims at. (23).

So in the end, Jim and I both have to learn this lesson.

My greatest challenge was to balance my faith with the type of story that I was writing. Dark comedies lean toward the violent and the shocking. I did not want to write something that would be violent for the sake of violence, yet I also did not want to water down the story for the sake of others. In the end, I knew that the story would take care of itself as the idea traveled through my faith and worldview.

#### What is a Dark Comedy?

John Vorhaus in The Comic Toolbox states that, “comedy is truth and pain” (2). The question that follows is what makes a comedy a dark comedy? Is it truth and even more pain? What are some of its characteristics? Dark comedy has the ability to broach subjects that are taboo, highly charged, either politically or socially, or too controversial. It allows the writers and filmmakers to produce a film that is not viewed by the spectator behind their self-defensive walls. As Wes Gehring points out in his book American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire, this genre “flippantly attacks what are normally society’s most sacredly serious subjects” (1). These subjects may include institutions such as the military, government, or religion. The genre may also attack values and beliefs. However, while these subjects are all fair game for the writers and producers of dark comedy, their more sensitive subject tends to be death by any cause: suicide, homicide, or accidental. Dark comedies push themes and ideas to a point where many find the subject matter disgusting, revolting, or just plain unfunny. One thing to keep in mind is the fact that dark comedy is not meant to provide a cheap laugh. In fact, it is closer to tragedy than it is to comedy, which is why of all the subjects of dark comedies, death by any cause – suicide, homicide, or accidental – is a prominent one.

In The Dark Comedy, J.L. Styan notes that, “Dark comedy is drama which impels the spectator forward by stimulus to mind or heart” (262). One question that I am confronted with while studying the dark comedy film is how far is too far? When does Styan’s “stimulus to mind or heart” cross the line of decency and propriety? Many films in the past such as Harold and Maude have been criticized for going beyond what is tasteful. Should we really laugh about things such as suicide, criminal activity, drugs, and death as a whole? In the Coen Brothers’ movie Fargo, death and murder seem so routine that when Officer Olson and Marge Gunderson, the pregnant Chief of Police, are investigating a murder scene, Marge bends down as if she found a piece of evidence. Olson asks if she found anything and her reply is, “Uh - I just, I think I'm gonna barf [...] it's just morning sickness.” This irreverent, but perhaps truthful response separates the viewer from the tragedy that surrounds the crime scene. It allows for people to laugh. It provides the audience a sense of catharsis even if it is misplaced. As Styan also points out, “the impulse to laughter and the impulse to tears sit uneasily together” (279). While watching some moments in this genre we sense the awkwardness the characters are experiencing. We watch their plight, their struggles, and failures and we find ourselves laughing in their “uncomfortable moments” (Horton 117). That is what dark comedies do. When the tears run out and the circumstances are so bleak, and there is no hope of escaping, the only thing left to do is laugh. As Mikhail Bakhtin states, “death is inseparable from laughter” (196). Nicholas Brooke reiterates this point when he writes, “Tragedy deals in extreme emotions [...] And because they are extreme, they are all liable to turn over into laughter.” (3). Tragedy and laughter are quite closely connected. Dark comedy happens when the two are linked or connected in the same story.

This connection is what I needed to study in order to be able to fully realize it in my script. Waking Up Normal touches on a number of subjects that are found in previously made dark comedies. Issues such as suicide, criminal activity, homicide, and absurdity in relationships have all held parts in the dark comedy genre, and play an important role in my film. The key was to find out what the common elements in each film were and what made them successful.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

When writing a film the best way to proceed is to observe where other films have been. My main research includes films that have been produced and are considered dark comedies. While watching these films I looked for certain elements and themes that influenced the critics' and filmmakers' decisions on labeling them as such. These films include Harold and Maude (1971), Heathers (1989), Raising Arizona (1989), Fargo (1996), and Being There (1979). I then examine how my screenplay is similar in style and genre to the films listed above.

### Harold and Maude

Harold and Maude (1971) is a film by Hal Ashby that centers around a young man obsessed with suicide and the staging of his own death. This depressed and clearly disturbed individual, who drives a hearse for a car, is an only child who has been given everything he has ever wanted, except for attention. He attends therapy sessions and funerals, only seeking the former to help with the problem of the latter. On one occasion he attends a funeral, as usual of someone he does not know, and runs into a 79-year old woman. She introduces herself and a friendship and romance evolve. As the two grow closer she teaches him about life even though he is obsessed with death; meanwhile, his mother continually tries fixing him up with girls his own age hoping he will get married. Eventually, he decides he will: to Maude, the 79-year old woman. Unfortunately, as they celebrate Maude's eightieth birthday she informs him that she will be leaving this life for she has just taken a lethal dose of medicine.

