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by

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Magic Mountain: The Scenic Route From Thriller to Comedy

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by

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Report

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Abstract

Magic Mountain: The Scenic Route from Thriller to Comedy

by

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This report documents the creative process that resulted in the feature screenplay “Magic Mountain,” including the first inspiration for a dramatic thriller, initial attempts to devise character and plot, writing and rewriting script pages, and then the radical change of genre and artistic intention toward surrealist comedy, culminating with the final sequence of rewriting during the thesis semester.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Welcome to The Mountain.....	1
Chapter 2: Why Are We Here.....	2
Chapter 3: It All Starts with Two Buddies on a Boat	4
Chapter 4: Two Brothers on Dry Land.....	6
Chapter 5: The First Treatment for "Two Brothers"	7
First Treatment for "Two Brothers"	8
Chapter 6: Finding the Structure Minute by Minute.....	10
Minute by Minute.....	10
Chapter 7: Character Bio for The Protagonist	15
Character Bio	15
Chapter 8: Defining Moment for The Protagonist.....	16
Defining Moment Scene	16
Chapter 9: The First Outline	18
Chapter 10: The First Two Sets of Pages	20
Nicky and The Ducklings	20
Nicole and Lucy	23
Danny and Lucy	24
Chapter 11: Writing the First 40 Pages	28
Chapter 12: Second Outline and Pages 1-50	30
Chapter 13: A New Start	31
Nicky and Jenny Meet in Flashback.....	32
Chapter 14: Magic Mountain.....	38
The Wolf Scene in The Last Dramatic Draft.....	39
Chapter 15: The First Set of Magic Mountain Pages.....	44
Danny and Margie and The Gun in The First Comedic Draft.....	45

Chapter 16: Ice Cream and Indians in Reel 2	47
Chapter 17: Reel 3.....	49
The Gold Watch Scene	49
Chapter 18: Reel 4.....	54
Danny's List Scene	54
Chapter 19: Reel 5.....	57
Chapter 20: Reel 6.....	58
Nicky Lets Bert Go.....	59
Chapter 21: Reel 7.....	62
Chapter 22: Reel 8.....	63
Chapter 23: Thesis Rewrite Part One.....	64
The Wives and The Treasure Map Opening Pages	67
Chapter 24: A Little Knowledge Can Be Dangerous.....	73
Chapter 25: The Rewritten Script	76
Appendix A The First Outline	85
Appendix B The Ecstasy Scene in The First Draft	92
Bibliography	95

CHAPTER 1: WELCOME TO THE MOUNTAIN

The writing process that culminated in the final version of “Magic Mountain” was a long and winding one that involved two very different attempts to tell a story about a couple of brothers walking up a mountain trail with their father's ashes. The first attempt, whose working title was “Two Brothers,” began as a dramatic thriller in which one brother had betrayed or allegedly betrayed the other in backstory and the hike up the mountain promised murderous revenge. This is the version I worked on in RTF 380J during the fall of 2012, my first semester enrolled in the UT-Austin screenwriting MFA program. Over the winter break, I continued to shape the story and moved in a somewhat lighter direction, more toward serious drama and away from dark thriller. Then in the spring of 2013, while using the project as my rewrite script for Beau Thorne’s “Rewrite” class, RTF 380J, I did a 180-degree turn and the story of two brothers walking up a mountain with their father’s ashes became a surrealist comedy. The overall tonal shift in this process has been from one extreme to another, from dark and gritty realism to the gleeful height of silliness and frivolity.

This report will explain how the project evolved from beginning to end. The first half of the report will concern the dramatic version. The second half will concern the comedic version beginning with the initial leap toward comedy. The report will continue into the first draft and then go through the process of revision in my thesis semester, summer 2014.

CHAPTER 2: WHY ARE WE HERE?

From the first day I became interested in writing and directing feature films, I believed that the only way to go was micro-budget, at least at first, until I could find an audience and make a name for myself. In order to get funding as a first-time director, I would need to ask for as little money as possible in the budget. This means restricting locations to the minimum and restricting number of cast members. It also means writing something that can be filmed in existing real-world locations with naturalistic lighting (daylight), so that time and money spent building sets and setting up lights can be greatly reduced. Going further, one would want to avoid the need for special effects and stunt actors. You get the idea: reduce potential production costs through a carefully chosen, low-budget screenwriting aesthetic.

This strategy fit well with my creative ambitions, since my favorite films were mostly naturalistic dramas – dialogue and character-driven and focused on the internal geography of the human soul, films by writer-directors such as John Cassavetes, Lars von Trier, and Ingmar Bergman. Writing in this style also did not have – to borrow a term from economics – a substantial opportunity cost, because at the time I was not seeking a career as a professional screenwriter. I wouldn't be able to sell the scripts I was writing but that was fine with me. My intention was to write a story and direct a film, not try to groom myself for writing screenplays that Hollywood might want to buy. I was not only uninterested in writing for mainstream cinema but more importantly I did not believe I could compete in the extremely competitive marketplace where only one out of one hundred commercial screenwriters can make a living as a writer. I now live in Los

Angeles and want to write for television – a happy consequence of the UT-Austin screenwriting program and the “Writers Room” course taught by Cindy McCreery and Scott Shepherd – but that is another story.

I not only believed that getting funding for my first film would necessitate writing for a very low budget, I also assumed that my films going forward, if I were fortunate enough to make more than one, would probably always require small budgets because the audience for my work would remain small, relatively speaking. I knew that the films I loved and wanted to emulate did not have wide commercial theatrical releases. I had seen all of them on DVD and most people had never heard of them. I knew that those films often barely made their money back. And I knew that the filmmakers were able to make multiple films because they were careful, even after achieving wide critical acclaim, to use screenplays that allowed them to save money in production.

Add to these practical considerations the notion that giving oneself creative limitations can help spur greater creativity, and you have the reasons why we are looking at a story of two people walking up a mountain trail, a story that, at first at least, required only two actors and one location for 90% of the film, would be filmed naturalistically in daylight with no expensive lighting setups, needed no constructed sets, involved – again, at first – no special effects, and consisted of long, dialogue-driven scenes that would allow for a production schedule in which shooting 8 pages per day was feasible.

But first, there was a boat.

CHAPTER 3: IT ALL STARTS WITH TWO BUDDIES ON A BOAT

The very first idea in this process came to me in October 2010, and I wrote down a few pages of notes and then forgot about the concept until the fall of 2012 when I entered the MFA program and needed something to write about. Here is a simplified version of the film scenario I thought of back in 2010:

1. Two old college friends who haven't talked in 10 years.
2. One of them is successful – in my notes, I called him The Nice One – and one of them took a downward spiral since they formerly knew each other – I called him The Angry One.
3. The Angry one blames the sad state he is in on his old friend, who betrayed him with a woman back in their college days. He has nothing – no job, no love, no hopes – while the Nice One has everything, a great job, money, wife, kids, house, et cetera.
4. The plot concerns the Angry One's plan to get revenge on his old friend who he believes ruined his life. He contacts The Nice One and pretends to be doing well, says he wants to visit and catch up, says they ought to go fishing (on one of the Great Lakes). The Nice One agrees, and they go. Soon enough, The Angry One makes his intentions known, binds the Nice One (handcuffs, rope) and explains himself. He describes the pain of his existence and why he believes it all goes back to the college-age betrayal, and lets the Nice One know his fate: The Angry One is going to dump The Nice One into the middle of the lake and let him drown.

5. The Nice One (who is actually more devious and intelligent than the Angry One) talks the Angry one into letting him live. He does this by telling the Angry One that he, the Nice One, actually has it worse since their college days. He hates his life, his job, his wife, his house, his kids, everything that appears to be good in his life that the Angry One envies. He speaks of having no freedom, of being imprisoned, of wishing that he had the freedom that the Angry One enjoys through having never “succeeded” by society’s standards. He goes so far as to thank the Angry One for waking him up, and even says that death may be a better option than returning to his life. The Angry One – perhaps truly motivated in this kidnapping (I loved the bleak irony) by the desire to have a friend, unties the Nice One, lets down his guard and, after a tense sequence of joking around, drinking beers, and swimming, ends up getting killed by the Nice One.

I subsequently decided that it would be better to do the film on a mountain with the “Two Buddies” (working title) walking up a trail, rather than have the film confined to a boat. This material was written down and saved in a file and forgotten about until I started the Fall 2012 semester.

CHAPTER 4: TWO BROTHERS ON DRY LAND

Upon entering my first semester in the program – actually five weeks into the first semester, when I gave up on another idea – I decided I would use the “Two Buddies” material for a feature film script. I quickly realized that I didn’t have enough material for a feature-length script, and that the original “Two Buddies” concept was probably better suited to a long short film. So, writing commenced and I came up with the idea that the two buddies should instead be two brothers who were taking their father’s ashes up to the top of a mountain, and that they each had a gun with them, unbeknownst to the other, and that one might be planning to kill the other. I also decided that as they walked up the mountain, we would flash back to important moments in the past – and go in reverse chronological order, so that the first flashback showed us something the morning before the hike, the next took us to the night before the hike, the next went to a few days prior, then a week prior, then a month, and so on. I also decided that the two brothers would be small-time criminals in New Jersey who had spent their entire lives in the city and had never been on a mountain before, the combined effect of which was that there suddenly was a lot of tough-guy posturing, foul language, and some comedic friction between the brothers and the natural world, about which they were completely ignorant.

CHAPTER 5: THE FIRST TREATMENT FOR “TWO BROTHERS”

I identified the genre as “dramatic thriller,” and said it was “Cain and Abel meets The Edge” (the David Mamet thriller that takes place in the wilderness of Alaska). The logline was “two brothers hike up a mountain to honor their father and bury his ashes, but the thin line between love and hate may mean only one of them will return.”

