

LITTLE MIRACLES

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ABSTRACT

Little Miracles is a screenplay that has been gestating in my mind for nearly a decade.

It slowly reveals the story of a man who desperately wants to be a father, in spite of his own infertility. After being abandoned by his wife five years earlier because she wanted to conceive children naturally, Adam transforms into a commitment-phobe and sex addict until he finally meets his match in Jess. As he prepares to take the plunge and plant roots with her he is visited by a past partner (Emma) who informs him that she is pregnant with his child. While Adam knows (and the audience knows) that the child cannot be his, he is forced to make a decision between the woman he loves and the possibility of having the thing he has always desired, a child of his own.

When I began to develop the world of the story and these characters there were a few things I knew I wanted to accomplish and a few things I knew I wanted to stay away from. To constantly remind myself of this throughout the writing process I made a list of obstructions and posted them above my desk. The note reads:

OBSTRUCTIONS & INSTRUCTIONS FOR UNTITLED FERTILITY DRAMA

- I. Tell the story linearly, don't even think about using flashbacks
- II. NEVER USE VOICE OVER, it's lazy and you don't need it
- III. Put the love story at the centre of the script and make us root for these two people
- IV. Put this love story into jeopardy by giving the protagonist a want even greater than love
- V. Don't be afraid of comedy, aim for 10 belly laughs
- VI. Don't overstay your welcome, it must be under 100 pages

This was all I knew at the beginning of this journey.

The purpose of this thesis support paper is to detail what I learned through the creative process of crafting this screenplay. It will include the highs, the lows, the revelations, the defeats and the victories.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This screenplay and support paper would never have happened without the support and guidance of a number of faculty in the Department of Film at York University.

First off, to my supervisor, Tereza Barta. Tereza and I have known each other for nearly two decades and over that time she has become an important mentor in all of my creative work. Tereza is not just a story editor. She lives, breathes and eats storytelling and through many spirited debates and discussions helped to shape this script to where it is today. Toda.

I am equally thankful to Howie Wiseman who served as my reader and offered many insightful notes and comments along the way, constantly pushing me not to settle. Also, to Laurence Green who went above and beyond the call of duty to read and give notes on two separate drafts of the script.

The project was developed through the course work in 5010 which was taught by Phil Hoffman and 5020 which was taught by Brenda Longfellow. The development through these courses was essential in helping me shape the structure and tone of the screenplay.

I also couldn't have completed this without the support of John Greyson and Kuowei Lee who as GPD and GPA respectively stayed on my case and saw to it that I completed my thesis work in a (somewhat) timely matter.

Finally, I am forever indebted to my wife Julie for her undying love and support and to Simon for learning to take solid naps and allowing me those quiet moments to sneak away and complete this work.

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ORIGINS

*The Scariest moment is always just before you start.
After that, things can only get better.*

- Stephen King¹

I often think of that Stephen King quote as I write. Ideas, especially creative ones become easier to grapple with and understand the more you engage with them. But at the beginning, before the spark, things can be quite scary. As I mentioned in my abstract, this was a script that had been developing in my mind for over a decade, but never found its way onto the page. All I really knew was the ending, where I wanted to go, but I had no idea how to get there, or even how to begin trying to get there. I had never worked backwards like this before, almost always starting with the inciting incident or at least the turning point to Act Two as my leaping off point. Changing my general approach and working process was very scary and it took me all those years before I could finally think about fully engaging with this piece. I knew I needed the structure and confines of an academic environment and the support of my supervisor to push through this barrier.