What subjects exactly do Harold and Maude touch on categorizing it as a dark comedy? The most obvious one is death. Harold stages many fake suicides throughout

the film. The movie opens with him climbing on a stool with a noose around his head in a fake attempt to hang himself. As he hangs there his mother comes into the room to use the telephone and nonchalantly says to him, “I suppose you think that’s very funny, Harold.” Was this statement a reaction that Ashby and Colin Higgins, the screenwriter, expected from the audience? Could they hear the critics and audience ask them that very question? How could people make a comedy out of such a thing? Funny or not, Harold continually tries similar things throughout the film. In another scene Harold floats face down in the pool, still dressed in his suit, acting as if he drowned. Meanwhile, his mother gets in the pool and completely ignores him while she swims her usual laps. She is not alarmed, having obviously become desensitized to his stunts and finding them unfunny.

While many find the insouciant attitude concerning suicide repugnant, a more controversial aspect of the movie happens to be the romance between a boy and an elderly woman. Even though most people are not interested in seeing such opposites attracted to one another, Ashby used that to further his dark comedy effect, especially in the scene where Harold and Maude passionately kiss one another. Apparently, he pushed it so far that, according to Gehring, the studio thought it would be too distasteful for the audience, and advised him to take it out. (99). However, it was one way for the filmmakers to express the idea that love knows no age barriers.

Higgins morphed it all together hoping the audience can look past the shocking elements and find the message he wanted to convey, which seems to be that human beings need to celebrate life. Were the filmmakers successful in pushing the boundaries or did they push too far and fail? While the intention of the film may have been to celebrate life it seemed to have centered on death—so much so it may seem to have

deadened our senses to it. After experiencing the “failed” suicide attempts by Harold, by the end of the film Maude’s death is just a successful suicide, as opposed to a tragic situation. However, the point of life as a celebration is not totally lost. Those who deal in death and pain tend not to take life for granted. Harold is so consumed with death that life passes him by. He fails to acknowledge or even realize that the consequences and emotions of death are still felt by those who have been left behind. As a result, Harold’s eyes are finally opened, as he is able to see the selfishness of an act of suicide. He hurts as Maude is dying in the ambulance. He realizes life is precious. Nevertheless, if this is the point it is muddled by the arbitrary death of Maude. She seems more like a hypocrite than someone who loves life. If Maude is to teach Harold to embrace life she is nothing more than a traitor to her own teaching, because if life is important for an 18-year old it is important for an 80-year old. The mixed message is further confused at the end of the film. I question how much Harold truly loves Maude since her death is so easily accepted.

While most dark comedies tend to end darkly Harold and Maude attempts to avoid that ending. Harold destroys the link to all the funerals he has attended, his hearse. We watch the hearse drive off the edge of a cliff and explode into flames as it crashes. We then watch Harold skip away into the sunset finally able to appreciate life and all it took were years of his fake suicides and one, final successful one by the person he loves the most.

### Heathers

Heathers (1989) is another film that centers on death. Directed by Michael Lehman, Heathers revolves around a high school girl named Veronica Sawyer played by



Winona Ryder. Veronica is a girl who wants to be accepted by the three most popular girls, all of whom have the same name: Heather. One night Veronica and Heather Chandler go to a college party where they end up drinking too much. In one humiliating scene, Veronica fails to hold her alcohol and vomits in front of everyone. This infuriates Heather Chandler and she threatens to tell everyone in school the following Monday. The next day, as an act of revenge, Veronica wants to make Heather vomit. With the manipulation and prodding of Veronica's outcast boyfriend J.D., Veronica ends up poisoning Heather. Heather's death is just the beginning. Throughout the rest of the film two more people, high school jocks named Ram and Kurt, are murdered as an act of revenge. Veronica and J.D. set it up to look like gay-lover suicides. Eventually, Veronica feels guilty and wants to stop murdering her fellow students, and then J.D. attempts to kill her. However, Veronica stages her own death in order to trick J.D. That is when she finds out that J.D. plans on killing the whole school by blowing it up. She ultimately saves the school while J.D. kills himself.