At the time of the first treatment I was putting together possibilities for what kind of material I thought might go in the reverse chronological flashbacks, but I didn’t yet know or try to figure out what the brothers would be doing in the present-tense story while making their way up the mountain. I had a vague sense that they would spend time early on talking around subjects, both projecting calm, while a lot of their true feelings of anger and fear would play on a heightened subtextual level, especially as we saw more and more revealed through flashback. I probably knew that I wanted a “slow burn” as far as dramatic tension, while they ascended the mountain, but I didn’t have any concrete notion of what the scenes on the mountain would become. Therefore, the first treatment was concerned almost entirely with figuring out the backstory, from which the flashbacks would be drawn.

Perhaps here is a good place to apologize for the temporary names I gave to the characters, Mikey and Nicky (inspired by Elaine May’s film, Mikey and Nicky, starring John Cassavetes and Peter Faulk). I wanted the brothers to have names that suggested their shared boyhood, and names that felt playful, in contrast to the dark nature of the story. Names that end in –y or –ey seemed to work for this purpose. However, in workshop, I realized that these names were problematic for my readers who complained

that the phonetic and perhaps typographic similarity of the names made the characters difficult to differentiate. I later changed the names to Danny and Nicky.

FIRST TREATMENT FOR TWO BROTHERS

An older man lies in a hospital bed, dictating his last request to an orderly. He wants his two quarreling sons to bring his ashes up a certain mountain in New Jersey and place them where a certain river meets a certain trail. The brothers will also place an item belonging to their long-dead mother in the ground with their father's remains. The man makes an audio recording of himself delivering some last words to his sons, with instructions that they only listen once they get to the place where the ashes will be laid. While this man lies in bed, slowly dying from a gunshot wound, one of his sons is awaiting trial for a heist-gone-awry the man and his sons were involved in, which resulted in the gunshot wound. That son, Nicky, will soon be imprisoned for two years. The other son, Mikey, has been arrested for co-committing the crime but will be released in four days. He was lucky enough to flee the scene in their getaway car, and the police cannot pin the crime on him. The father intended the ill-fated caper to be his last stand, and his intentions were tragically all too prescient. The brothers intended the crime to be their way out of poverty permanently, as a successful heist would have garnered them a large sum of cash, once they fenced the stolen goods.

Tensions flare up between the brothers, because as Mikey drove away, Nicky stayed with their father as he bled in the street. Then Nicky saved him and sacrificed himself by calling 9-1-1, bringing in the ambulances as well as the police, against his father's protestations. Although Mikey left the scene honestly thinking both of them were dead, he still harbors intense shame and guilt for abandoning his brother and father when they needed him most. While Nicky did everything he could to save his brother from also being charged with the crime, Nicky cannot help but harbor some resentment toward Mikey for going free after abandoning them at the crime scene. He knows he should not feel this way, but this resentment and other issues from the past torment him as he sits in a locked cell for two years. After the father makes the request concerning his ashes, and records his voice into a tape recorder, the dying patriarch will never see either of his sons again.

While Nicky pines away in prison, his wife gives birth to their first child, a son they name after the brothers' father. In the year or so following, a former flame of Nicky's wife from high school enters the picture, seeing an opportunity. He has done well in the construction business and could support her and her child, along

with his own two children from his first marriage. Learning of this threat, Nicky, stuck in prison for another year, asks his brother Mikey to intervene, to help around his wife's house with fixing things, spend some time with her, invite her to dinner with Mikey and his wife, and generally keep her from being lonely. In order to save his brother's marriage, Mikey must make Nicky's wife remember she's part of the family and is not alone. Nicky's wife responds positively to this attention and help, and her ex-boyfriend's ambitions soon fade. The only problem is that Mikey gradually falls in love with his brother's wife, and the problem intensifies because he must keep his feelings a secret.

Nicky receives word from an anonymous source that his wife and his brother are having an affair while he is in prison. The truth is that Mikey does not betray his brother for the entire duration of Nicky's imprisonment, until the week before Nicky is released. Racked with shame and guilt, but desperately still in love, Mikey says his good-byes to Nicky's wife, and tries to forget how he feels. Long awaiting something concrete to back up her suspicions, Mikey's wife, now armed with hard evidence of her husband's betrayal, reveals herself as the anonymous source to Nicky. She tells him everything and more, largely overstating the reality of the situation. Nicky's heart is sick and his blood boils as he sits in his cell. He and Mikey's wife hatch a plan to get the heist money back from Mikey, who was left in charge of safe-keeping the cash until things died down. They plan to split the money, whose sum they greatly overestimate, before she leaves Mikey high-and-dry. She incorrectly believes Mikey has kept the money tucked away in a well-hidden bank account, when in fact Mikey has already spent the small amount of money taking care of Nicky's wife and child while Nicky was in prison.

These events and other crucial moments from the brothers' past are seen in flashback, as the present-day action and framing device is the brothers' two-day trek up the mountain. Nicky has barely spoken to his brother since being let out of prison. Mikey is unaware of his wife's clandestine communications with Nicky, so he proposes to his brother that they go ahead and make the trip up the mountain and honor their father's last request. Mikey understands that his father had long lamented the quarreling between his sons that went back to when they were just boys. The two of them have always been very close, but have also challenged each other relentlessly and unfairly at times. Mikey sees that their father gave them the task of hiking up the mountain together with hope that the two of them would recognize their brotherly bond and learn to finally stick together as one family. Nicky however joins Mikey for the hike with different intentions, and has some game-changing secrets of his own. The thin line between love and hate will be tested, and only one of the brothers may make it back down the mountain.

CHAPTER 6: FINDING THE STRUCTURE MINUTE BY MINUTE

Although the first treatment wasn't entirely satisfying to me, written as it was hurriedly to submit for a class deadline, I had to move on to the next assignment. The next step in the process was to begin sorting out the structure of the screenplay by looking at options for the major beats of the story, which all screenwriters know as the Inciting Incident, the Act One Break, the Midpoint, the Act Two Break, and the Climax. Additionally, in line with the assignment given by Cindy McCreery, the instructor of RTF 380J, I would fill in possibilities for what would take place at other designated places in the script. In total, I would come up with ideas for what would happen at minutes 5, 10, 17, 30, 45, 60, 75, 90, 105 of the running time.

Most experienced screenwriters who have studied popular texts on screenwriting can look at those numbers and put labels on them, such as "The Setup" or "Theme Stated" for page 5, then "Inciting Incident/Catalyst" for page 10 or page 17, then "Act 1 Break" for page 30, and so on. At the time of putting together the "Minute by Minute" assignment, I didn't have a solid comprehension of what each of the minute markers was supposed to be, but I gave it my best shot. As I go through the "minutes" set forth in the assignment, I will provide commentary where I feel it is called for.

MINUTE BY MINUTE

5 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, the brothers are seen making their way up the trail. Tense-but-calm discourse ensues. Catching up and trivialities form the basis of conversation.

FLASHBACKS to this morning reveal both of the brothers have guns with them.

Neither brother is aware that the other is armed.

In the above pairing of present action and flashback, I liked the dramatic tension caused by the flashback reveal that the brothers packed guns for the mountain hike. I also liked the dramatic irony introduced, since the audience knows what neither of the two brothers knows. The contrast between the surface calm of the present action and the “real meaning” of the hike in subtext also seemed to work.

10 Minutes

FLASHBACK to yesterday (day before hike) shows that Mikey is in love with Nicky's wife and wants to finally forget about her and do what's right. He contacts Nicky and proposes they trek up the mountain to bury their father's ashes.

FLASHBACK to yesterday shows that Mikey's wife and Nicky have planned for Nicky to forcibly retrieve the loot from Mikey from the crime the brothers perpetrated before Nicky went to prison.

It might help to remind the reader that Nicky and Mikey's wife are aware that their spouses had an affair. The plan is to get the money that Mikey was entrusted with while Nicky was in prison. I like the way the use of flashback again functions as a reveal. We now know at least partially “why” the brothers brought guns with them and didn't tell each other.

17 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, Nicky asks Mikey if he wants to tell him anything, like a secret. Mikey remains somewhat jocular and avoids the opportunity to come clean about Nicky's wife.

FLASHBACK shows Mikey struggling to overcome his feelings for Nicky's wife, while discussing the matter with her.

Looking at this now – with over a year’s worth of screenwriting experience since composing this minute-by-minute assignment – I recognize there is some redundancy in the second flashback, though it might be vagueness or lack of specificity in the wording that makes it seem redundant.

30 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, Nicky reveals that he has been told that Mikey has slept with his wife.

FLASHBACK shows us Mikey and Nicky's wife together, having sex.

Clearly, I chose to place this momentous event at the “30” mark because it seemed to be a good Act 1 break. I think this was ultimately a mistake, as it allowed the central tension to rise to a peak too soon. I discuss this further in subsequent chapters of this report.

45 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, Nicky pretends to forgive Mikey. They discuss the death of their father, and the way the crime they perpetrated went wrong. Nicky's stories from prison, and stories from Mikey's life during that time are shared.

60 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, Nicky tells Mikey that their father is not Mikey's biological father. Mikey doesn't believe him. Nicky starts putting the pieces together for Mikey. They get into a physical confrontation and end up separated from each other, also having lost their phones and the map. Nicky was badly injured by Mikey in their fight, possibly a life-threatening injury.

FLASHBACKS show Nicky asking Mikey to help prevent Nicky's wife from leaving him while he's locked up by spending time with her and inviting her over.

To some degree, the action in flashback above could be seen as a fatal mistake by Nicky at

the “60” or midpoint mark. Another midpoint event is that stakes are raised on the mountain with the possibly life-threatening injury to Nicky, the loss of their phones and the map, and their separation so that each is alone on the mountain.