It was in second year of my undergraduate studies at York that I was first introduced to the work of Krzysztof Kieslowki and his screenwriting

¹ Stephen King, *On Writing* (United States: Scribner, 2000), 1

partner Krzysztop Piesiewicz. And it was these two polish men that I first thought about when the idea of Adam's predicament in the final act came into my mind for the first time. What struck me most about their work, specifically *The Decalogue* is how they placed their characters in the middle of impossible decisions and squeezed them and cornered them until they were forced to make a choice. Screenwriting guru Robert McKee says that true character is defined by these decisions, that both in screenwriting as in life, "TRUE CHARACTER can only be expressed through choice in dilemma. How the person chooses to act under pressure is who he is – the greater the pressure, the truer and deeper the choice of character".² I have always been drawn to films about human beings and their struggles and successes and to stories that put the protagonist in the middle of a near impossible decision.

When the idea for Adam's final decision came to me, I knew I had found something that I wanted to fully explore. A man who desperately wants to be a father and yet is infertile. A man who because of his infertility always keeps one foot out the door of his romantic relationships and yet finds himself madly in love and truly ready to commit. And suddenly, without warning,

² Robert McKee, *Story : substance, structure, style and the principles of screenwriting*

(United States: ReganBooks,1997) 375

these two desires come to a head. Adam is forced to decide between a deep and passionate love with Jess or the ability to be a father to Emma's baby without anyone ever realizing it is not biologically his.

MATTHEW'S CHOICE (THE TITLE)

There's an old adage that suggests titles come very easily, early on and stick through until the very end, or they are a constant struggle and something you can never quite settle on. The title of this film falls in the latter category. Throughout the process of developing this screenplay, it went by many different titles before finally landing on *Little Miracles*. For a long time it was *The Modern Father*, but I ultimately didn't like the use of the word father as it seemed like too big of a tell. For a little while it was *Other People's Children* a title I still like but also seems to tip my hand. And for the briefest of moments it went by *Adam's Choice*. This last title is obviously meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but ultimately felt a little too cute. Of course I am alluding to the 1982 film starring Meryl Streep called *Sophie's Choice*. In this holocaust tale, a mother must pick which of her children to save from certain death, an impossible decision to say the least. But this is truly what I want the audience to feel at the end of the film. If I have done my job the audience will see a man who in Jess has finally met his equal. They are a perfect match and yet in Emma he has the chance at fatherhood that he so desires. He must choose between the love of his life and the possibility of fatherhood and the unconditional love of his child.

Little Miracles came at the suggestion of my thesis supervisor Tereza Barta and I quickly gravitated towards it. It does what a great title should do. At first, it seems to mean one thing, but hopefully after reading the script, it takes on a whole other meaning. Is the title referring to the children who are our little miracles or does it refer to the miracle of Adam being a father?

THE “T” WORD

The dreaded “T” word. Theme is something I generally struggle with when writing and often need the help of other readers to identify. More often than not I work from story and character and find the theme through the process of writing. On my first feature film *Surviving Crooked Lake* the theme did not truly emerge until the middle of the editing process and then it became about shaping the pre-existing footage into something that could fully articulate what I was trying to say about loss, grief and leaving the past behind.

Of course I always have a sense of what some of the thematic elements are as I am writing. Early on in developing this screenplay I knew that there were thematic elements about the past (and leaving the past in the past), about needing to fully accept yourself before being able to connect with another in a healthy and meaningful way, about fate, parenthood and the old nature vs. nurture debate. But if I had to summarize the theme of the film I would say it goes something like this, **through acting selfishly and stubbornly one can obtain what they want, but they may soon discover it isn't everything they wanted.**

Adam is a damaged man, haunted by the ghost of his ex-wife who left him when she learned of his affliction. He now sees this as his defining characteristic and uses casual sex with a number of partners to distance himself from intimacy and commitment. He is essentially chasing his pain, but it's not making him happy, because he is still hung up on being a father. Adam is selfish and stubborn. He takes money from his mother early on in the film to pay for his fertility treatments. His body cannot produce sperm, but he wants to try and force his body to do otherwise.