Throughout the film, the characters, like in so many other dark comedies, are emotionally separated from the events that take place in their lives. There is a type of callousness that exists when trying to make sense of death in a dark comedy, which enables man to accept the "gruesome shocks" (Gehring 167). This is even more apparent in the film Heathers. For example, in Heather Chandler's suicide note, written by her friend Veronica, Veronica uses the word "myriad". While the teachers are discussing how the school should handle the unfortunate death, the English teacher reveals how impressed she was that she used that vocabulary word, especially since she got that word wrong on the last quiz. Even Heather's friends show little if any remorse; they are more

upset that the administration only canceled school for an hour. According to Gehring, much of the lack of relationships between some of the characters is due to their failure in communication (106). This communication gap in Heathers is reminiscent of the relationship between Harold and his mother in Harold and Maude.

Again, death is the primary theme of the film, and what makes this a dark comedy is the way the characters respond to it. Veronica laments how people are starting to view suicide as the cool thing to do. According to Veronica, death is not the taker of things, but the giver. Veronica is given freedom due to the death of Heather Chandler and especially J.D. Death also gives Heather some depth, Ram, a brain, and Kurt, a soul, as his father cries out, "I love my dead gay son."

Some of the characters in Heathers tend to operate on a scale of extremes. The irreverent reactions to the deaths make the characters seem even further excessive. The jocks, Ram and Kurt, are both extreme in nature: they are always wanting to beat someone up for some minor offense. They behave like stereotypical jocks; they even wear their helmets in their coffin lending some truth to the stereotype that everything they do revolves around sports. Heather Chandler behaves like a stereotypical snob. She treats people horribly that she feels are beneath her. Immediately after Heather dies Veronica says, "I just killed my best friend." J.D. responds, "And worst enemy." Veronica then quips, "Same difference." The usual popular girl is often hated even by her best friend/enemy. J.D. is also a very extreme character that goes to extreme measures. From one murder he plans two more and soon he wants to kill the whole school. In fact, J.D. states, "The extreme always seem to make an impression."

If the message of this film, as Gehring states, is isolation (105), then it achieves that end. However, the miscommunication and isolation that is felt and experienced by the characters resonate through the film so deeply, it also leaves the audience feeling the same way: empty. This is very common with films of this genre. The sense of emptiness pervades everything the characters do. It states that death is inevitable and means nothing. While death in other genres gives meaning and purpose to life, the death in the dark comedy genre has no purpose (Gehring 166). Considering this aspect, Heathers is the quintessential dark comedy.

### Raising Arizona

“Black humor is the midnight world of the comic antihero who is the foundation for screwball film comedy” (Gehring 2). H.I. McDonnough is that comic antihero and Raising Arizona (1987) is the midnight world. Raising Arizona was directed by Joel Coen and written by both Joel and Ethan Coen. This film is about H.I. McDonnough, an ex-con played by Nicholas Cage, who marries Edwinna, or Ed, a local police officer. Ed, played by Holly Hunter, desires to have a family of her own. After the two of them marry they soon discover that Ed is barren. Across town, local furniture salesman Nathan Arizona (Huffhines) and his wife Florence Arizona give birth to quintuplets. According to Ed, the couple have more kids “than they can handle”, so H.I. and Ed decide to kidnap one. With the arrival of H.I.’s friends, Gale and Evelle Snoats who recently broke out of prison, things grow a little more complicated. Nathan Arizona puts up a reward for the return of his son and this reward influences the Snoats brothers to kidnap Nathan Jr. from H.I. and Ed. Back and forth this continues until finally H.I. and Ed return Nathan Jr. to his rightful parents.

This movie is a dark comedy for a couple of reasons. Gehring points out that this genre is known for the “showcasing of absurdity” (44). When considering the subject matter it tends to lean towards the absurd or farcical. A kidnapping of an infant is not usually a comedic subject matter. “We’re not willfully different... to make a mainstream movie that’s going to go over big with everybody, you don’t make a comedy about kidnapping” (qtd. in Bergan 104). With the characters involved and their reason for committing the crime the Coen brothers somehow make it a comedy. Each criminal, whether it is H.I., Gale, or Evelle Snoats, all fall in love with Nathan Jr. In fact, in one scene after Gale and Evelle Snoats rob a small convenient store they accidentally leave the infant on the roof of the car. The infant, still in his car seat, falls off the car as the two brothers make their getaway. When they find out the child was left on the roof of the car they just begin screaming. After they drive back and find that the child is okay, Evelle just holds the child and cries how he never wants to give the child up. In Magill’s Survey of Cinema’s review of Raising Arizona, the author states that the criminals “seem genuinely enraptured by the sheer wonder of the little creature they have captured.”