75 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, Mikey reaches the appointed place for burying his father's ashes and their mother's item [something that belonged to her]. However, Nicky is not with him, because Nicky is still lost and making his way to the place. Mikey fears his brother might have died from his injury somewhere in the woods since their fight and separation. He waits for his brother, instead of burying anything.

FLASHBACKS show us the crime they perpetrated in which their father was shot and Mikey drove away in the getaway car, incorrectly thinking his brother and father dead.

There is a link here between the present action and the flashback, as Mikey now waits at the top of the mountain for his brother who might be dead, and in flashback he was separated from his brother and father and thought they might be dead. Most importantly, Mikey was responsible for both situations – in the past while leaving the crime scene alone, and now while waiting at the top of the mountain after injuring Nicky in their fight. To a certain degree, in both timelines this is where he is most alone and far from his goal, if you want to think of his (spiritual/need) goal as familial love.

90 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, Mikey realizes he has lost the audio recording his father made for the brothers to listen to after they dispense with the ashes, and he also cannot find the ashes he had in his backpack. Night falls. Mikey tries to signal for Nicky by whistling, calling out, and holding a torch above his head.

The above feels like a continuation of the previous beat – Mikey alone and feeling the

consequences of his actions. I like how primal the imagery is – a man on a mountain alone calling out for his brethren and signaling with fire. There is also something ironic and Low-Pointish to his losing their father’s audiotape – the logos of the father, the absence of the father’s “law” or guidance – while he has ostensibly “won” by getting to the top of the mountain first.

105 Minutes

ON THE MOUNTAIN, the next morning Nicky shows up with a makeshift crutch, hurt but alive. Mikey physically helps his brother get up to the appointed place. Nicky has the ashes and their mother’s item, but not the audio tape. They discuss Mikey's plan to relocate with his wife to another state and start a family, with frequent holiday visits back to town.

The final FLASHBACK shows the two brothers (age 12 and 13), their father, and their mother outdoors in a wooded area enjoying themselves at a picnic.

CHAPTER 7: CHARACTER BIO FOR THE PROTAGONIST

Who is the man who sleeps with and falls in love with his brother's wife while his brother is in prison? And how could this ostensibly terrible human being be the protagonist of my screenplay? I have a penchant for occasionally trying to write screenplays with very flawed, "unsympathetic" characters who are nonetheless very interesting to me. This is what I turned in for the character bio assignment in RTF 380J.

CHARACTER BIO

Mikey Flannagan is thirty-one years old and unhappily married with no children. He is a small-time criminal going back to his boyhood stealing cars and selling counterfeit sports memorabilia. Only a few convictions mar his otherwise respectable career as a heist man and getaway driver. He works shit jobs in the straight world, as his record keeps him from finding anything better to support himself and his wife. To a former adrenaline junky, the sedated dullness of adult life on auto-pilot is intolerable, so he returns to thieving, once-in-awhile, despite his wife's protestations. He wants a way out, and is always dreaming of the big score that would set him free.

Mikey is in love, but not with his wife. The object of his affection is forbidden fruit: his incarcerated brother's wife. He knows his feelings are shameful and wrong, and has tried to suppress them, but he cannot get her out of his mind. Ultimately, he will give in and sleep with his brother's wife one time before his brother returns from prison.

Mikey's mother died when he was thirteen, leaving him, his brother, and his father to fend for themselves. The three cagey males did the best they could without her softening influence and love, but some lingering pain and bitterness over the loss still remains in all three of them. Despite his betrayal of his brother, he wants to make things right and honor his father, who has recently died, partly as a result of Mikey's unintentionally fateful actions.

CHAPTER 8: A DEFINING MOMENT FOR THE PROTAGONIST

Next on the writing agenda in RTF 380J was “The Defining Moment” for the protagonist, a scene that would occur in the first 10 pages of the script and solidify for the audience the identity of our main character. I see Mikey Flannagan as a man propelled and divided by two strong forces within himself. On one hand, he wants love – more than most people. On the other hand, he is a deceitful human being by nature. I think this “defining moment” scene captures his duality well enough, showing him lying to his wife, looking at a photo of a different woman whom he loves, packing a gun in case things get ugly with his brother, then burning a photograph of the woman he loves (his brother’s wife) because he wants to do the right thing and have the love of his brother. Also, I think appropriately, that portion of the conflict in the story which Mikey himself caused (strife over adultery) is featured here in his defining moment. His dual nature is on display, as are the kind of actions that define him (loving and deceiving) and which lead to the construction of dramatic conflict via Mikey as protagonist.

DEFINING MOMENT SCENE

INT. FLANNAGAN HOUSE, BEDROOM - DAY

It’s morning. Mikey is tying his shoes. Margie is in bed, facing the wall, eyes open, pretending to be asleep.

He goes to a cabinet and unlocks one of the doors. He takes out one of the handguns stored there. Also in the cabinet is a picture of a woman. He looks at her for a second and then decides he will put the picture in his pocket.

MARGIE

What’s that for?

MIKEY

Bears, I don't know. Mountain lions.

He turns to see her sitting up in bed, softly looking at him and the gun he is holding.

MARGIE

I love you.

MIKEY

I love you too, baby.

MARGIE

He's picking you up?

MIKEY

Yeah.

A car horn is heard from outside. She extends an arm to him, which holds his neck when he bends down to her. They kiss for a moment.

EXT. FLANNAGAN HOUSE - DAY

Mikey burns the photograph of the woman with his cigarette lighter. Another honk comes from Nicky's car.

CHAPTER 9: THE FIRST OUTLINE

Looking at the first outline, the overall problem that never got cured in the dramatic thriller version of this script is clear. Maybe there is more than one sufficient cause of script failure, but this one is as good a torpedo as any other. The problem is the mishandling of dramatic tension in the present action on the mountain. Tension is built up nicely at first, but is released too soon, with the effect that the second half of the script outline lacks tension and focus. I can tell (standing where I am now, almost 2 years later) that I was searching for something to keep things going after I mistakenly let the main tension get resolved near the middle of the script outline. My notes on the outline that I gave the workshop class reflect this:

There is no Act 2 break in this outline because I am really not sure how the story unfolds from the midpoint to the end. There are definitely scenes missing (on the mountain and in flashback), and probably an entire other conflict emerges or re-emerges in the second act, and I don't know what it is, yet....[after the affair situation seems to have been resolved].

It could be that I should have maintained the tension caused by the affair and the presence of guns farther into Act 2. Or perhaps, if I was set on getting that out in the open, as I did in this outline, I should have introduced an external conflict to preoccupy the brothers on the mountain – some type of immediate danger – for the second half of the second act. Then I could have glided into the Third Act climax and returned to the brotherly conflict for a final statement and resolution. Let's face it, for all its great dialogue and character development, commentary on human life and everything else, David Mamet's "two guys on a mountain" film, The Edge, is about two men getting chased through the woods by a bear. Having peaked and slackened the tension surrounding the affair, and without

availing myself of the joys of action-movie conflict (and expensive bears), I started to conjure up mostly internal conflict to generate interest and that tactic really didn't do the job. I settled upon having Nicky inform Mikey that their father wasn't really Mikey's father, which does not amount to an escalation of dramatic tension, following as it does the more volatile issue of the affair.

The flashbacks also participate in this problem of dramatic tension because although the flashbacks continue to contain interesting exposition going into Act 2, the kind which may deepen audience emotional and intellectual involvement, at a certain point the flashbacks begin to lack the special quality of a reveal or a plot twist, and do not contribute to the audience's sensation of tension escalating. The flashbacks fill in and complete "the story," giving the overall picture more complexity, and they repeatedly frame and re-frame the present action on the mountain, but at a certain point they cease to help maintain or increase dramatic tension. Counter examples that do help with dramatic tension would be the flashbacks of Act 1: the brothers have guns with them, one of them is in love with the other's wife, et cetera. See Appendix A for the "First Outline."

CHAPTER 10: THE FIRST TWO SETS OF PAGES

It's the classic story, for me anyway, of what happened continually in the workshop setting. I did not spend enough time figuring out the screen story as a whole before jumping into pages. Having battled through writing four feature-length scripts (counting this "two guys on a mountain" process as two scripts) without proper preparation of screenplay structure ahead of time, I have a greater respect than ever for the necessity of sorting out all the important beats of a screenplay before one feels confident that a story is ready to be told. So while I am going to look at these two sets of pages and discuss the process that was occurring as I wrote them, the 20/20 view in hindsight is that none of it matters because the overall story was not worked out yet, and fiddling around with trying to write the opening pages was putting the cart before the horse.

In examining these first two sets of pages, both of which are attempts to write pages 1-15 approximately, I am aware of several things I was dealing with. One, I was trying to sort out how "likeable" or sympathetic my unheroic characters needed to be. This was an issue in workshop from the very start. Most of my colleagues disliked the characters and the story and didn't understand it and didn't understand me for wanting to write it. The first set of pages includes my first attempt to insert a "Save the Cat" scene into this story so that one of the characters, Nicky, would be more likeable.

NICKY AND THE DUCKLINGS

INT. NICKY'S VAN - DAY

Nicky is driving, Mikey is the passenger. Mikey is getting info from his smart

phone and looking up ahead.

MIKEY

That's it.

There is a mountain (one of several) that the brothers look toward.

All-of-a-sudden, Nicky slams on the brakes and the van comes to a screeching halt and fishtails sideways.

EXT. ROAD - DAY

Nicky hops out of the van and walks in front of it.

NICKY

Seriously?

He's talking to a duck. She is leading several little yellow and brown ducklings across the road.

There is some confusion among the little ones now that Nicky is involved. Two of the ducklings go the wrong way, and Nicky tries to help by picking one up in his hand.

NICKY (CONT'D)

All right. Come here, you little fucker.

The mother duck runs over, quacking angrily, and Nicky must flee as she chases him.

NICKY (CONT'D)

Whoah, hey, settle down!