Emma is the opposite of this. She is generous and giving. She is maternal in nature and works as a grade one teacher. She even takes pity on Paul when he shows up at the club and takes him home with her. She is fair to Adam, almost to a fault, and even at the end doesn't want to entrap him, but just get an honest answer from him. I have left it open ended as to whether or not she knows she is duping Adam or if she honestly believes the baby is his. Through being selfless, Emma gets what she has wanted for the entire duration of the film, a life with Adam, thus suggesting that selflessness leads to true happiness.

Jess is the right partner for Adam. She is equally damaged as him and uses white wine in the same way that he uses sex. Her arc and journey

mirrors Adam's. She was hurt in a past relationship (although it seems she played more of the Summer character than the Adam character in her first marriage). This hurt has left her weary of love and relationships, but underneath the tough exterior, it is this deep and meaningful connection she longs for.

Diane and Richard serve as the witness to our story. At various times throughout the story and using very different methods and tones they act as a soundboard for Adam, a shoulder to cry on. Richard seems to want to please everyone and be the life of the party. Diane, like many parents, is selfless and wants to see her son happy. In this way, Emma is a lot like Diane.

STRUCTURE

Screenwriting guru Blake Snyder has a useful tool for developing structure called “The Blake Snyder Beat Sheet”. It comes from his popular book *Save the Cat* and is a tool I have encouraged my own students to use when developing their scripts.

I completed several of these throughout the writing of the film. Each time the story would evolve, I would go back and check it against this tool.

I thought it would be interesting to go back and fill it out one last time now that this draft is complete. I wanted to see how it would check out.

THE BLAKE SNYDER BEAT SHEET

PROJECT TITLE: Little Miracles

GENRE: Right of Passage

1. **Opening Image** (1): Adam and Summer post coital, trying to conceive a child.
2. **Theme Stated** (5): Adam and Summer break up and there is a give and take between them where Summer acts selfishly and Adam behaves selflessly.

3. **Set-up** (1-10): In a prologue, we learn that Adam and his first wife broke up because he was infertile and couldn't impregnate her and that as a result of this Adam moved home with his mother. In the present day of the story we establish Adam is in a casual relationship with Emma which she wants more out of and that Adam is a real player. We also set up the dynamic between Adam and his closest friends, Richard and Sara, that Adam is a bit of a nomad and that he plays violin professionally in a pit band.

4. **Catalyst** (12): Dr. Gold tells Adam that after all their years of tests and fertility treatments it is finally time to give up and Adam will never be able to produce sperm.

5. **Debate** (12-25): Adam struggles to come to terms with Dr. Gold's advice and tries to tell Emma the truth, but is unable to. He discusses it with his Mother who tells him that he should be honest with the women in his life. It is at this time that Adam first meets Jess.

6. **Break into 2** (25): Adam sleeps with Jess for the first time and immediately realizes she is different than the other girls he has been seeing. She seems like a good match for him and wants the same things.

7. **B Story** (30): Emma hooks up with Paul on her birthday and this will eventually lead to her being pregnant.

8. **Fun and Games** (30-55): Adam and Jess get to know one another a bit better. Their casual sex evolves into casual dating, even if neither of them is willing to admit it. They watch old movies together, get drunk, play Frisbee, go for ice cream. They learn about each other's past marriages and share common ground.

9. **Midpoint** (55): Adam tells Jess the truth about why he and Summer broke up. He tells Jess he is infertile. It reads like a false victory.

10. **Bad Guys Close In** (55-75): Emma starts to reach out to Adam to tell him about her pregnancy. Jess starts to get cold feet about the blossoming relationship between her and Adam.

11. **All Is Lost** (75): Diane dies.

12. **Dark Night of the Soul** (75-85): Adam makes funeral arrangements and tries to write an obituary.

13. **Break into 3** (85): Jess reaches out to Adam and the two start to plan for their future in a new, honest and committed relationship.

