

Sunday, July 31st

By

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Abstract

My thesis film *Sunday, July 31st* is an exercise in abandonment—with it, I leave the lingering ghosts of a tumultuous childhood behind and finally step out of my father’s ubiquitous shadow. In a way, it is a dreamy retelling of our relationship. Framed through a restrained yet poignant lens, the narrative charts the journey of Pejman, the protagonist, as he embarks on a pivotal transformation from adolescence to adulthood. We observe as a seemingly insignificant misstep culminates in a powerful declaration of selfhood, throwing open the doors to a tenuous freedom that jars as much as it thrills. As the story reaches its coda, it exposes the restorative potency of truth, prompting the viewer to question their own notions of right and wrong, good and bad.

Acknowledgements

My heartfelt gratitude goes out to Professors Tereza Barta, Howie Wiseman, and Manfred Becker. Together, they constitute the holy trinity of sage advice, tough love, and sobering skepticism. To that end, whatever forward strides I mustered up over my two years of studying at York University is a direct result of their generosity in dealing with the constant bouts of doubt and fragility, and a testament to their commitment to their calling as artists and educators.

My sincere thanks to my fellow filmmakers and members of my graduate studies cohort who helped me realize my vision. As a result of the many rich and critical discussions we had—all within the rigorous confines of Film 5010—my thesis film went through many iterations and evolved into a more mature story.

I'd also like to express my undying love and admiration for my family—its matriarch, Forough Shekari, in particular. She got me acquainted with cinema at a young age, kindling within me the fire of creativity and setting me on a jagged course to self- discovery and examination.

Finally, my eternal love and admiration for my partner and producer, Soledad Vega, with whom no endeavor—creative or otherwise—is surmountable.

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The Genesis

To my brother and me, our father was always an enigma—a specter that veered in and out of our lives, by turns austere and taciturn. He was barely present past an hour or two a week—not long enough to get a proper reading on the man. And so, faced with a cryptogram for a father, we filled in the gaps with our imagination, sketching an abstract portrait of a categorically unknowable, unreachable man. It is that sense of mystery and absence that first got me thinking about what would become my thesis film: a narrative that would bridge the distance between my personal history and artistic musings through a fusion of cinematic abstraction and realism. And though the concept went through myriad changes during my studies at York University’s graduate program in film production, at its core, it was always an examination of a father-son bond, or lack thereof.

When I started to conceptualize the narrative, I had a drastically different vision in mind than what came to be my thesis project. At first, I was haunted by the recurring vision of a bitter son setting his father’s coffin ablaze. It was an image loaded with meaning, both personal and metaphorical: truthful in the way it encapsulated my feelings towards my father, yet by virtue of the grandiosity of the gesture, abstract enough to allow for some distancing between author and artwork. I delved in and started writing the first draft in Howie Wiseman’s screenwriting class, Film 5110. I knew where the story would end—with the son burning up his father’s body—so I started there and worked backwards.

The First Iteration

The first draft of the screenplay depicted the story of two brothers, hardened under decades of rage and performative aggression, who are thrown off-kilter by their father's death—the very fountain of their pain and trauma. We meet them on the fateful day of the funeral as they try to find their way out of grief, hoping to situate their respective selves in the process. But it all comes crumbling down in spectacular fashion when one of the brothers decides to steal their father's coffin and set it on fire.

The narrative was an attempt at teasing out the tangled knots of family trauma and religious and cultural dogmas. It was cerebral, arcane. I employed a blitz-style, helter-skelter approach to writing the first draft, which resulted in, at best, a meandering attempt at confronting deep-seated grievances and long-held qualms with my father and my country of birth. I traced the cultural and familial antecedents that shaped my personal narrative through fictional characters, and doing so was therapeutic. But a short movie it was not.

And so I kept going, each rewrite a reconciliation of fanciful visual musings and pressing inquiries. I wanted to examine the extent to which religious and cultural beliefs might give expression to male psychological neuroses. I was fascinated by the particular mode of masculinity I had grown up with: an erratic, chest-beating gorilla masculinity that suffocated the life out of everything around it. Where did it come from? What gave rise to it?

The more I chased these questions, the more heavy-handed and esoteric the story became. It was dense with ideas and laden with a lofty sense of entitlement. It wreaked of grandiosity, not too dissimilar from the main character's coup de maître. To offset the deficiencies, I began to buttress the narrative with occasional moments of levity and comic relief—a desperate move that yielded a tonal shift I hadn't quite anticipated and couldn't quite get a grasp on.

The narrative thread began to get away from me, yet I remained oblivious to the problem throughout the writing process and only became attuned to it a week prior the start of pre-production. More on that later.

An honest reading is all it took. I had recently finished reading George Saunders's *A Swim In A Pond In The Rain* at Howie Wiseman's insistence, and I thought about Saunders's seminal advice about close reading. Saunders encourages writers to read their drafts closely and objectively, as an impartial reader would. "Good stories," he writes, "are alert to themselves."¹ Each sentence crafted by the writer elicits a response, rendering the story a vibrant conduit for meaning where every phrase meticulously refines and accentuates its essence in subtle, yet impactful ways. Through revision, the writer becomes attuned to this underlying significance. The advice reverberated in my mind as I gave the screenplay its first critical reading. Everything that had come before was at best a casual read, beginning from the presupposition that the story was good and only required minor tweaks and improvements to be production ready. It was frightening to realize I had remained utterly oblivious to so many fatal flaws in my writing.