He runs around the van with the little yellow bird in his hand as the mother chases and non-stop quacks at him. The other babies who made it safely across the road now huddle and cheep-cheep at the action.

NICKY (CONT'D)

(a little scared)

Jesus fucking Christ!

As Nicky rounds the front corner of the van and sees Mikey through the windshield, he yells to him.

NICKY (CONT'D)

Start the van!

Mikey starts the engine. He adds a honk-honk and a smile just for fun, which doesn't help.

Nicky makes it over to where the other chicks are huddled on the side of the road.

He carefully places the one from his hand onto the ground, just as its siblings scatter in a panic.

The mother duck catches up and bites Nicky repeatedly on the forearm like a cobra.

NICKY

Ow, Jesus!

Nicky goes off to the side as she shoes him away, her tail feathers in a furious waggle and her eyes beedy and black with maternal rage.

NICKY (CONT'D)

Fuckin bitch, man.

He rubs his forearm where she bit him. He looks to Mikey, who is smiling behind the windshield.

The mother duck pushes her children down the slope of the embankment and continues quacking like hell.

NICKY (CONT'D)

Fucking ducks, man. They're crazy.

[end scene]

I cut the above scene from the next set of pages because I didn't think the scene was working. It took the script into a much lighter tone, which was partly the intention, but didn't seem to fit what I was trying to do at the time. It was just kind of random. My colleagues loved it, though. It is also interesting to note that the way I chose to let Nicky "Save the Cat" – or in this case, ducklings on the side of the road – resembles

somewhat the tone and physicality found in much later script pages once I entered the realm of comedy. I remember enjoying writing this duckling scene and in a way it portends my eventual turn toward comedy, but for the moment, it wasn't a good fit for the thriller I was trying to write.

I also added a Save the Cat scene for the other brother, Danny, in the second set of pages. (This marks the point where I changed the name 'Mikey' to 'Danny.')

One of the scenes I excerpt below shows Danny being a nice, loving uncle to his niece, Lucy. Concurrently, this set of pages also marks the entrance of children into this screenplay. I can't say that I analyzed the decision intellectually at the time, but for the purpose of this report, I'll delve into why I gave Nicky a daughter and made Danny a caring uncle. One, the scene allows Danny to Save the Cat, and at this stage of the writing process I was looking for a way to make my characters more likeable. Beyond that I suppose bringing children and parenting into the story was a way to raise the stakes – if things go wrong on the mountain, then the children and their mothers will suffer and the audience would fear for that. The presence of children also makes the brothers into fathers and I think adds complexity to their characters, as well as humanizes them and lends them some amount of assumed capacity for love and decency, which makes the current state of their lives feel all the more tragic. Finally, the presence of children brings the story into a broader context, one of lifespans, generations, family, et cetera (it's hard to pinpoint). Anyhow, as I continued forward in this “two brothers on a mountain” process, the children remained and eventually both brothers were given multiple children.

Here is the first scene I created to introduce children into the story,

followed by Danny's first Save the Cat scene. These scenes appeared in the second set of opening pages.

NICOLE AND LUCY

INT. NICKY'S HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK

In the master bedroom, NICOLE, 30s, sits in a chair. She is the WOMAN IN DANNY'S PHOTOGRAPHS. She's holding a phone in her hand, but her hand is resting on the table. There is no call taking place.

Outside the window, eight year-old LUCY plays in the back yard, talking to herself, working out some kind of solitary game.

Nicole finally dials a number and waits. She hangs up before anyone could have answered.

After a moment, Nicole stands by the window and looks at Lucy entertaining herself with two female dolls. One of the dolls is brand-new. The other doll is beaten up and missing some clothes and some hair.

From another room, the sound of a baby starting to cry is heard. Nicole exits to attend to her baby.

[end scene]

DANNY AND LUCY

INT. NICKY'S HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK

Danny and Nicole (Nicky's wife) walk into her kitchen with bags of groceries.

NICOLE
I can fix you something.

DANNY
No, it's okay.

NICOLE
Are you sure? I got these.

She holds up something frozen from the store.

DANNY

Margie would be mad if I came home
and already ate.

NICOLE

How's she doing?

DANNY

She's okay.

LATER

Danny and Nicole have put the groceries away. They sit at her kitchen table sharing a bag of peanut M&Ms. Nicole has a baby in her arms.

NICOLE (CONT'D)

He misses Nicky.

DANNY

Yeah. You think he knows?

NICOLE

I think he knows his Daddy's not around.
Six months to go.

DANNY

Are you good? You need anything?

NICOLE

I'm good. Thank you.

DANNY

So, we'll see you Thursday for dinner
and a movie?

She nods and smiles.

Lucy walks into the room.

LUCY

Hi.

DANNY
Hello, Lucille.

She coyly smiles.

DANNY
How's school?

LUCY
Good.

DANNY
How's your puppy?

LUCY
He's good.

DANNY
You miss your Dad?

She nods. She goes to him and holds his hand. She looks at her mother.

NICOLE
You want Uncle Dan to give you a
piggy back ride?

Lucy looks at Danny, waiting to see his response.

EXT. STREET – DAY – FLASHBACK

Danny walks down the street with Lucy on his back, her arms wrapped around his neck.

Lucy puts her hands over Danny's eyes. He pretends to lose all sense of direction and walks into a car. She smiles and uncovers his eyes.

Nicole is at her front door, watching them, looking content for a moment.

[end scene]

Lastly, I see in the first two sets of pages that I was working on how best to handle dramatic tension and dramatic irony caused by the alleged affair between

Danny and his brother's wife. In the first set of pages it was out in the open to the audience that an affair happened, and Nicky also knew that an affair happened, and the questions were, What is Nicky going to do about it, and What is Danny going to do about it? In the second set of pages I chose to withhold the truth from both the audience and from Nicky, thus allowing more questions: What really happened, What will Nicky do if and when he finds out, and also, Does Nicky actually already know or believe he knows? The latter strategy was used to preserve and increase tension and allow myself more steps along the way toward whatever culmination of tension was promised in the narrative. The above quoted scenes with Danny and Nicole are from the second set of pages where I was leaving the question of an affair open, and in those scenes, which would have taken place chronologically before an affair started, I was purposely creating an ambiguous atmosphere where the audience might see a trace of sexual tension, might infer illicit intentions on the part of Danny or Nicole, or they might not. I tried to give the audience something to think about and give them more to observe in the behavior of the characters, infusing a bit of mystery, rather than leaving it simply as "we know these two went on to have an affair and here they are before it happened."

CHAPTER 11: WRITING THE FIRST 40 PAGES

The next step in RTF 380J was writing Act 1, which was supposed to be 30 pages. I wrote 40 pages, which took me closer to the middle of the script, since – following my low-budget aesthetic – the screenplay would ideally be 90 pages and no more. There were no significant changes to the first 14 pages I discussed in the preceding chapter. Pages 14-40 were a departure from both the Minute-by-Minute assignment and the First Outline in a variety of places. The way the physical confrontation happened at the Act 1 break was completely different and much improved. The separation of the brothers following the confrontation was different and more interesting, and the way they came back together and ostensibly put the matter aside for now had also changed. In sum, I think there is some very good writing in those pages, but the fact remained: the big rising and falling came and went by the time we arrived at the midpoint.

Setting aside the problem with dramatic tension, already covered in Chapter Nine on the First Outline, there is another almost-as-deadly problem in these script pages – and throughout the rest of the dramatic drafts of this material: the lack of strong authorial point-of-view and thematic coherence. What is it all about and how are we to interpret the story, from a moral point of view, from any point of view? What is the message? What is one supposed to think at the end of this? How is one supposed to feel? I thought I knew the “why” on a gut level, on a film-lover level, on an “I can write these characters and make them real” level, but I did not have a solid thematic point-of-view as a storyteller.

I think some films can get away with not having such a point-of-view, but

in my case I had chosen a narrative technique that I feel implies and promises a point-of-view, some kind of “answer” by the end of the story: the use of reverse-chronological flashbacks.

Controlling the flow of the narrative with something akin to regular reminders that the story is being presented in a very specific, formal way begs for a point-of-view. It calls so much attention to itself that one expects the flashback technique to ultimately reveal “the answer” whatever that might be in a story like this – something like “it all goes back to...” whatever it is we see in the very last, and chronologically first, flashback. Therefore, while the flashbacks have a certain cinematic power and the juxtaposition of present action and flashback was an exciting technique for me as a writer – framing the present in the context of new information from the past, and adding dynamic tonal shifts – I didn’t really fully know what I was doing. I knew on an intuitive level that this was a powerful way to present things to the audience, I knew how it worked and why it was powerful, but I lacked a consciously defined direction. By use of the technique I implicitly promised the audience we were going somewhere, but I did not know where I was taking them.

As a general observation, I think not having a thematic point of view will tend to reveal itself in second-half problems as one approaches the climax, whose function partially is to directly address and finalize the thematic content of the story. If you don’t know what you’re doing on a thematic level, it’s going to throw a wrench into the second half of your screenplay.

CHAPTER 12: SECOND OUTLINE AND PAGES 1-50

Looking at the second outline and the accompanying first 50 pages of the script, I see an attempt to address the problem in dramatic tension. As was the case with the previous outline and pages, the issue of the affair ostensibly comes and goes in this outline and set of pages by the midpoint, with the implication that the brothers are not going to harm each other and will continue going up the mountain. Here is how I attempted to bring tension back into the screenplay after that point.