14. **Finale** (85-110): As Jess and Adam plan to move in together and for their new life together, Emma finally tells Adam she is pregnant. Adam is left with a choice between the woman he loves (Jess) and the chance to be a father to Emma's baby.

15. **Final Image** (110): Adam dancing with a pregnant Emma at their wedding.

What first strikes me about this is that there is a terrific relationship between the opening image and the closing image. Adam has come full circle and in Emma finally has what he was trying to get with Summer. This is what Snyder says should happen. The final image should be the inverse of the opening image thus showing the character's journey or arc.

The other thing I am very proud of is a perfectly timed midpoint. Adam opening up to Jess and telling her the truth about his infertility is a very big deal for him. It is what Snyder would refer to as a false victory. But of course

it is short lived and Adam's world is about to come crashing down around him.

This Beat Sheet helps to reaffirm that I have hit several key beats needed to tell a whole and compelling story.

EDITED VERSION OF SSHRC PROGRAM OF STUDY

In 1979 Robert Benton's *Kramer vs. Kramer* was released. The film introduced a social narrative in popular culture that spoke to new modes of understanding family and gender roles through delving into the social issue of single fatherhood. Although by the late 1970s, the second wave of feminism had already challenged entrenched social discourses and changed basic understanding of sexuality and gender roles, *Kramer vs. Kramer* demonstrated how filmmaking could take societal debates from academic circles to mass audiences. In an emblematic scene at the end of the film, Joanna (Meryl Streep) arrives to take her son into her custody and tells Ted (Dustin Hoffman), "I came here to take my son home and I realized he already is home." This one line, in the context of the entire film, helped to make the idea of single fatherhood more acceptable to a generation of people.

Adopting this critical perspective while applying a cinematic language inspired by contemporary North American independent filmmaking and modern Euro-Asia minimalism *Little Miracles* seeks to explore questions of post-modernity in the context of how we understand masculinity through focusing on Adam, a protagonist who views himself as an incomplete, forty-year-old man. While he desperately wants to have a baby and a family, he is single and infertile. Through Adam, I want to make the audience feel his

struggles so that they understand the challenges of fatherhood in today's society. I will create this empathy by isolating Adam. While he lives with and cares for his aging mother and dates (and sleeps with) many women, he is essentially alone.

While a number of films including Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *L'enfant* and Ben Elton's *Maybe Baby* have explored the female's desire for a child, few have looked at this intimate issue from a masculine perspective. Through following Adam's journey, the screenplay presents this mostly ignored angle to the reader, thus helping make this secret struggle the topic of a broader societal discussion.

Inspired by the minimalist films of international art house cinema including the work of Thomas Vinterberg, Suzanne Bier and Ang Lee, I want my film to tell a small, insulated story. These filmmakers have demonstrated how to isolate narratives so that they are driven and motivated by their character's needs and desires yet at the same time, represent large, universal themes that help to bring important social issues to the forefront of today's culture. *Little Miracles* is also steeped in a deep tradition of classic and contemporary films that deal with themes of masculinity and fatherhood. These include Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are*

All Right and Steve McQueen's *Shame*, which all attempt to define the charged meanings of masculinity. These challenges appear more acute when contrasting these men with seemingly empowered female characters who appear to have redefined the boundaries of traditional female roles. Using these films, along with texts such as Brian Baker's *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000*, and *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* edited by Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, I have deepened my knowledge of traditional cinema's treatment of these themes. Doing so allowed me to deconstruct their methodology so that I will be able to approach the subject in a new and interesting way.

LOOKING AHEAD

I had the pleasure of seeing the great screenwriter Oren Moverman give a talk during TIFF 2014. I was at a low point in the development of my screenplay. I felt a little lost with it, like I needed some kind of breakthrough. Something he said really stuck with me. He suggested that screenwriting was one of the most futile professions in the world. That a screenplay is essentially a useless document – either it will be successful and ultimately produced, at which point the document itself becomes redundant as audiences will simply gravitate towards the finished film and hardly ever return to the original text. Or (and this is much more common) the screenplay is destined to end up at the bottom of a pile on an Executive’s desk.