The absurdity that everyone who kidnapped the child loves it and wants to take care of it eases the audience’s mind that no harm will come to this child. This enables the plot to become comedic especially when it involves semi-hardened criminals. We learn to feel for H.I. even though he is a thrice-convicted convenient store robber and a kidnapper. He is a lost character who tries to find where he belongs. As Gehring points out, “Dark comedy is about lostness” (166). He searches for himself in his dreams and wonders where he is. He becomes an empathetic character, maybe even sympathetic; he is the anti-hero. Though his intentions are not completely malicious we can sympathize

with this character, who if found in real life would not be so sympathetic. This anti-hero “is a character capable of suggesting complexity because he has implicitly two or more sides towards the spectator... positive and negative and all the shades between” (Styan 270).

### Fargo

Fargo (1996) is another movie directed and written by the Coen brothers. It is set in Minnesota and follows the failed plot of the kidnapping and ransom of a car salesman’s wife. David H. Macy plays Jerry Lundegaard, a car salesman who sets up to have his wife kidnapped so his father-in-law would pay for the ransom. Unfortunately, the people that Lundegaard hires end up killing three people, including his wife and father-in-law. This further complicates things as the kidnappers/killers ask for more money.

Certain situations in this movie if taken by them alone are not very humorous; in fact, they are quite tragic. A total of seven murders are committed and some are quite gruesome. While Marge Gunderson, played by Frances McDormand, investigate the murders humorous situations arise. Peter Stormare, playing Gaear Grimsrud, is pushing his partner’s dead body through a wood chipper. The white snow turns red in a very graphic scene. When officer Gunderson arrives on the scene she tries to get Grimsrud’s attention but the wood chipper is too loud. He fails to hear her as he continues to push the body through the wood chipper. It is a disturbing scene that some people would find humorous due to the fact that the criminal is working away while the officer tries to speak over the running machine. All the same, the callousness displayed by Grimsrud is very troubling.

Another scene that displays a sick sense of humor is when the kidnappers arrive at the house by the lake with their victim. She is so frightened the only thing she can do is run around the yard, even though she cannot see anything because of the mask over her head. Carl Showalter, played by Steve Buscemi, stands there and laughs as this woman, wanting her freedom, runs around the yard tripping over things. Mikita Brottman writes, “scenes in the film may appear to transgress the line that separates humor from horror, but this scene shows us that this line is an illusion. The funny isn’t close to horror, it is horror” (91).

This type of “humor is geared for shock effect” (Gehring 1). In one scene a state trooper pulls Showalter and Grimsrud over. When the state trooper asks Showalter to step out of the car Grimsrud shoots the trooper through the top of the head. In this scene, “the laughable becomes shocking at the flick of the trigger” (Brottman 82). And it is this juxtaposition that makes up the dark comedy.

All movies like to end on a happy note, or at least upbeat. In Raising Arizona, the McDonnough’s return the kid and resign themselves to the fact that they may remain childless. In Harold and Maude, even though Maude dies, Harold goes on with a new vigor for life. And in Fargo, the movie ends with Marge Gunderson and her husband in bed watching television. As Thomas Doherty puts it, Fargo ends as the “stone-cold evil in forbidding environs melts away, if somewhat uneasily, under a sunny disposition” (55).

### Being There

Being There (1979), directed by Hal Ashby, is about a gardener named Chance, who goes through life quoting television shows. After the death of his boss, Chance is

pushed out onto the streets to find a new home. As he wanders around the city of Washington D.C. he is hit by a car, but not seriously hurt. He is taken to the home of the Rands, a powerful and rich couple. Mr. Ben Rand is dying and is won over by Chance Gardener “an idiot savant gardener whose knowledge of the world comes exclusively from television” (Cook 114). Whenever Chance is asked a question he replies through the only knowledge he has attained, gardening and plant growth. Due to Mr. Rand’s connections Chance comes into contact with the President of the United States. When asked advice by the president, Chance gives some abstract reply that is taken as wisdom. Thus begins Chance’s rise to the top. Once the president quotes him in a national televised speech Chance becomes instantaneously famous. Many people want to interview him, yet this character can neither read nor write. He is barely intelligent enough to understand everyday conversation. However, Chance becomes successful through everyone else’s misconceptions and misunderstandings.