Rereading the screenplay, I became convinced that the story would never work as a short film. Simply put, the breadth and scope of the material being discussed required a larger canvas—closer to a feature-length screenplay—to stand a fighting chance at succeeding. Perhaps its biggest flaw, beyond being bloated with esoteric ideas and signposted with snooty philosophical musings, was that it was not self-contained. It assumed viewers would be familiar with characters and contexts, and thus it required external sources for its completeness that were not contained within the narrative itself.

As an example, the story made a big deal of intergenerational trauma, the kind that is “indicative of a deep-seated disturbance in relations between the two generations...[and] can obviously be traced back to historically specific causes.”² In my story, that intergenerational trauma stemmed from the horrific experience of the Iran-Iraq War, which left a generation of Iranian men deeply wounded and on the margins of society. I was intrigued by how deep, unshakable trauma was silently passed on to the next generation of men, creating an unbridgeable chasm: “The post-war generation either took care to accept the suppressions and mystifications put forward by their fathers or preferred...not to question their ‘enigmatic pasts’...and yet, it was this ‘enigma’ which stood like an invisible wall between the generations from the very beginning.”³ And there you have it. The underpinnings of the relationships and the narrative catalyst were attempting to tackle too large a topic, leading to a story that inevitably spread itself too thin, becoming abstruse. In retrospect, I was trying to cover too much ground or hint at a larger story beyond the scope of a short film. It was doomed from the get-go.

In fact, a seminal moment occurred when I shared my misgivings about the screenplay with my supervisor, Tereza Barta. Upon hearing my spiel, she recommended that I watch Marco Ferreri's *La Grande Bouffe* (1973) and pay close attention to Ferreri's astute and powerful observation of hypermasculinity. The film depicts four middle-aged friends who, jaded with life, retreat to a country mansion where they become determined to eat themselves to death. It's an intense watch, requiring both patience and goodwill. But, I remember watching it and being in awe of how effortlessly Ferreri had managed to broach such a complicated discussion, all within a feature-length film that, although intense and difficult to watch at times, never felt self-aggrandizing. I could not say the same thing about my story.

I was about a week into pre-production on the short film. I had contracted actors, recruited a cinematographer and had drafted a budget, all on the strength of that first draft. My supervisors had given me the green light to move ahead, too. In short, kiboshing the operation meant risking my reputation with my peers. Did I want to be labelled a perennial waffler?

Despite my early trepidations, I was leaning heavily towards the "abort" button. Previous experiences had taught me that the greatest embarrassment would not be to change course midway, no; it would be to make a half-baked short film. I had made that mistake before and was wary of committing the same error again. On April 9, 2023, after placing multiple calls to my producer, supervisory committee, and actors, amongst others, I officially pulled the plug on the production.

Suddenly, an eerie calm descended over me. I had done it. I realized the story wasn't up to snuff and I took steps to stem the flow. This was a good learning moment, one that's usually accompanied by warm, fuzzy feelings of accomplishment. But whatever calm washed over me in those initial hours quickly dissipated, turning into hysteria as it slowly dawned on me that a *new* story had to be written. Again, I'd be faced with the proverbial blank page. But this time, a dream I was about to have would prove to be instrumental.

Taking Shape

Having secured everyone's commitment to the new production start-date, I set out to write a new screenplay. This time, I knew I wanted a succinct storyline, something light on its feet with a short running time. I wanted a tight structure that would allow for a focused exploration of the father-son theme, whilst making the narrative's impact more immediate and intense.

It was at around this period that a dream came to me. In it, I was standing atop what appeared to be a large diving board, the ground seemingly a world away. I look to my right and spot my brother, Mehdi. In the dream he appears much younger—nine or ten, maybe. He's scared, looking to me for direction, for guidance. I stand there, staring at his frightened face, thinking, how can we get down from here? Suddenly a howl becomes audible. Again, I look down, staring at the abyss, and a turbulent figure comes into view. I don't see his face, only a grimace and bared teeth, snarling in our direction, commanding vehemently that we climb down at once. I know this figure to be my father. I'm scared. My brother and I remain standing there for what seems an eternity. I look around, but there are no stairs, no ladder to usher us to the ground. And even if there were, what relative safety would we gain on the ground, anyway? Our father seems furious. What sort of punishment awaits us down below? I get a strange feeling that jumping, while constituting insubordination and likely leading to severe punishment, may be the right thing to do—the obvious risks notwithstanding.

That fever dream became the crux of my screenplay.