Just after the tension slackens around the midpoint, we see in flashback that Nicky has already been to the mountain and dug a grave for his brother high up on the trail. Now the audience will feel tension as we wonder if that grave will get used. Could the still-simmering conflict erupt again, or maybe Nicky was just pretending to be “over it” so that he could get Danny up to the gravesite and kill him? What eventually happens is that they pass by the gravesite and Nicky chooses not to do anything violent. They reach the top of the mountain and then the next day back in the city Danny kills Nicky and Nicky’s wife because, ultimately, he could not stop loving Nicky’s wife – something that we saw hints of in flashbacks that prepared us, in hindsight, for the double-murder. This was the first version where anyone actually killed anyone else. I recall writing this second outline and the 50 pages in two days while listening to 1980s pop music and it all seemed to add up to something new, strange, and beautiful. But I quickly realized that in creating this new wave of dramatic tension, I took the characters beyond believability into psycho-killer zone, which would necessitate re-thinking genre and everything else, and by now I had simply lost interest in this very dark material.

CHAPTER 13: A NEW START

With the Fall 2012 semester over, it was now winter break and I was faced with having to complete the full draft of the screenplay over the holiday, turn it in, and then rewrite the same script during the Spring semester in Beau Thorne's "Rewrite" class, also called RTF 380J. From where I don't know, but I got inspired to lighten things up and the script that I completed and turned in at the start of the Rewrite class left much of the dark thriller aspects behind. The brothers joke around good-naturedly. They both have a sense of humor. Many of the scenes are fun, while the threat of violence lives in the subtext. In fact, if I were still trying to write a thriller, adding more surface lightness might be a more dynamic approach to handling the story. When we start with the light side of the relationship, we see the potential for happiness, and what will be lost if things go bad. A greater distance to travel is built into the arc of the story. The introduction of comedy and fun in this draft also prefigures my eventual shift entirely into comedy, but for now the comedy I think served to heighten the tension – similar to how when gangsters in mafia movies joke around it's kind of great and adds something to the mix while you know that violence is just around the corner.

The following scene is a flashback showing us the day Nicky met the woman (now named Jenny in the script) who would become his wife. This scene never happened in previous versions, and shows how much lighter the tone of the script had become in certain places, and also shows that while Nicky was still a tough guy, I was making him into a softer, more likeable character.

NICKY AND JENNY MEET IN FLASHBACK

EXT. MUNICIPAL GARDENS - DAY

A wedding reception is taking place in a landscaped “garden” venue. There’s a gazebo and a really tacky fountain where the DJ is currently spinning “Whoomp There It Is,” by Tag Team (1993).

Jenny, seven years younger than we’ve seen her, is mingling with two friends, call them BECKY and VERONICA. She’s wearing a lime-green bridesmaid dress. Efforts to make her look dowdy have failed.

To the Farino brothers she is apparently something special. Nicky and Danny are trying to inconspicuously check her out.

NICKY

Lord have mercy. Look at that.

DANNY

She’s outta your league.

NICKY

You never know. It ain’t always about looks.

DANNY

It ain’t always about money, either. And, it ain’t always about having a nice car, nice house, good job, credibility, or wits. Go get her, Champ.

NICKY

You think I got a shot?

DANNY

If you don’t take the shot I’m gonna take it.

NICKY

What about the one you was checking out over by the punch bowl?

DANNY

That was then, this is now.

EXT. MUNICIPAL GARDENS - DAY

Somewhere in the gardens, Jenny has allowed Nicky to lead her away from the reception crowd. They've "taken a walk."

JENNY

You look familiar.

NICKY

Yeah, you do, too.

JENNY

How do you know Joey and Linda?

NICKY

To be honest with you, we don't know anybody here.

JENNY

(amused)

Oh my God, you crashed the wedding.

NICKY

Well, technically, we came with a guy named Monty who knows a guy who knows Joey.

JENNY

You do this a lot? Go to weddings and pick up chicks?

NICKY

Who says I'm here to pick up chicks?

JENNY

You look like the type.

NICKY

I do?

Nicky is flattered and quietly surprised.

JENNY

Or maybe not. Was that your brother
you were with?

NICKY

Yeah.

Nicky sulks for a second, waiting for her to say Danny is cute.

JENNY

He looks like an asshole.

NICKY

He is. Bigtime. He also has the clap.

JENNY

The clap? What is this, Vietnam?
Thanks for telling me that by the
way.

NICKY

Sorry.

JENNY

Does he really have it?

NICKY

Yeah, it's awful. He's gotta wear,
like, special diapers. If he wants to
go... horseback riding or whatever.

JENNY

Geez.

NICKY

Yeah, he's a real turd.

JENNY

Turd?

NICKY

Sorry, I slipped, I didn't mean to
curse in front of you.

JENNY
You have a girlfriend?

NICKY
No.

JENNY
Are you gay?

Nicky is offended. His feathers ruffled.

NICKY
You serious?

JENNY
You seem like you're in touch
with your feminine side.

She cracks up.

JENNY (CONT'D)
I'm kidding you.

NICKY
Yeah, I know you were joking.

JENNY
I do like a guy who can be...
comfortable... with... being...
um... (she's trying to say "sensitive")

NICKY
That ain't me, Honey. I'm solid steel.
Nothing but steel and rocks and
barbed wire and a V-8 engine blazing
down the highway.

She laughs.

JENNY
What are you talking about? You
trying to tell me you have an erection
or something?

NICKY

No, I wouldn't do that here.

JENNY

No? Watch out, everybody, Mister Steel over here.

NICKY

You're funny.

[end scene]

As I said, Nicky had become somewhat of a different version of himself and a better fit for the lighter script I was writing. He also became the protagonist in this draft. Much of the tension shifted from “What violent action is Nicky going to take against Danny on the mountain” to “How will this betrayal affect Nicky on a personal level if he finds out it did in fact happen” (but also still, What will he do on the mountain?). I was starting to ask the audience to care about Nicky as a person much more than I had before. I also shifted the initial cause of brotherly conflict to Nicky, so instead of Danny causing trouble by sleeping with Nicky's wife (allegedly), now it was all about how Nicky had psychological issues (wait for the cliché) dating back to his childhood and his abusive father, and wrongly believed that Danny and his wife had slept together. The audience didn't find out it was all in Nicky's head until Nicky found out the same, and I moved the moment when they openly discuss the alleged affair much farther along in the script than where it had been previously – page 22 in previous drafts, page 64 in this one. Likewise, the separation of the brothers on the mountain that follows the open discussion and physical confrontation was moved from page 28-35 to page 69-75. This was now the place where the tension over the affair came to a close. However, while I maintained the

dramatic tension – and might have also been more authorial and coherent in flashbacks – I ended up promising one thing and delivering something else, since the affair never happened and the feeling of imminent danger that I created in the first half of the script was answered with a less-than-convincing diversion into psychology. I think that turn inward could work, but the way I handled it was cursory and half-hearted, largely because I just wanted to be done with the draft.

Moving forward, by the time I finished this draft I had removed many of the dark thriller aspects that no longer interested me, lightened up the tone, added humor, managed to preserve dramatic tension much longer in the running time, shifted Nicky into the protagonist role and started trying to make the audience care about him, and ultimately put the source of conflict between brothers into Nicky’s psychology, rather than actual betrayal between brothers. All of these changes stuck as I moved into the next stage of this process.

CHAPTER 14: MAGIC MOUNTAIN

The spring semester began and I turned in the script and was faced with rewriting it... again. I had no interest in doing so but I went through the motions of beginning to prepare another rewrite. I put together a list of model films and did analyses of them, as is par for the course in the Rewrite class – you spend the first half prepping a rewrite and the second half turning in pages. My models were Raging Bull, for obvious reasons – two tough, potentially violent brothers in conflict over an alleged adulterous betrayal which was only real in the protagonist’s mind, Reservoir Dogs, because the film uses flashback in a somewhat similar way to what I was doing with my script, and Tape, the Richard Linklater film that takes place entirely in one motel room and concerns an alleged sexual betrayal in a love triangle. The next thing that happened is I had to pitch my rewrite to Beau. Wanting to leave the mountain behind, I came up with an entirely new story concept that used Nicky as protagonist and followed him and his daughter Lucy on a road trip. No mountain. No brother. None of that. Beau basically said I could not do this new story because it was not a rewrite. Rather, he said I could do it but he didn’t want me to, if I remember correctly. He seemed to think there were many ways to rewrite the “two brothers on a mountain” script.

With very little time between this conversation, which left me sulking back to the mountain for another go round, and the date I would have to turn in new pages (Reel 1, the “first 15”), I found a solution. I would write Nicky and Danny on the mountain as a comedy. I had already written humor into certain scenes in the last dramatic draft, and those scenes pointed the way forward.

The first scene is the one I quoted in the preceding chapter, where Nicky awkwardly meets his future wife, Jenny, for the first time. He trips over his words and says comical things in spite of trying to be cool.

The second scene, which occurred very near the end of the last dramatic draft, is the one I credit with really turning the tide toward comedy. The comedy doesn't come on full-force in this scene, but the scene elements, the visuals, and the dialogue point unmistakably toward comedic potential. This is the scene where the brothers encounter and are terrified by a "wolf" on the mountain, which is actually not a wolf but a harmless pet, an Alaskan Malamute. Much of the comedy in "Magic Mountain" would eventually be generated by two city dwellers faced with their own ignorance of Nature, multiplied by their dumbness.

THE WOLF SCENE IN THE LAST DRAMATIC SCRIPT

Preceding this scene, the brothers strip to their underwear and cross a river. Nicky's ear is bleeding as he stands on the river bank because the brothers' physical altercation a few scenes before this involved Danny landing a punch to his ear.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - DAY

From the new side of the river, we see the water flow down the mountain. Nicky is standing there in his underwear and shoes looking upstream, his belly glistening in the sun, with a hint of Ferdinand Magellan in the air. He's got a bloody napkin held to his ear. He also shivers a little from the cold.

Danny can be heard shouting to him from somewhere off-screen.

DANNY (O.S.)

We oughta make a fire.

NICKY

Definitely.

DANNY (O.S.)

Let's wait till we get to the top.

NICKY

Okay.

DANNY (O.S.)

How far is that?