Although I would not define this film purely as a dark comedy, it has several elements within the film that I find useful and helpful. Like most dark comedies I have examined it deals with the issue of death. Chance’s old employer dies in the very beginning of the film. The maid informs Chance of the unfortunate incident, but Chance can only comment on how the weather feels like snow. This detachment from one character to another is similar to many other films in the dark comedy genre. Although the reason is different the result is still the same. Chance is emotionally disconnected with everyone he comes in contact with. Deep inside he loves his employers and friends, but since he has been reared on television all his life the emotional part of his personality is stunted.

This part of Chance's personality gives the character quirkiness, a sense of wonder. He is very different from all the other characters, especially in his sense of innocence and his pure love for television. His world is whatever is currently on the television. He kisses Mrs. Rand only because two characters on the television set he is watching are kissing.

Chance carries the film where there is no monumental action taking place. The events that happen are minor, they transform the characters in small steps. We watch the characters transform slowly and progressively throughout the film as they are touched by Chance's innocence.

### Conclusion

An old Hollywood cliché that has been credited to Samuel Goldwyn said, "Pictures are for entertainment; messages should be delivered by Western Union" (qtd in Marx 175). While every movie has a message and a worldview, some hold to the idea that comedies, or dark comedies, do not. Gehring writes, "black humor's message is that there is no message" (2). Even if that were true that is still a message. The question is what will the message be? As a Christian writing a dark comedy this is another aspect with which I grappled.

Higgins, the screenwriter for Harold and Maude, wanted to express that "We're all Harold, and we all want to be Maude. We're all repressed and trying to be free, to be ourselves, to be vitally interested in living, to be everything we want." (Shedlin 53). The message attempts to answer what life is. Maude, the character in the film that is filled with wisdom, finds it necessary to kill herself simply because she is eighty and she feels "being eighty is an age ceiling one does not go beyond" (Gehring 98). It is ironic that the



character that represents life is the only one who kills oneself. Is this what life is? While I can understand a portion of their viewpoint, there are moments that the message fails to be inspiring. Gehring notes that Harold “eats ginger pie, strokes a tactile sculpture, learns to play a banjo, inhales from her ‘adorifies’ ... [is] introduced to yoga breathing, gets stoned, and re-examines the world around him.” (98). While these may be nice experiences it hardly qualifies as a life lived to the fullest. To me the life that is portrayed and lived is not all that different from everyday life, except for a few stolen cars with no repercussions. But maybe that is what life is, living everyday, day-to-day, and enjoying it.

Whatever the case, I have to ask myself what worldview or message will my film send. Will my main character end in isolation? Will he find himself? How can I bring hope in a dark comedy while remaining both true to my faith and the genre? Dark comedies tend to deal in death, whether it is a suicide or a homicide. Each of the previously reviewed films had points similar in nature to the story that I formulated. Heathers and Harold and Maude both dealt with the issue of suicide. In Waking Up Normal, my protagonist, Jim Dandie, is a depressed individual who, due to the events in his life, struggles with the idea of suicide. Neither Harold and Maude nor Heathers approaches the issue as an after school special would. Both deal with it in a comedic, albeit dark, way. However, while Jim is going to struggle with the issue he will not be as obsessed with the idea as Harold was.

Crime is another issue that my screenplay is dealt with. In Heathers, J.D. and Veronica’s relationship is somewhat similar to Clive’s and Jim’s. Although there is no romance between Clive and Jim, Clive does push Jim to commit crimes, which go against

his conscience. Though the crimes are not as extreme as murder, it does offer insight on the aspect of one character manipulating another.