The Second Iteration

Set against the backdrop of a record-breaking heatwave in Toronto, the narrative of the second version of the screenplay follows the journey of Shahram, a middle-aged Iranian immigrant, as he grapples with the challenges of parenting and the weight of a perpetually ringing phone that threatens to consume him. The story unfolds through the eyes of his ten-year-old son, Pejman, who is trying to navigate the complexities of his own emotions and sense of identity. After Pejman's mother drops him off at Shahram's shabby apartment, hints of unresolved conflicts and a broken relationship between the father and son come to the fore. The tension coupled with the heat transform Shahram's ratty apartment into a cauldron, forcing the pair to seek relief elsewhere.

Next, we find them in a car, en route to an unknown destination. As we soon find out, with Shahram behind the wheel, the commute is rife with perils. His careless driving almost ends in an accident. This turns Pejman into a ball of anxiety and fear as he curls into a corner and braces against the back door. Although seemingly aware of his erratic driving, Shahram offers no apologies and displays no signs of concern for Pejman.

Once they arrive at the swimming pool, Shahram restricts Pejman to the shallow area with the younger children. That confinement does not last long when Pejman spots a towering diving board and decides to disobey his father's specific instructions by ascending the imperious steps leading to the top.

Once at the summit (image 1), the tables turn. Pejman—who until now had been resigned to looking up at his father’s towering figure—looks down at his father’s minuscule figure, which is dwarfed in the distance. Conversely, seen from the ground, Pejman appears imperial, a giant. The father, unlike the apparition in my dream, does not protest (image 2). Instead, a quiet resignation washes over him as he comes to accept the inevitable passing of the torch.

Pejman jumps, and we cut to black. The next few minutes remain hidden from our view. We neither witness Shahram’s reaction to Pejman stepping out of the pool—Did Shahram offer consolation or praise for the daring leap, or was he merely a passive observer?—nor will we ever learn if he later reprimanded the young boy. Time skips forward, and we find them in the car once again. This time though, the ride stands in stark contrast to the earlier one. It’s eerily serene, suffocatingly quiet.

The final scene frames Pejman’s face in the car’s sideview mirror. We watch as his countenance transitions from bewilderment—perhaps because he was still unsettled by the preceding moments and was trying to process the permanently altered dynamics between him and his father—to slight elation. Then, we cut to black.

The ending, intentionally circular, reflects the same unresolved conflicts that characterize the beginning of the film. This choice was deliberate, as I aimed for an understated and unresolved conclusion that resonated with my personal experience, particularly my estrangement from my own father. Being estranged for nearly two years has led me to abandon any expectation of

reconciliation, and has guided my decision against writing a neatly concluded ending. Instead, I sought for the film to authentically mirror my current life realities and emotions.

As with all unresolved endings, the movie leaves us with more questions than answers. One might speculate what audiences are pondering: Will Shahram ultimately break his silence as the story unfolds? How will Pejman's pivotal moment influence the subsequent hours at home? Is tension destined for the dinner table? And, will they dine together, or will Shahram retreat to his room, marking time until his ex-wife returns to collect their rebellious son? It is in these lingering questions that the movie and my own life coalesce, where Pejman and I become one.



Image 1: Pejman standing above diving board.

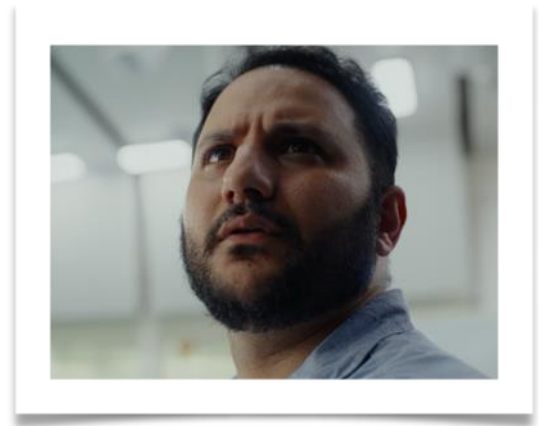


Image 2: Shahram spotting Pejman above diving board.

Philosophical Musings

Though I never set out to signpost my stories with heady philosophical concepts, often in retrospect, I can identify how certain discourses I've read about in the past reveal themselves in my writing. More than a conscious decision on my part to incorporate theory into my writing, my subconscious infuses my ramblings with theoretical concepts, which I discuss below. The following reveals how, when writing stories, one should try their best to get out of the way of the narrative, leaving agendas and ideas out of the equation, and trust that the subconscious will take over at some point and coat the narrative with the requisite rationale.

Nietzsche's Übermensch and the Journey of Self-Actualization

Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch, or "overman," as delineated in his seminal work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, serves as a compelling lens through which to view Pejman's character arc. The Übermensch represents an individual who transcends conventional morality to define their own values and purpose, embodying the pinnacle of self-actualization and existential autonomy.⁴ In my film, Pejman's culminating act of leaping from the diving board symbolizes this transcendental journey. This leap is not merely a physical act but a metaphorical embrace of uncertainty and self-defined courage, reflecting the overcoming of inherited norms and expectations. It signifies Pejman stepping out of his father's protective shadow, thereby illustrating a movement towards Nietzschean self-overcoming and the creation of one's identity and values.