NICKY

No idea.

DANNY (O.S.)

Holy Mary Mother of God it's a gray
mountain wolf!

Danny is peeing over by a tree, with his backpack slung over his shoulder. He stops mid-stream and takes off his backpack. He gets his gun out.

DANNY (CONT'D)

He musta smelled the blood from your
ear.

The animal bares its canine teeth at Danny.

NICKY

Danny, don't shoot it.

DANNY

Ha! That's easy for you to say, you're
way the hell over there. Why don't you
come over here and look in this
fucker's evil eyes.

NICKY

Don't shoot it.

DANNY

Are you outta your mind?

NICKY

Shoot the ground. Just scare it. Shoot
the air.

DANNY

What am I gonna do in five minutes
when this motherfucker comes back?
I only have five bullets. We got like
two hours to go, at least.

NICKY

Just scare him away.

DANNY

All right, all right.

BANG. Danny fires a shot to the side. The animal doesn't move an inch.

DANNY (CONT'D)

See, he don't fuckin care. Nicky, I
gotta shoot it.

Nicky still doesn't like the idea.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Nicky, I gotta do it. It's us or him.
I mean, he's a beautiful animal, but,
y'know, what are you gonna do?
This guy wants to eat my face. That
ain't happening.

NICKY

Fire another shot.

DANNY

Nicky, that means I'd only have four
bullets left. Where there's one there's
more. There's probably like ten more
wolves on this mountain. And bears.
Probably like thirty bears.

NICKY

Shoot it. Ya dick.

DANNY

I'm a dick, now?

NICKY

Do it.

Danny points the gun.

DANNY

But, wait a second, why am I a dick for doing this?

NICKY

'Cause it's a beautiful animal and you're a dick.

DANNY

You wanna trade places with me?

NICKY

Not really.

DANNY

Wait a second, wait a second. Light a fire. Nicky, make a fire. Wolves hate fire. They hate it. Grab a stick and make a torch. There's one right there (a stick).

Nicky gets a rather large stick, more like a pole.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Get a shirt or something outta your backpack. Here's my lighter.

Danny fumbles to get his lighter out of his pants. He throws his cigarette lighter at Nicky.

Nicky removes a jacket from his backpack.

NICKY

All I got is this jacket.

DANNY

Light that shit. Hurry up.

Nicky wraps his jacket around the long stick and starts to light it.

NICKY
It's fuckin fireproof.

DANNY
You kidding me?

NICKY
Wait, I got it.

The jacket catches fire and Nicky now has a torch.

He goes to Danny and points the torch at the four-legged beast. No reaction from the animal.

A WHISTLE comes from somewhere up the trail. A man's voice is heard calling out.

MAN (O.S.)
Charlie!

The canine turns and trots away toward the voice.

The brothers look at each other.

[end scene excerpt]

CHAPTER 15: FIRST SET OF MAGIC MOUNTAIN PAGES

The first set of pages I turned in for Beau's class was "Reel 1." This marked the start of me officially making this project a comedy. The first reel, being as it was a spontaneous, last-minute comedic rewrite of existing dramatic pages, contained scenes that were essentially dramatic and carried a more or less serious tone. I injected humor where I could, changing dialogue and behavior and narrative description, but the sense of seriousness remained. I was okay with this for now. I had no idea where I was going with the script, and knew that most of the old dramatic stuff would have to go, so for now I just had to turn in pages and get started sorting out how to make "two brothers on the mountain" fun and funny. I also wanted some gravitas to remain in the material. I thought of works like Waiting for Godot, and the films of Wes Anderson, one of my favorite filmmakers, whose films are comedies on the surface, but with an undercurrent of seriousness or significance, for lack of a better word. You walk away from his films knowing that you felt something important and real, even though you were smiling and laughing at Bill Murray or Owen Wilson most of the time. So, for now, the tone of my script would be surface-funny but I would preserve some gravitas.

To show what I mean, as far as how a dramatic scene became a still-dramatic but funny scene, I will quote part of the "Danny and Margie and The Gun" scene from Reel 1 of the first comedic version. Recall the "Defining Moment" scene for Mikey Flannagan that I quoted in Chapter Eight. In that earlier version, we were learning that Mikey was taking a gun with him to the mountain and had secret photos of a woman (Nicky's wife). That scene changed a lot before I was finished writing the dramatic

versions, but suffice to say it never became as openly comedic as the following scene turned out to be in Reel 1 of “Magic Mountain.”

“DANNY AND MARGIE AND THE GUN” SCENE IN FIRST

COMEDIC DRAFT

An excerpt of the scene:

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Cute strawberry-blonde, MARGIE, 28, is curled up in bed pretending to be asleep. She faces the wall and her eyes are open. She takes a slow, deep breath, blinks and looks like she’s waiting for something.

DANNY, 30, sits on the floor tying up his boots. He wears a red flannel shirt and blue parka vest. With his skinny arms and legs, he could have been the star player on the JV basketball team if they’d let a grown man try out.

He is good-looking, with tousled dark hair and sad blue eyes. He’s Nicky’s brother, in case you didn’t catch that. And he is also Very Dumb.

DANNY

Oh. Hey, baby. I didn’t mean to wake you.

MARGIE

You weren’t gonna say goodbye?

DANNY

Yeah. Of course I was.

Margie sits up, wrapped in blankets like a baby bird peeking over the side of the bed. Her messed-up hair and slept-in purple eye shadow only make her more attractive, in a trashy but lovable way.

DANNY (CONT’D)

Do you think I should bring my gun?

MARGIE

No. Why?

DANNY

Bears. I don’t know.

MARGIE

Bears?

DANNY

Yeah. Or mountain lions. It's the wilderness. There's like animals and shit everywhere.

MARGIE

I thought mountain lions were extinct a long time ago.

DANNY

What did you fail Geography? They ain't extinct. In danger, maybe. You're thinking of the mountain panther.

MARGIE

That ain't Geography, Danny. Geography is maps. That's zoology or something and I never took that.

DANNY

I know they got bears. There's a place right down the road from where we're going called Bear Mountain. What does that tell you? Fuckin wolves, maybe, you never know.

Margie gives him a funny look.

MARGIE

Don't say the F word.

DANNY

Sorry.

MARGIE

You need to stop. I'm giving you one more month.

[end scene excerpt]

CHAPTER 16: ICE CREAM AND INDIANS IN REEL 2

Reel 2 started with the first scene with the brothers together. I felt like that was an appropriate inciting incident since the story and “the journey” would largely be about their relationship, and Nicky's relationship to himself vis-a-vis his feelings toward his brother. The goal of the A-story was to take their father's ashes to the top of the mountain, but in a sense this line of action was background to Nicky's internal conflict and the “brother versus brother” subplot.

It becomes clear that Nicky has self-esteem issues and envies his brother who has always been the good-looking, athletic one, and also the “smarter” of the two. He also has his shit together much more than Nicky does. And to top it off, Nicky believes that their now deceased father preferred Danny to him. This internal conflict is returned to many times while they go up the mountain, but the first time it makes itself known is in Reel 2 when Nicky notices that Danny is wearing their father's gold watch.

The brothers are in Nicky's van on the way to the mountain. They catch up and argue about minor things and then Nicky sees that Danny is wearing a gold watch that belonged to their father, which Danny claims was willed to him by the father or given to him by their mother according to their father's wishes. Nicky gets jealous and angry right away, tries to keep his cool, but then whips the van off the road and dashes into a gas station for some ice cream to soothe his soul and find an inner calm. As I would do many times in the script, I was asking the audience to feel some of Nicky's pain and anguish while also hopefully making them laugh.

This internal conflict in Nicky that also created conflict between the brothers

helped to give the story an emotional throughline to compliment the A-story – and after all, it seemed to fit since it was their father’s ashes they were taking up the mountain. I would return to this source of internal and relationship conflict many times in subsequent pages, and ultimately it was this internal conflict that gets resolved in the climax when Nicky hallucinates that his father is talking to him, saying a few special words that (all-too-easily perhaps) “fix” and resolve this internal subplot.

As Reel 2 continued, I charged head-on into ridiculousness and buffoonery. It was at this point that the dumbness of the brothers was pushed to the limit of believability, and then pushed a little more, and that is where I wanted it to be. I call “Magic Mountain” surrealist comedy because late in the script the brothers take psychedelic mushrooms and hallucinate dream-like images, and because somewhere in the middle they carry an improvised torch that glows brighter and longer than it realistically would, but also because I think that the level of their dumbness is borderline surreal. The audience just has to go with it, suspend disbelief and accept that the two brothers could be this dumb and have such weird ideas. Reel 2 is where I jumped through that hoop and wrote a scene wherein the brothers expressed concern that “Indians” might try to give them trouble on the mountain.

The brothers reach the mountain and Danny tells Nicky that he brought pot, something called ‘X’ (unaware that it is the drug ecstasy), and psychedelic mushrooms. Nicky swears off using any of the drugs, but we know that I’m promising the audience the brothers will take the drugs to comic effect somewhere in the story. The reel closes with the brothers starting their hike up the mountain, and thus hitting the Act 1 break.

CHAPTER 17: REEL 3

Reel 3 quickly returns us to conflict when Nicky asks about the gold watch again, bringing up another example of me wanting the audience to feel Nicky's pain while also laughing at him.

THE GOLD WATCH SCENE

After having ostensibly left the issue of the watch behind before they arrived at the mountain, the fact that Nicky again blows up about the watch shows us that the issue poses a greater threat to his own happiness and to his relationship with his brother than he can manage to control through telling himself he doesn't care (and eating ice cream).

EXT. MOUNTAIN - DAY

Nicky and Danny walk up the trail.

NICKY

So you got the watch.

DANNY

Huh? Yeah.

NICKY

That's good. You should have it.
I'm happy for you.

DANNY

You mad?

NICKY

No, I said I'm happy.