This was not the best thing to hear at that given moment in time, but it ultimately became liberating. As I went back to my script, his words were still ringing in my ears and it allowed me to start writing for myself again. I stopped being concerned about “the reader” whether it be my thesis committee or a studio executive. It reminded me that writing is challenging and often lonely and to embrace that feeling. This was around the time that I realized Adam’s arc was not as focused or clear as I wanted it to be and in the

weeks following TIFF 2014, I think I was able to start to address a shift in his journey.

It is my hope that eventually this script will end up in Mr. Moverman's first category and somebody will be interested in producing the film, but until that time I plan to continue to rework, revise and edit the screenplay. I am a firm believer in the idea that a film is never done, but that the filmmakers just eventually run out of time. This is true for the director on set, the editor in the edit room and it is especially true of the screenwriter.

Now that I have completed a draft that I am proud of, I plan to share it with a multitude of readers. I want notes and feedback, but I mostly want to know if details that I have implemented into the script are working and if readers pick up on certain things.

Below is a list of the five questions that I would like to ask readers of this script to help me shape future revisions.

1. What do you make of the presence of children in the script?

I have tried to sprinkle in children throughout the film. The kids trick or treating, kids on the subway and the little girl at St. Lawrence

Market. It seems you can't go anywhere these days without running into kids (and their strollers) and I want Adam to feel this. I want him to see this and I want it to weigh on him. In an earlier draft Richard and Sara were parents to a precocious five-year-old boy who viewed Adam as something of a fun-Uncle figure. I keep wondering about this and if perhaps that was the right way to go. I ultimately removed it from the script because it felt too on the nose, but I want to make sure that these children throughout the script are tracking for the audience/reader. The female's yearning for children is a topic often explored in films and pop culture but we have rarely seen this from the male perspective and I want to make sure it is on point. Additionally, I want to make sure people understand why Adam wants to be a father. I have tried not to be too heavy handed here and hope that there are enough subtleties interwoven into the script.

2. Is Adam an active character who you can relate to?

This has been a constant struggle while writing. Adam's journey and conflict is so internal that it is challenging to dramatize. If we can't understand what his struggle is, then it will be very hard for the audience to understand some of his more questionable actions (his womanizing, his inability to commit to Jess). I don't want him to be

judged too harshly for these actions. I want the audience to understand that this is a defense mechanism, that he is trying to hide inside of this reprehensible behavior as a way of protecting himself from the hurt he felt with Summer. If the reader can understand why Adam does the things he does then they will empathize with him and be on his side for this journey. One reference constantly brought up when I discuss the script with people is Steve McQueen's *Shame*, a film I despise. In the film Michael Fassbender plays Brandon, a sex addict who is so detached from his own life that he is unable to connect with anyone in his life. I found it impossible to connect with the protagonist and thus with the film as a whole. I want to make sure Adam is nothing like this character.

Additionally, another area I think I can explore further is Adam's profession. Initially, I liked the idea of Adam being an artist, a creative type who would have a certain sensitivity, and that has served me well. But now I believe I can do even more with this and help to give Adam some more concrete objectives from a career perspective. Watching him chase these goals should also help to make him a more active protagonist.