Freud's Tripartite Psyche: Conflict and Resolution

Freud's structural model of the psyche, comprising the id, ego, and super-ego, provides a framework for analyzing the internal dynamics of the characters. Shahram embodies the super-ego—the moral compass and the guardian of societal norms and expectations—often clashing with Pejman's id—the source of instinctual desires and immediate gratification needs.⁵ The screenplay captures this tension, particularly in the restrictive confines of Shahram's apartment and the contrasting liberating space of the swimming pool. Pejman's progression towards the ego, which seeks rationality and mediates between the id's desires and the super-ego's restrictions, culminates in his act of diving. This act symbolizes the assertion of his individuality and the negotiation of his place within the overlapping spheres of personal desire and external expectation.

Symbolism and Setting: Externalizing the Philosophical Conflict

The screenplay utilizes setting and symbols to externalize the philosophical conflict and exploration at its heart. The oppressive heat that pervades the narrative serves as a metaphor for the stifling nature of societal and parental expectations, mirroring the super-ego's dominance in Freudian theory. The unfinished puzzle in Shahram's apartment symbolizes the complexity of human relationships and the existential puzzle of understanding oneself and one's place in the world (more on this later). The swimming pool, as a space of potential freedom and self-expression, stands in stark contrast to the apartment's confines and represents the existential field where Pejman can strive towards his *Übermensch* potential.

Approach

From the very beginning, I wanted to compliment the story's inherent understated and subdued qualities with an equally restrained cinematic treatment. I wanted the story to unspool organically and for it not to feel manufactured, almost as if we, the viewers, were intruding on someone's dreamscape, watching from afar as each fragmented piece slotted next to the other along a murky continuum. It was those early sentiments that led to a series of important decisions, ultimately defining my approach to filming. Firstly, I felt the film needed to possess a dreamlike quality. Secondly, mirroring the nature of dreams, I decided it should feel fragmented and meandering. This vision for a film that defies traditional narrative structures by embracing a dream's fluidity and unpredictability naturally led me to put a lot of consideration into the narrative's focus.

In seeking a vessel through which to channel this dreaminess and fragmented storytelling, I found inspiration in Abbas Kiarostami's *Khane-ye doust kodjast?* ("Where is the Friend's House?"), (1987). The film, with its deceptively simple tale told through the eyes of a young protagonist, captivated me. It demonstrates how the innocence and perspective of youth can serve as a powerful medium for exploring complex themes in a manner that feels both ethereal and grounded.

Echoing my aspirations, Sandra E. Lim, in the July 2020 edition of *Sense Of Cinema*, observes Kiarostami's mastery: "While the hero's journey is a simple premise, Kiarostami's style of realism is characterized by an economy of form, which is deceptively simple—especially in the structuring device of asking for directions, the answers to which are never straightforward. In

this way, Kiarostami asks the viewer to interact with the narrative, to pick up and weave its threads.”⁶ This insight resonated with me as it highlighted how a narrative built around a young protagonist’s view could not only capture the essence of dreaminess but also invite audiences to engage more deeply with the narrative and piece together its fragments in a discursive journey. Inspired by this notion, I sought to situate my film at the intersection of narrative discursiveness and viewer interaction. My ambition was for the narrative to evoke a sense of disjointed recollection, akin to a series of memories, as if Pejman is now a middle-aged man reflecting on this pivotal day. To that end, I made the decision to omit a large swathe of “shoe-leather” moments. I hoped that, by skipping the mundane aspects of movement and transition, the narrative would take on a disorienting effect similar to dreams, where dreamers often find themselves suddenly in new locations without remembering how they got there. This can imbue the story with a surreal quality, as the logical progression of time and space is disrupted.

Lim further elucidates Kiarostami’s innovative techniques, noting, “Kiarostami also developed a style of non-acting, in which he enlisted children from the village of Koker to improvise and react to real situations ‘as a living thing.’”⁷ Embracing this philosophy, I encouraged a similar authenticity in my film, blending structured narrative with spontaneous, genuine moments. This approach not only pays homage to Kiarostami’s legacy but also reinforces the immersive dreaminess of the narrative, bridging the viewer’s interaction with the film through a tapestry of vivid, yet fragmented, memories.

As with all my previous films, I maintained a project bible (images 3-4) that included the script, shot list, visual and literary references, as well as extensive notes on potential pitfalls, staging,

blocking, and more. I carried the bible with me throughout the entire filming process, consulting my notes and adding new ones that would inform the approach to editing. Additionally, at the production's conclusion, I wrote an extensive postmortem, identifying key mistakes and deficiencies as well as significant breakthroughs and successes. This approach, while not entirely new, reached a level of maturity and productivity previously elusive to me. In contrast to earlier productions, where I kept notes primarily to appear prepared to others, in this production, the notes became so integral that not having them on me caused me a great deal of panic.

The bible's significance deepened for me for two main reasons. First, rather than compiling its contents after all the conceptual work on the movie had been completed, like an afterthought, this time I began incorporating notes, ideas, and references from the very beginning. This transformed the bible from a mere reference into a chronology of events, illustrating how small discoveries along the way came to change the narrative and shape my final approach. Secondly, my decision to include the script, page by page, draft after draft, meant that notes and references became inseparably linked to the script. Previously, I kept a copy of the script and a book of references (production bible) in separate locations. This approach, I realized, led to a disconnect between musings (chiefly visual) and narrative changes (to the screenplay). When faced with a problem on set, I would have to consult my notes, then the script, before returning to the notes again for potential solutions.