Developing characters that stand out and are memorable is a difficult thing, especially with the hopes of not making them trite or too stereotypical. Raising Arizona, Fargo, and Being There all have protagonists that are quirky and quite interesting. In Raising Arizona, Nicolas Cage's character H.I. McDonough is a con that truly loves his wife. He is not an extreme character like Chance's in Being There, but he is interesting. His view on life and the love he has for his wife is quite endearing for a lifelong criminal. He is very witty for an uneducated person. The Coen brothers use a similar idea in Fargo with Frances McDormand's character Marge Gunderson, who is a pregnant police chief. She is a very intelligent character even though she speaks slowly and to some degree sounds quite the contrary. These characteristics add dimension and contradictions that make her interesting. As one can see, there are many aspects to a dark comedy. Yet dark comedy is still a genre that remains slightly nebulous. The purpose of studying the other films that have been described as dark comedy was to measure them against my film, Waking Up Normal. The similarities other dark comedies have with one another provide a useful backdrop and starting point for my film.

### Chapter III: Methodology

Writing a screenplay requires a vast amount of preparation. This preparation comes in the form of research, planning, and deliberation. There are plenty of steps a writer has to take before he actually sits down and begins to write the screenplay. In this chapter I outline the steps I took to produce the screenplay Waking Up Normal and some of the artifacts that were developed in the process.

After I thought of the main plot line I began working on subplots and the minor characters involved. This expanded the story considerably. While the plots, subplots and characters were beginning to take shape I formulated a beat sheet. A beat sheet is a “writing tool used to identify the sequence of events, turning points, and action” in the story (Atchity and Wong 17). I used this tool to highlight the most important events in the story, those things which are most integral to its development. In turn, this aided me in fleshing out the major turning points of my script.

Following the completion of the beat sheet I began writing a step outline using those major turning points found in the beat sheet. The step outline “describes what happens in each scene, how it builds and turns” (McKee 412). This provided me with a more detailed blue print. I could follow my story scene by scene and examine the progression of the story line making changes and corrections more easily. After the step outline was completed it was time to write the screenplay.

To get a feel for scenes I kept a few shooting scripts next to my desk. The scripts I would refer back to were Adaptation written by Charlie and Donald Kaufman, About A Boy written by Peter Hedges, Chris and Paul Weitz, and Snow Falling On Cedars written by Ron Bass and Scott Hicks. I would read and reread these scripts periodically to fully

understand how other writers began and ended their scenes. It gave me an eye and a feel for how long each scene should be. This assisted my writing, especially when I felt lost in the scene.

The rest of this chapter includes some of the artifacts I used in the process of writing. Some of these artifacts are the original synopsis, my revised synopsis and the character sketches. The beat sheet and the step outline can be found in the Appendix. I included the original synopsis to illustrate the transformation the script went through as the story itself progressed. In the original synopsis my main protagonist's name was Damon. Eventually, I changed it to Clive to play off of the infamous bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde. There were many other changes that occurred as well. I hope that this chapter gives an overview of the process the script Waking Up Normal followed.

#### Original Synopsis

Damon (Clive) robs a bank and escapes without being recognized. Jim is sitting in an office speaking with his professional counselor. The counselor is listening to Jim as Jim recalls certain events of his youth that have led him to the place he is currently at. The scenes play out as Jim recalls them. After the session Jim leaves and goes about his mundane life. He goes to work, goes to lunch, orders the same thing, sees the same people, and does everything he has always done. Jim's father gets onto Jim about taking the civil service exam to become a police officer. Jim is dreaming of something along the lines of the FBI. Jim still visits the girlfriend that broke up with him months before. Damon and Jim come across one another while Damon comes into the bank to do some "banking". That is where Damon first recognizes Jim.

One day Damon approaches Jim and the two begin hanging out. Damon tries to persuade Jim to help him rob the bank. Jim at first refuses. When he returns home to his parent's house and sees how boring his life really is, Jim decides to assist Damon. They begin planning out the whole job in the basement of his parent's house, where Jim sleeps. Jim continues to go to work each day and eventually falls in love with the newly hired bank teller. Jim starts doubting his decision rob the bank the more he gets to know the new girl.

Soon the day of the robbery approaches and neither his ex nor the new teller are giving him the attention he wants or desires. So he proceeds to go through with the robbery. Jim's job is to go to work that day as usual and make sure that everything runs smoothly until Damon arrives. Damon comes in the bank and holds it up. Jim remembers the failures of his life and finally decides to shoot his partner. When Jim shoots Damon, and thereby killing him, Jim becomes a hero to the community, his family, and even wins the girl – both of them. We see the glory that Jim achieves. But when Jim looks into his future he admits the authorities eventually find out everything. However, Jim decides to live in the moment and enjoy the fame. But in the back of his mind he wonders if anyone will ever make a movie about him.