DANNY

You wanna wear it?

NICKY

No, not at all.

DANNY

I could let you wear it for five minutes.

NICKY

It's fine. I got other stuff.

DANNY

Like what?

NICKY

Stuff you don't know about.

DANNY

I'm glad you got stuff. Because I got stuff, too, besides this watch.

NICKY

Like what?

DANNY

Nothin, don't worry about it. Have a good time. Stop being like a big baby.

NICKY

I'm not worried about the watch, Danny.

DANNY

So we can forget about it?

NICKY

Yeah, forget about it.

DANNY

Okay.

NICKY

I don't wanna talk about it.

DANNY

All right. No talking about the watch. Starting now.

Danny looks at the watch.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Go.

They're silent as they walk.

Danny looks at the watch again.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Ten seconds.

Nicky pretends this doesn't bug the shit out of him.

He closes his eyes and mumbles his mantra.

Still walking, not talking.

DANNY (CONT'D)

Twenty.

NICKY

If you say thirty, you're gonna be sorry.

Danny appears to give up on this.

Then he looks at the watch for a moment.

DANNY

Thirty-one.

Nicky grabs Danny's wrist and starts trying to pry the watch off him. Danny holds onto the watch with his other hand and tries to keep it on his wrist.

Somehow, they fall over onto the ground.

NICKY

You son of a bitch! I was supposed to have that watch!

DANNY

What's the difference, I'll let you borrow it!

NICKY
Fuck you, I'll let you borrow it!

DANNY
Fine, take it!

Danny unsnaps the watch and Nicky yanks it off his wrist.

Nicky puts the watch on, or tries to.

NICKY
God damn it.

DANNY
What?

NICKY
Nothing.

Nicky scoots around to hide his activity from Danny.

DANNY
It doesn't fit?

NICKY
Shut up.

DANNY
Is it because you're too fat?

Nicky struggles to make the watch fit. It's not happening.

[end scene]

Moments later, Nicky sees an injured bird on the side of the trail. I don't recall intellectually coming to the conclusion beforehand, but the bird is essentially a device to make Nicky's mental and emotional states manifest through the way he talks about the bird, cares for the bird, et cetera. I assumed that he identified with the injured

bird in some sense and wanted to, like he says, save the bird and protect it. So from here, Nicky has a pet bird he names 'Bert.' Danny thinks this is beyond ridiculous and also unfair to the bird. They continue up the trail with Bert in Nicky's backpack.

Then the pages go right into "the wolf scene," a version of which I have previously quoted. The new version of the wolf scene pressed the comedy farther in several ways. Firstly, neither of the brothers brought a gun to the mountain in the new comedic version, so they had to improvise and point invisible guns at the Alaskan Malamute. From there I altered the dialogue and the brothers' interaction with each other to heighten the comedy.

CHAPTER 18: REEL 4

Reel 4 begins with Nicky telling Danny that he has decided to let his daughter Lucy's pet bird go (this a result of having "his own bird" for less than an hour). We get some exposition about Nicky's family situation and then Danny says, "You start letting peoples' pets go you're finished. Jenny barely let you in the house this time." Then the brothers talk about their father wanting his remains turned to ashes and agree that it's a good choice. Segueing into a familiar topic, Nicky asks Danny what else he was given of their father's belongings besides the gold watch.

DANNY'S LIST SCENE

NICKY

What other stuff did you get besides the watch?

DANNY

Just like, some clothes, golf clubs, pictures. His old Army uniforms. Cufflinks. Couple pairs of shoes. That old jacket he used to wear all the time that Mom hated.

NICKY

The brown one with the fucked up zipper?

DANNY

Yeah. That's about it.

Danny and Nicky both have another Oreo.

NICKY

Shit. We're out of Oreos.

Danny stops.

DANNY

Go in my bag.

Nicky unzips Danny's backpack.

NICKY

Oh.

He takes out a new bag of Oreos from Danny's backpack. He opens them and they each have one and start walking again.

DANNY

Old vinyl records. His high school varsity letter jacket. Some ties. His wallet.

NICKY

The one with the initials?

DANNY

Yeah. And I found an old picture of Mom in the wallet, which was cool. Oh yeah, also rings. He had those rings he didn't really wear except for once in a while.

NICKY

Mom hated those.

DANNY

Actually she did but she gave him a ring one time. I got that one, too. It says their names on the inside. And I got his old baseball glove, I almost forgot about that.

They walk silently for a moment. Nicky's gaze is downcast. He looks at Danny and the torch he's carrying.

DANNY (CONT'D)

And I got a few hats.

NICKY

I guess we don't gotta worry about wolves.

DANNY

Yeah. For now, at least.

NICKY

One guy does the fire, one guy does the
shotgun, we should be good.

[end scene excerpt]

Significantly, unlike when Nicky discovered Danny had the watch, this time Nicky doesn't get angry. He is bothered but almost seems to resign himself to being the less-loved son. I chose to allow a flicker of good feeling coming from Nicky as he changes the subject and revives conversation about the "wolf" and how they seem to have handled it using teamwork.

In the next scene, they find themselves facing a river that has no bridge across it, standing there wondering what to do while it has also begun to rain. Nicky hesitates at first but then decides to cross the river, after his brother has already entered the water. Nicky says, "All right, I'm gonna wrap the bird" (in an empty Oreo package inside his backpack) to keep the bird from getting wet. He then accidentally falls into the river and drops the backpack, which floats down the river as the brothers swim after it.

CHAPTER 19: REEL 5

When I turned in Reel 4, I cheekily ended the week's pages on a cliffhanger in the middle of the scene, not so much at the end of a proper sequence. So that scene continues in Reel 5 as the brothers float down the river after Nicky's backpack and finally catch up to it. When Nicky gets ashore with the backpack and opens it, he finds the ashes container intact, but the bird is dead.

I chose in this first draft to place the cause of the bird's death out of Nicky's hands, as it was due to his dumbness, which is not strictly his fault. He thought "wrapping" the bird was a good idea, and his fall into the river was an accident. In the final draft of the thesis rewrite script, I altered the scene so that the bird's death was clearly his fault – a result of the cowardly way he tried to cross the river, which caused him to fall and drop the backpack containing the bird into the water. More on that later.

Deciding that Nicky's bird should die wasn't an overly intellectualized choice I made. It just seemed like it should happen. I probably had a vague idea that things needed to get darker for Nicky before they got better in the end, but I wouldn't call this a low point. I suppose it was more of an instinctive thematic choice at first, something about death and rebirth of the hero, the death of the old self before the birth of the new self. At the time of first writing the bird and the bird's death into the story, the two brothers were taking their dead father's ashes up the mountain, so I'm sure on a subtextual level Nicky's behavior with the bird had something to do with death, grief, and things like that. I return to the topic of the bird as symbol when I discuss the thesis semester rewrite in later chapters.

CHAPTER 20: REEL 6

The brothers get back to Danny's backpack and Danny suggests they take 'X' to "relax." Cut to: they are saying I love you back and forth and giving each other massages because the X is actually the drug ecstasy. See Appendix B for this scene.

The scene is very funny and weird and was a big hit with my workshop colleagues, but in this first draft it sort of jumps away from the narrative into La La Land for a moment and then when the scene is over, we jump back as if nothing happened. In the final draft of the thesis rewrite I tried to make the 'X' scene more integrated by positioning it in a place that would better serve the plot and subplots. More on that later.

The 'X' scene ends with them smoking a joint. Nicky earlier said he wouldn't touch pot because it makes him paranoid, but apparently the ecstasy made him think smoking pot would be a great idea. Immediately following the smoking of the joint, the scene cuts to the brothers walking up the trail again and Nicky loses it, gets hyper-paranoid. In a way this brought us back to the mood that started with Bert's death. This is the place in the script where Nicky feels the most despair. I tried to handle his paranoia in a way that is supposed to be both comical and serious. I wanted us to feel his pain and take him seriously, while at the same time enjoy laughing at our sad clown. Unfortunately in this draft the scene itself, and Nicky's tortured emotional state, more or less just evaporate when Danny has the bright idea that they can boil the psychedelic mushrooms to eat (since they ran out of Oreos) and not risk hallucination because, as Nicky surmises, "boiling stuff takes the other stuff out, right?"

Then we find the brothers on a plateau overlooking a valley. They eat the boiled

mushrooms and after an intervening scene Nicky decides to "let Bert go" (he had kept the dead bird in his backpack since the river scene). He takes the bird to the edge of a cliff, says some words and then throws the bird into the sky. Just then the two brothers begin to hallucinate. I stopped the pages for the week right there when they begin tripping because I hadn't yet sorted out what I wanted to happen, but an interesting thing happened in the writing of the last part of this reel.

I first envisioned Nicky taking the dead bird to the edge of a cliff, saying some words, and then – in his version of the right thing to do for a bird – throwing the bird over the cliff as if the bird might fly away or enter the ether. But then of course the bird would fall to the Earth. This to me was kind of poignant, and also funny, and represented something important in Nicky's stubborn and childish mind having to do with his fight against reality back in his "real life". The interesting part is that when I actually wrote the pages I stopped the bird at the top of its trajectory instead of letting it fall to the ground below as I had first imagined. I made the bird freeze in the air and not fall to the Earth. The bird then flapped its wings and turned into a bright blue star and the hallucination sequence began. I think this might as well mark the place where the script avoided taking Nicky toward a low point, and took him instead right into a wild hallucination that sort of by grace alone delivered him through his troubles to a better mental state which would take him through the remaining pages. In the final rewrite, I let the bird fall to the Earth, but still ended up doing the same thing – bringing in hallucination that too-easily carried him to victory. I talk about this in the thesis rewrite chapter.

NICKY LETS BERT GO

EXT. MOUNTAIN - DAY

The brothers are resting by the campfire after their mushroom dinner. Danny is carving a stick with his knife. Nicky is lying on his back looking up at the sky.