Image 3: Project bible

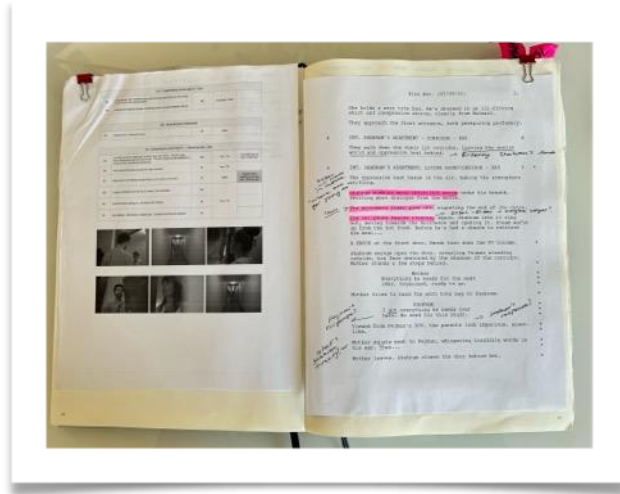


Image 4: Project bible

Casting

My initial idea was to assemble a cast comprised of non-actors and union pros. I'd observed this method working to great effect in the films of Sean Baker and the Safdie brothers, especially in the Safdie brothers' *Good Time* (2017), where the mixture of amateur and professional give the film a unique blend of hyperrealism and surrealism. To my chagrin, what seemed easy and achievable in theory proved to be a difficult task in practical terms.

Yeimy Daza, a fellow filmmaker and member of my graduate studies cohort, stepped in as our casting director. Daza had extensive experience working in the casting world and was willing to offer our production her services at a fraction of the fee other casting directors demanded. With her help, we managed to put out a country-wide call for the lead parts and received a slew of submissions. Most, if not all, of the first-round submissions were way off the mark, though not always due to poor performance or lack of believability—however, these issues were present in some of the reject piles. Sometimes, what stopped me from granting a performer a callback was strictly based on appearance.

You see, the father and son in the story were very real people to me, not just figments of my imagination. They were, for all intents and purposes, abstract representations of myself and my father. As such, they needed to embody certain physical and aesthetic qualities.

In the son's case, I was searching for a deep sense of vulnerability in the eyes. Someone who could convey profound wisdom and hurt by simply staring in our direction. Someone of smaller physical stature, who could fool you into thinking that they're submissive and subservient, but

when the moment arises they'll subvert all your preconceived notions by taking the narrative by the scruff of the neck and flipping the script.

In the father's case, the task was even more delicate. I had seen so many facile renditions of strained father-son relationships where the father character was abysmally one-note. He enters the story as an oppressive, deadbeat character and by the story's end is transformed into a full-fledged beast. No insight is gained from such monotonous treatments. Furthermore, I don't believe in good and bad. Those are basic categories people come up with for the sake of nothing else but expediency. Often our busy lives are not conducive to spending enough time with people in a manner that yields a real, deep understanding. As such, we tend to lean on good and bad as basic character descriptors. In real life where one does not have ample time to ponder people and their motives, where expediency is king, such simple moral categories may be excusable. But, when making a film, veering into caricature territory can threaten to derail a project. For this reason, I had made it my mission to find an actor who possessed soft, dare I say saintly, features. It was the juxtaposition of harsh commandments and soft features that made my father a complex individual. I wanted to bring that same complexity to the screen.

The first breakthrough came when casting for Pejman's part. I remember feeling somewhat dejected, thinking to myself that I'd never find the right person to play the part and that I should just settle for the next best thing. We'd spent the whole day auditioning people and were almost done. Then I looked down at the casting list in front of me and spotted two identical faces, one after the other. Was it a trick of the eye? Had my vision become blurry after an arduous day of

casting? I peered closer, squinting to make out the faces, the names. And there they were. Yusuf and Kerem Basak. Identical twins, virtually indistinguishable.

Aesthetically, they both struck me as perfect for the part. All that remained was to see them audition. Yusuf entered the room first. Being the younger brother—by all of three minutes—he seemed sprightly and free. He didn't care too much about making an impression. All he was concerned with was a chance to play around and have fun. I would give him a brief note, he would take it, and he would masterfully incorporate it into his interpretation and present a whole new nuanced take time after time. I was convinced that he was my Pejman. So much so that I felt a slight reticence to seeing Kerem, his twin brother.

Thank goodness I did see him. Kerem, the elder brother, communicated not only all of Yusuf's intelligence and liberty but also a nuanced, subdued confidence and a reflective intensity. Observing him in silence, particularly when he gazed into the lens, was deeply compelling. Ultimately, it was this blend of powerful stillness and assured presence that persuaded me to cast him as Pejman. While Yusuf radiated a playful and exuberant energy, Kerem portrayed those qualities and others I needed for this role. Above all, I was captivated by how, at a first glance, he could almost tempt you into underestimating him, mistaking him for a pushover. Yet, when he revealed that other aspect of himself, there was no questioning his formidable presence.