3. What do you make of the ending?

For my money Woody Allen's *Manhattan* has one of the greatest endings in all of cinema. Allen's Isaac is working on his new novel, speaking into a tape recorder and making a list of things that make life worth living. He suggests trivial things like Groucho Marx, Cezane, a certain dish at a Chinese restaurant and then he lists "Tracy's face". In this moment Isaac realizes he has made a terrible mistake in dumping Mariel Hemingway's Tracy and goes running through the streets of New York to stop her from getting on a plane to study in London for six months. What makes this ending so satisfying is the heartbreak and the melancholy of it. Isaac had encouraged her to go study abroad and wanted her to take their relationship less seriously, and now that she has, he regrets it. He wants to be with her, but she is leaving and we are left with a sense of not knowing what the future will hold for these two. It's the perfect bittersweet ending, not unlike *Casablanca* where Rick and Ilsa are clearly in love, but must remain apart in order for the "good guys" to win the war. While the details and context of my ending are completely different, I want the emotional punch to work exactly the same. The audience should completely understand why Adam has chosen a life with Emma and her baby, but they should also wish that he had remained with Jess so that they two of them could have lived

“happily ever after”. This is the *Kieslowskian* element that I alluded to earlier and it was my original idea for the film, so I really want to track how this is reading with audiences.

4. What do you think of the Jess and Adam love story?

I have tried to model Jess and Adam on the class structure of the modern romantic comedy. It starts with an unexpected meet-cute between Jess and Adam at the DMV and then takes us through many of the standard beats. They are attracted to one another but there is something standing in their way (their mutual inability to commit). Then I position it so that they each start to want different things (Adam wants their relationship to become more serious and Jess is still distant). This ultimately breaks them apart (and they go their separate ways on New Year’s Eve) only to be brought back together by a tragedy (the death of Diane). At this point we expect them to stay together but I throw one final wrench into the equation (with the revelation that Emma is pregnant) and break them up. Ultimately if the audience doesn’t care about this relationship or root for them, the film does not work, so I want to make sure audiences like these two people together and that the scenes between them are filled with everything a great

relationship has including, chemistry, sex, laughter, arguments and empathy.

5. Do you view Adam as a lost man-child?

Since the turn of the millennia, it seems that there has been a new fascination with the idea of the *Man Child*. The films of Judd Apatow have helped make this grown up coming-of-age story a genre unto itself and actors like Seth Rogen, Jason Segal and Paul Rudd have made a living playing these lovable losers.

The most interesting rendering of one of these men was played by Mark Ruffalo in Kenneth Lonergan's *You Can Count on Me*. He plays Terry, a young man who is damaged by the death of his parents as a child. While Terry is a bit more of a "loser" than Adam (he can't hold down a job, has been in prison, smokes too much weed), he is the point of comparison I am most drawn to, because as the audience, you can't help but simply love this character. You love him in spite of his flaws and that is because we are fully able to empathize with him. We understand why he is the way he is.

There is a subtle note in my screenplay where Adam returns time and again to the fitness centre where he has a locker full of clean clothes and toiletries. I wanted to use the metaphor of Adam not truly having a place of his own to show that he is still lost and still trying to find his way. Of course he often sleeps at his Mom's but it should never quite feel like home. It's part of the reason why he hops around from bed to bed. Of course he is afraid to commit, but it is also a way of protecting himself. Then, at the end of the film, when it seems he has found peace with Jess we see him pack up the contents of his locker at the gym and then unpack them in at Jess' apartment. The man-child has come of age and is now a fully formed adult, able to have a healthy adult relationship with Jess. Hopefully this will make it all the more heartbreaking when he abandons Jess in favour of Emma and her baby.

LOOKING BACK

In closing, I wanted to take a moment to look back on the three plus years I spent working on and developing this script. The writing of this screenplay coincided with many highs and lows in my own personal life. Just as I was to embark on the first draft of the screenplay, I found out that my wife was pregnant with our first child. Then, a mere six weeks before his eventual birth, and with no warning, my own father passed away. It struck me as ironic that in the midst of telling this story about masculinity and fatherhood that I should become a father (to a now nineteen-month-old son) and lose my own father at the same time. I've tried to incorporate parts of these joys and sorrows into my own script as Adam too loses a parent at a time of great change and upheaval in his life.

Now, as I sit writing this paper and completing my thesis work, my wife is once again pregnant. This ever growing and changing thesis has coincided with my ever growing and changing family.

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