#### Revised Synopsis

Jim Dandie is a security guard for his father's bank. He is a product of low expectations that were produced by his parents: Dan and Peggy Dandie. Overlooked and undervalued, Jim lives his life without his father's approval or respect. Jim is constantly plagued with nightmares of killing his father and his failure to stop a bank robbery years

ago. But when Clive Bensky, an old high school “friend”, invites him to go boating Jim’s world takes an unexpected turn.

Clive attempts to help Jim break out of his shell by pushing him to experience new things. Unfortunately, those new things tend to involve misdemeanors and felonies. The only thing that keeps Jim hanging around Clive is Bonnie, Clive’s beautiful girlfriend. The only thing that keeps Clive hanging around Jim is the bank Jim works at.

After a string of robberies in the area, Jim’s father’s bank is on heightened security. And even though Clive is an experienced bank robber he has never robbed a bank with armed security guards; that is why he needs Jim.

After joyriding in a boat, hijacking a car, stealing groceries from a grocery store, and breaking and entering, Clive convinces Jim to help him rob Jim’s father’s bank. And for an added security measure Clive kidnaps Dan Dandie and holds him hostage until the job is done. The only thing that has gone right with Jim’s life thus far is the fact that Bonnie, Clive’s girlfriend, falls in love with Jim. One thing that further complicates the situation is that Bonnie has been an accomplice to Clive’s bank robberies. He can either turn Clive in, and in turn, implicate Bonnie, or he can help Clive rob the bank.

However, when the day comes, Jim’s nightmares come true. He realizes that Clive was Jim’s white whale. Clive was the robber that Jim failed to stop years before. This truly propels Jim to find the bravado to stop the bank robbery. He does so by shooting and killing Clive and thereby, ending Clive’s crime spree.

#### Characters

Jim Dandie (Protagonist): Jim is a twenty-six year old security guard who works at his father’s bank. He is the only child of Daniel (Dan) and Peggy Dandie. When Jim

grew up he was always overlooked as a child despite being an only child. Whenever Jim would attempt anything he would either fail completely or fall short. If he did succeed, his father still did not believe it was good enough.

Still living at home with his parents he longs to be remembered for something other than his failures in life, or embarrassing moments. However, Jim has never been able to move past those moments. His biggest failure in life came when he failed to stop a bank robbery that took place in his father's bank. His father had always held that against him and thus it became another obstacle in their relationship.

Clive Bensky (Antagonist): Clive is also twenty-six years old. He grew up in the same high school as Jim Dandie. In fact, they were in the same class though they never really hung out. Clive has always been the charming individual well liked by everybody. When Clive graduated high school he started getting into petty crime. He would steal children's bicycles or break into people's garages and steal their tools. Eventually, he realized he could not make a decent living doing this type of thing so he decided he would go into bank robbery. Ever since then he has been robbing banks all across the country.

Clive is a manipulator and a deceiver. He tricks and persuades Jim to help him in his crimes. Things have gone right for Clive most of his life. He has a pretty girlfriend (Bonnie), a nice home, and most of all; Dan loves him more than his own son.

Bonnie – She is roughly the same age as Clive and Jim. Currently, she is Clive's girlfriend. She has dated Clive for several years and has helped him rob a couple of banks. She is a cautious individual, especially when it comes to letting people in her life. She has a high sense of morality and that is why she struggles staying with Clive. When

she first meets Jim she believes he's too much like Clive, therefore, she doesn't like him. She begins to see who Jim is and how hard he has had it in life and she grows to like him. She is Jim's encouragement through life.

Daniel (Dan) Dandie – This is Jim's father. He is a bank manager for the bank Jim works at. He feels he's a failure as a father because of the way Jim has turned out. Because Jim has never lived up to his expectations Dan has taken other people into his life as his own son, namely Clive. Dan is Jim's biggest obstacle.

Peggy Dandie – Jim's mother remains in her own little world. Carrying on with the everyday struggles she never leaves home.

Teddy – This is the other security at Daniel's Bank. He doesn't take his job seriously and is actually quite lazy.

Sally – She is Jim's ex-girlfriend. She longs for someone who is brave and accomplished. Tired of Jim's complaining she has turned cold and complacent toward him.