It took much longer to find the right actor to play the father. Just as the search for Pejman had resulted in a near-failure only to be rescued in the final hour by Kerem's appearance, the options for the father were petering out in similar fashion. I had looked all over the country for the

perfect actor with the right qualities, perfect craft, and so on. Some came close: they had the right look, but lacked the sensibility; or, they had the right sensibility, but didn't have the right look.

We had gone through all the submissions and still did not have a Shahram.

Ultimately, I found Shahram in my brother Mehdi—the very same Mehdi who had appeared in my initial dream, standing atop the diving board, frozen in fear, as if questioning, “What now?” Mehdi and I had a history of making films together. In fact, some of my earliest films were improvisational shorts that he and I filmed on Betacam. In that respect, I took comfort in knowing that we understood each other's aesthetic sensibilities and work styles. More importantly, what Mehdi possessed, beyond a facility for acting and improvisation, was an acute understanding of my father and his plight. Mehdi, like myself, was not interested in knee-jerk, naive interpretations. He was keenly aware of our father's history—the events that had brought our father to the present, shaped his identity, and provided the impetus for the many misguided decisions he'd made throughout his life. Mehdi knew that to have any success in portraying Shahram honestly, the character's misdeeds should stem from a tragic misunderstanding as opposed to an inherent evil. Equally, he understood that the job of portraying Shahram required an intimate understanding of the all-too human frailties and follies that are part and parcel of parenthood. With those priorities in place, he was ready to dig in.

Rehearsals

In the end, I ended up with a cast that wouldn't feel out of place in a Sean Baker or Safdie Brothers film. Sure, there were no professionals sprinkled in; this was an all-amateur cast that required a lot of guidance. But what they lacked in experience, they more than made up for in heart and soul. I had learned important lessons in preparation from my previous projects with amateur actors or non-actors, particularly the value of rehearsals. Bearing this in mind, I asked my producer Soledad Vega to allocate two, four-hour rehearsal sessions and schedule them for the week prior to filming. I wanted any discoveries made to remain fresh in the actors' bodies and minds, enhancing their performance and the authenticity of the film.

Being an actor myself, I had recently completed a two-day workshop with renowned teacher Lindy Davies and come away with key discoveries. Davies employs three key concepts in her training—Dropping-in, Abstract, and Blueprint—each of which is designed to get the performer closer to the truth of the part. Armed with newfound techniques, I entered rehearsals with Mehdi and Kerem and began testing out Davies's ideas within the context of my short film narrative. To that end, I designated a square space (as taught by Davies) within which actors would be granted three strict modes of expression: standing still, sitting, and running. Kerem and Mehdi then entered the space—sometimes completely empty of objects, other times littered with abstract objects that had nothing to do with the story—and started the dropping-in process. Dropping-in, in this context, signifies an actor's gradual emotional and physical entrance into the character. During the rehearsal, while actors occupied the space within the square, I stood on the sideline, screenplay in hand, reading out *action lines* from specific scenes. As I read the lines, the job of

each actor was to respond to the contextual information being read, but only through the strict modalities available in the exercise: running, sitting, or standing still.

In retrospect, I wonder if I may have thrown my actors into the deep end too quickly. There was a lot of confusion and trepidation at first. After all, neither one had any previous, structured training, and they didn't know how to fully engage with Davies's exercise. The first day unraveled in that manner, tinged with hesitancy and bewilderment. That did not concern me, though. I knew that the second day—once initial reservation had dissipated and inhibitions shed—would be when they'd really begin to “drop-in.” And, just as I thought, on our second day, both Mehdi and Kerem began responding to the material. It was amazing to witness them go through such a rich and complex transition, from total paralysis and confusion to being fully immersed in the story and responding in immediate, unfiltered ways. Of course, it helped that the exercises, by virtue of their deceptive limitations, compelled the actors to respond with urgency and truthfulness. It allows the performer to experience the character moment-to-moment, to discover their impulses and inclinations within the context of a scene, without getting bogged down in heady, opaque discussions.

Production

My long-time producer and partner Soledad Vega helmed the film's production. We had started making movies together back in 2015, developing a shorthand that was instrumental to the efficient flow of all stages of our filmmaking endeavors. In building the production crew, we stuck to our tried and true method of nimble units. Both of us appreciate the mobility and freedom a small team grants the filmmaking process. In essence, smaller teams tend to quickly coalesce, transforming into a close-knit, family unit that shares both triumphs and challenges. Naturally, this setup requires individuals to assume multiple roles, necessitating a blend of generalist and specialist skills that is both demanding and stressful, as it stretches everyone to the very limits of their capacity. Yet, this very demand for versatility paradoxically strengthens the bond and unity among crew members. From my perspective, this dynamic not only fosters a stronger sense of camaraderie but also facilitates greater personal investment in the project—provided, of course, that the narrative strikes a chord with them in the first place.

Our cinematographer would be one Jeremy Cox. Cox had recently finished filming *Until Branches Bend*, and garnered much praise for his transcendental photography. There's an ineffable quality to his work that eschews mainstream cinematographic practices. Unlike many cinematographers I met with and interviewed for the job, Cox's interest lies not in producing beautiful, of-the-moment images; on the contrary, he understands that an ugly image might have its appropriate moment within a narrative sequence too. And therein lies his greatest strength: the ability to not only hold the current shot, the current moment in his mind, but also cogitate on what shot should come next, as he always keeps the entire sequence and the movie as a whole as

reference points. In that respect, he is unique among his peers, possessing both an editor's sequential perception and a cinematographer's eye for composition.

Stylistically, Cox and I decided that the movie should be a subtle homage to Eric Rohmer's cinema with a deliberate focus on the human experience, minimal camera movements, and a rich colour palette that would operate at a subliminal level. In that respect, most if not all of our conceptual work revolved around finding the most restrained, most accurate camera placement for each given moment. In essence, we set out to create loaded visuals that helped unburden the text; instead of blurring everything out in exposition, we intended to show it. That did not always work out to plan, though.

A prime example is the opening apartment scene in which the viewer, for the first time, gets to witness the strained father-son bond. For this sequence, we opted for camera placements that remain far adrift from the characters' eyelines, giving the viewer the feeling that the two men are untethered, miles apart and unlikely to coalesce in any significant way. In short, they don't see eye to eye. The approach, whilst making total sense to us, caused a lot of confusion on set. In particular, my continuity supervisor voiced serious misgivings about the footage cutting together and instead lobbied for a more conventional approach: a reverse-shot. Cox and I stuck to our guns. This was not a gratuitous, spur of the moment call; this was an extension of weeks of preparation, deeply connected to our overall approach to filming.

Additionally, to maximize empathy and understanding for Pejman's plight, Cox and I decided that everything should be filtered through his point of view. As such, once he enters the story, all

subsequent events are largely processed from his perspective, giving the viewer access to some of the inner workings of his mind and the turmoil therein. Equally as important was the decision to withhold usage of any shot that contained the two actors within the same frame. We both agreed that much of the narrative should play out in poignant “singles,” where the viewer gets to observe each character as siloed, boxed-in within the cramped confines of the 4:3 aspect ratio. Any semblance of connection, of unity, was deliberately cut out through this strict approach to framing. In fact, there are only two instances of two-shot in the entire movie, each deliberately selected to mark a seminal moment in the screenplay, and by extension, each character’s arc.

In searching for some playfulness, we landed on the penultimate scene. The nature of the sequence—how it marks the character of Pejman’s journey—gave us enough leeway to take some creative license. We wanted the ascent to the top of the diving board to take on a foreboding, borderline ominous feel. To achieve that, we utilized a lot of abstract imagery and composition. Specifically, when Pejman first comes face-to-face with the behemoth that is the diving board (image 5-6), standing at the bottom and staring up, instead of revealing the entire structure, we decided to reveal it through obscure fragments. We examine the structure in slow drips, just as Pejman does when he glances at the diving board and begins to understand the path he must take to individuation—examining it from every angle, perhaps never seeing it until after the jump.



Image 5: Pejman's POV of diving board.

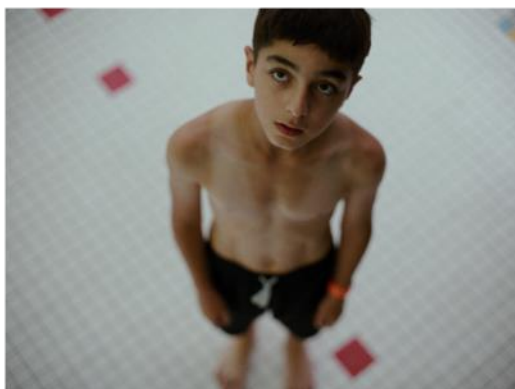


Image 6: Pejman looking up at diving board.

Post-production

Much like our filming, the editing was to have an equally restrained and understated feel to it. To execute on that plan I sked Kane Stewart, the editor of *Until Branches Bend*, to join our post team. The fact that Stewart and Cox had already worked together created a nice synergy across production and post-production phases. I remember watching the first assembly that Stewart had put together and being in awe of how familiar he seemed with the story. The ease with which he sifted through the footage to finally land on the right coverage and select the right take was as much a testament to the effective and close working relationship he'd developed with Cox as it was to his artistry as a picture editor.

A particular pain point revealed itself during the assembly review. It had dawned on Stewart that there may be a problem with Pejman arriving, as he does, two minutes into the story. The assembly cut began with Shahram, virtually entombed in his sweltering apartment, avoiding the incessant calls on his cellphone, and it wasn't until later that Pejman was introduced. The worry was that viewers, on account of the film opening with Shahram, might identify Shahram as the protagonist. That would mean that their allegiance would lie with Shahram instead of with Pejman, resulting in a fatal narrative flaw. I, however, saw it differently. In my view, Pejman's delayed arrival and subsequent hijacking of the narrative functioned like a nice sleight of hand, neatly subverting the viewer's expectation by flipping the narrative when we switch from Shahram's point of view to that of Pejman. But Stewart wouldn't budge until my assertion was proven empirically, through a rigorous process of revisions and rejigging that entailed multiple alternate beginnings. They all commenced with the shot of Pejman and his mother walking to an unspecified destination, then transitioned to the scene at the apartment to introduce Shahram, and

then back to Pejman arriving at the doorsteps of the apartment. We must have tried four or five different variations of that opening, but none had quite the enigmatic feeling or the magic of the original. It was almost too easy, too predictable to start any other way. Once all other options had been exhausted and Stewart was convinced, we left the troubled opening alone and moved on to the rest of the film.