Gary – This is Jim's counselor. He is ignorant, incompetent, uncaring and unwise. He fails at helping Jim fix his problem, and actually, he makes things worse by his advice. Rather than helping people, he ignores them and their needs.



## Chapter IV: Critique

When undertaking a project such as writing a screenplay there are myriad questions and unknowns that the writer longs to be answered. How will the script be received? Will those who read it understand it or even care for it? How can I, as a writer, make it more accepted without deviating from the original vision? Although the word “vision” sounds more lofty and self-important than it really is, it is nonetheless true. With all of these things running through the writer’s mind the most anticipated and nerve-racking experience is the public reading and the criticism to follow.

Waking Up Normal has been, overall, a six-month process. Working this intimately with any project brings an attachment to it. Ideas of where the story should go and who the characters are flood my mind whether asleep or awake. After experiencing the public reading it was now time for feedback from other sources that have not been as closely connected to the story as I.

In the manner of the dark comedy genre, Waking Up Normal has a sense of a realistic implausibility, depending on the point of view the reader is taking. With that in mind, the characters needed to tend towards that idea as well. There has been some praise in the fact that the characters such as Jim, Peggy, Dan, and Clive have achieved the sort of extremism that is needed in a film such as this, but on the other hand there has also been some constructive criticism for the need of other characters to lean that way as well.

The most difficult character to develop and understand has been the character of Bonnie. Some of the criticism of this character has been the fact that she is not as quirky as the other characters. The original problem with Bonnie was the fact that she had no specific goal other than helping Jim. Upon realizing that Bonnie wanted and desired to

live a normal, boring life, it gave me a clarity and sort of understanding of who Bonnie was. When she became clearer she became more real. And that is the Bonnie that was presented in the public reading version of the script.

While acknowledging that Bonnie's character and personality can be pushed further still, another criticism was that she was not as involved in the climax as she should be. At the end of the film Jim shoots and kills Clive during the bank robbery. Unbeknownst to Clive, Clive's gun is loaded with blanks. In the original version Jim is the one that loads Clive's gun with the blanks. One suggestion, however, was to have Bonnie load the gun instead of Jim. While I feel that this suggestion has merit, a part of me feels that this ending would make it less about Jim's character and more about Bonnie's. The reason given for Bonnie to do this instead of Jim was that it would make Bonnie's character more complex and more involved in the climax. But the downside to this choice would be that Jim is still in the same position he started the film in; he is reactive rather than proactive. He reacts to Bonnie loading the gun, he reacts to Clive shooting at him, and he reacts to the situation that was not set up by him, but was set up by Bonnie. If Bonnie loads the gun it shows that Jim is once again dependent on someone else to help him out of a situation, rather than he helping himself. While it may make the ending more complex some would argue it makes it more confused. One way to fix this is to find the quirkiness or extremism in Bonnie outside of the ending. By giving Bonnie her own qualities that rival the other characters this would in turn give Bonnie a part to play in this film. Overall, I agree that Bonnie needs to find her extreme qualities; however I do not feel having her load the gun with blanks would achieve that end. Either way, in the next rewrite I will focus more on this aspect.

Another suggestion was to add one more moment between Dan Dandie and his son Jim. The motive for that suggestion was to grant Jim a more absolute reason for following through with his plan to stop Clive and the bank robbery. Currently, the scene is implied, but I agree that a more defined moment may strengthen Jim's resolve. The suggestion was to give Jim a line or two referencing something his father said to him while locked in Clive's basement and bound. That reference, in turn, would cement Jim's decision to shoot Clive.

In future rewrites I would love to focus more on the scenes Clive mentors Jim through acts of crime. In the latest version I feel the scenes could be tighter and have more specific goals worked in. While concentrating on this area of the script an idea was given to me to have these scenes occur earlier in the movie. I agree this would give an interesting and comedic element to the story, but I fear it would rush the transformation Jim makes to get to the point to rob his father's bank. I have to keep in mind that ultimately this is about why Jim decides to go through with the robbery and not how the robbery goes down.

There were many creative and wise suggestions given to me during this process. Even though some of these ideas were not implemented as of yet does not rule out a rewrite in that direction in the future. The more I work and spend time with this script the better idea I will have to strengthen it, especially with the ideas I have been given thus far.

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