A prominent motif throughout the narrative is the concept of a puzzle. This occurred to me while writing the script: Pejman, in his interactions with his obstinate father and his unpredictable ways, is essentially solving a puzzle. To this end, the idea of fragmentation, of structuring scenes as though they are disparate pieces of a complex puzzle, influenced the design of certain scenes. Most notable among these is the introduction of Shahram, which takes up the first minute or so of the film. In this section, Stewart and I adopted a rather disjointed structure, piecing together a series of shots in which Shahram's face is either obscured, or seen through a reflection, or completely hidden. In our view, this fragmentation dovetails with the overarching puzzle motif on a subliminal level, conveying notions such as Shahram being an enigma, and Pejman's life possessing a riddle-like quality, without the need for overt exposition.

Release Plan

I began submitting the film to festivals earnestly in January, 2024. At the time of writing this paper, I have yet to receive news on any of the submissions, and it is unlikely that I will have any concrete ideas about our premiere status until sometime in May. My priority is to have a European premiere, followed by a national screening at either Toronto International Film Festival or Vancouver International Film Festival. I decided to aim for an international premiere overseas partly because I believe that the film reflects European sensibilities of understated, restrained filmmaking in comparison to a North American cinematic tradition. In this respect, I think the film is better suited to European audiences than to North American ones.

Additionally, I believe that short films that burn their “world premiere” at home often struggle to gain traction abroad. While not the only reason a film may find it challenging to travel successfully, there’s no denying that having a world premiere at a local festival significantly reduces the film’s appeal to programmers at other festivals.

Postmortem and Conclusion

The production was a success in that I managed to capture all the shots I had set out to capture. There was little to no compromise, which meant I largely stuck to my guns and asked the crew to help me capture the shot as scripted, as opposed to opting for an easier, less challenging version that would require less time and energy. Of course, it helped immensely that Cox was not one for compromises either and constantly pushed me to try harder, trying over and over to perfect the desired image. In that respect, I think he is much less inhibited than I, and he feels little hesitation in asking the cast and crew to commit to additional takes. I, on the other hand, felt trepidation, especially when sensing that the actors may be tired, or the crew haggard after ten or so takes.

In fact, I remember Cox turning to me after a shot we had captured did not align the way we had imagined and telling me—much to my dismay—that I’d have to ask the actor to repeat the take. The moment I’m referring to is the final jump from the ten-meter diving board. Kerem was tired and did not want to climb atop the board and jump again. I didn’t want to be the one to tell a ten-year-old kid, after nine hours of filming, that we would need him to repeat the sequence again. But Cox was insistent: “You need to get that shot, Meysam. We simply don’t have it yet. It’s important,” he said to me. And so I did, and I couldn’t be more thankful to him that we repeated that sequence. Kerem’s preceding jumps were timid, devoid of the liberating and unrestrained image I needed to capture for the penultimate sequence to work. But his final jump was right on the money: hands held aloft, screaming in total ecstasy, free at last.

Where the production could have been sharper was in the actual day-to-day running of the set. My producer could not be on the set with us, and her absence created a real deficit. The set

needed a second person who could step in and own the problems, issues, and questions—someone with the proverbial “bird’s eye view.” Also, in our exuberance to create a learning environment for some of our crew members and collaborators, we threw one or two people into the deep end without properly considering the implications of someone with little experience leading an important department. Going forward, I will aim to strike a healthier balance between the need to have experienced professionals in important roles and fostering a thriving learning environment for more junior members of the team by placing them in less demanding roles.

Like every other film project, this endeavour was always going to be an attempt at capturing the colour and timbre of that initial image—that kernel of an idea that set me on this road of discovery. I never believed—and still don’t—that the totality of an idea can be captured. It’s nearly impossible, because no matter how hard you try to grasp an idea, it slips through your fingers like fine grains of sand. It’s elusive. The challenge, in that respect, is to try your best to capture the essence of the idea and remain open to discoveries along the way. To trust yourself, rely on your collaborators during difficult times, and do your best to step out of the way of the film. Because, if executed well, there comes a time when the production takes on a life of its own, the movie becoming a living, breathing entity that undulates to its unique rhythm, and the worst thing you can do is to meddle. I’ve learned that, instead, it’s best to observe its movements, and, like a conductor, gently shape it with light gestures here and there.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Saunders, *A Swim In A Pond In The Rain*, 8.
² Schneider, "Fathers and Sons, Retrospectively," 5.
³ Schneider, 8.
⁴ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 12, 36.
⁵ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 22, 40.
⁶ Lim, "Realism, Morality and Care," 1.
⁷ Lim, 2.

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