NICKY

I think I wanna let Bert go.

He gets up and grabs his backpack.

DANNY

You gonna bury him?

NICKY

I'm gonna say some words. Come on.

He walks away. Danny follows.

EXT. MOUNTAIN - DAY

Nicky and Danny stand at the edge of the trail, near the cliff that overlooks the valley. Nicky holds his backpack to his chest.

NICKY

May your spirit fly, Bert. Fly to Jupiter.
Fly to Mars. Fly to Neptune. Fly to the
sun but don't get burned. Fly to the stars,
my little pal.

Nicky opens his backpack. He reaches in and gets the bird.

NICKY (CONT'D)

Birds don't belong in cages, Danny. And
they don't belong in the ground.

Nicky takes a breath.

Then he winds up and throws the bird like a baseball high into the sky over the cliff.

The bird sails through the air.

The bird is just about to reach the apex of its trajectory.

And the bird freezes.

The bird's wings begin to flap.

Then the bird starts to glow and turns into a bright blue star.

DANNY

Holy shit balls.

NICKY

Do you see that?

DANNY

Holy fucking shit.

Then the sound of bird song emanates from the blue star. The musical whistling is joined by a Chipmunk-esque vocal.

BIRD STAR

“Nicky is my friend... Yes, he is...
Nicky is my friendly friend... Yes yes
he is my friendly friend and he is my
buddy...”

Nicky covers his eyes for a second with his hands. Then he uncovers them to see if this is real.

NICKY

Do you see that?

DANNY

Mother of Christ...(inaudible)

Danny is on his knees, praying, with his eyes closed.

NICKY

What's wrong?

Danny crosses himself with the Father-Son-Holy ghost motion, repeatedly, just keeps doing it, continuously.

CHAPTER 21: REEL 7

Reel 7 is the hallucination sequence followed by the brothers throwing their father's ashes into the wind. The various plot threads are all intended to be finished in this reel. As I mentioned in the last chapter, Nicky is visited by Bert's spirit in the form of a blue star. Bert leads him into a field where he meets a tribe of Indians, who at first terrify him but then offer him soup. Then John Wayne's face appears in the sky and turns out to be a stand-in for Nicky's father. John Wayne says a few things and Nicky sort of gets transformed without even knowing it.

Meanwhile, Danny hallucinates a ghastly Wolf Bird that chases him, shoots lasers from its eyes, and forces Danny to promise to tell Nicky that their father's stuff belongs to the two brothers equally. In a way this was a chance to give Danny somewhat of a character arc near the end of the story, as he soon after does what the Wolf Bird told him to do.

Following the hallucination, the brothers regroup, debrief each other about what they saw, and then agree to disperse the ashes into the wind over the cliff. When they cast the ashes into the wind, the A-story plot is complete. I also intended with this scene to close the subplots of Nicky's internal conflict and his conflict with his brother. Nicky discovers that he brought "the wrong ashes," a decoy he made to try to outsmart Danny. He then learns that Danny brought the real ashes and essentially is looking out for Nicky, knows his flaws, and still loves him. After Danny gives Nicky the ashes to throw into the wind, Nicky shares the ashes with Danny and they throw them into the wind together.

CHAPTER 22: REEL 8

Reel 8 was only two pages long, since the climax and completion of the plot and subplots had been achieved by the end of the preceding reel. As post-climax resolution, I intended these two pages to basically confirm that a change had occurred and that Nicky and Danny's relationship had been mended. I also used the pages to end on a comedic note after the climax had gotten a little serious.

In concluding this section of my report on the first draft of "Magic Mountain" I want to thank my colleagues in workshop, who had read the previous semester's dark and strange versions of "two brothers" and were now shocked and amazed by the new pages I was turning in. Though half the class never connected strongly with the comedic material, I had a core group of four colleagues plus Beau who loved what I was doing. Each week they laughed out loud in class talking about what I had written in the most recent "episode" of Magic Mountain. Suddenly, my script was the funniest thing anyone had turned in during our time together in the program. Having their weekly support bolstered my confidence that I could write comedy, and I am grateful for their help.

CHAPTER 23: THESIS REWRITE PART ONE

To begin my rewrite of “Magic Mountain,” I met with my thesis supervisor, Stuart Kelban, and my reader, Tom Willett in May 2014. They had read the first draft, which I completed at the end of the Spring 2013 semester. We sat and talked about the script, and I came away with four categories of notes for my revision: there were problems with the tone of the script, the story material involving the father needed work, some of the major beats of the story could be improved, and the way the climax was handled was problematic. Each area of critique overlapped with my pre-existing concerns, so the following involves my own interpretation as well.

The tone of the first draft was a major issue. The script started by showing us the brothers with their wives, and children in the case of Nicky. The pages had a slow, thoughtful pace, and touched on the personal lives of the brothers vis-à-vis their families. The script opened like a carefully measured, almost somber drama containing a glimmer of hope, but at the same time featured clownish characters who did not fit in the atmosphere where I had placed them. This was a product of the first comedic draft being an outgrowth of a serious story, and also was due to my intention to maintain some amount of gravitas while writing “Magic Mountain.” I intended to make the audience laugh at the unbelievable ridiculousness of these characters but I also asked the audience to take seriously the emotional and intellectual weight of their A-story journey, carrying their father’s ashes up a mountain, and take seriously Nicky’s internal struggle having to do with his father, his brother, and ultimately himself. Another way of looking at it, or the same way in different terms, is that psychological realism (my usual area of writing) met

face-to-face with the ridiculously comic portraiture I was delving into for the first time in this script.

One obvious place where the problem in tone jumps out at the reader occurs while the brothers are on their way to the mountain, not long after leaving their homes. They suddenly start talking about the possibility of “Indians” giving them trouble on the mountain. It is as if we passed into a different world when that conversation gets going. Up to this point the characters had been reasonably self-aware and then suddenly they have this huge disconnect with reality as we know it, and think that “Indians” still live in forests and still get into skirmishes with city dwellers.

The second area of suggestions for the rewrite concerned bringing the father more into the story. Stuart and Tom – I have to speak of them collectively because I don’t remember who said what – advised that we ought to learn more about the father. Why did he want his ashes on this mountain? Were the brothers perhaps angry with him for sending them on this mission? They said the things the brothers encounter on the mountain should be evocative of the father. There should be more stuff that is buried coming to the surface. Could we find out why Danny was favored over Nicky? The script should start with the reading of the father’s will. Maybe Danny had already been to the mountain with the father and that could be a source of conflict once that was revealed to Nicky.

I ultimately decided to take what we in the program learned to call “the note behind the note” and go in the opposite direction to solve the problem. My feelings about how to handle the role of the father in the story ultimately go back to the problem

in tone and the tug-of-war between comedy and drama in the material. I decided to remove the ashes from the story because I began to think that element was out of place in the comedic environment I had created. I kept wondering if the ashes were simply a downer that didn't need to be there. When I thought of telling someone the logline, which would have included "it's a comedy about two brothers taking ashes up a mountain" I had to stop and ask if that made any sense, and ultimately ask if I was trying to do too many things at once, to be both funny and philosophical or "deep."

The central value of "Magic Mountain" for me has always been the feel of the comedy in certain scenes. That is the reason I returned to the mountain and used the script as my thesis rewrite. Truth be told, although I wanted some complexity in the mix, whatever importance I might have placed on the symbolism of the mountain, the nature of brotherhood, the fact of death and loss, and other mysteries of life, the substance of the material for me had always been the specific kind of comedy that I created with these two personalities. So if one side of the tone needed to shrink, it was going to be the serious side, and that meant getting rid of the ashes and not going in the direction of bringing the father more into the story. I would also frame this choice in the larger "journey" I made while writing "two brothers on a mountain," which was toward progressively less seriousness (for better or worse) at every stage of rewriting.

This created an immediate problem because the removal of the ashes eliminated the brothers' reason for walking to the top of the mountain. I came up with a handful of ideas for a new A-story. First, I thought maybe the father had left a treasure map that would take them to the top of the mountain where they may or may not find

treasure. I thought maybe the “map” might turn out not to be a map at all, but some other document or set of scribbles that the brothers had wishfully thought was a sort of prize left to them by their father. It might have been that the audience eventually discovered that the map was not a map, but that the brothers would nevertheless still find “treasure” at the top of the mountain and believe their father had left it there for them. Then I removed the father from the equation and thought the treasure map might be an invention of the wives to get their husbands to go on a journey together and become friends again after a lengthy and bitter estrangement. The wives would say they found the map(s) in the father’s belongings, and the brothers would believe that the father had left treasure up on the mountain. Then the wives would try to get the brothers to make the trip together. I wrote rough version of this in the following pages as the opening to the script, but later opted for a different A-story.

THE WIVES AND THE TREASURE MAP OPENING PAGES

EXT. BACK YARD - DAY

A chain-link fence separates two back yards. On one side of the metal fence stands a comically overstated ten-foot tall wooden fence, designed to amplify the barrier between the yards.

MARGIE and JENNY, housewives in their late 20s, talk to each other through the fences, but can’t see each other. They have the air of conspiracy. They speak in hushed tones and look over their shoulders back at their houses. They are each dressed up to go somewhere semi-formal. Margie is six months pregnant.

JENNY throws something over the barrier to Margie. It’s a scroll. Looks homemade, a large sheet of yellowish paper tied up with a leather shoelace.

JENNY

Tell Danny it’s a treasure map and you found it in Mr. Farino’s couch cushion. I’m giving Nicky one, too.

MARGIE

I don't understand.

JENNY

They'll both go looking for the treasure. We just have to get them to go together.

MARGIE

Oh. Wow. That's so smart.

Jenny holds a baby boy wearing a little paperboy cap and a miniature clip-on tie. Margie's kids run around her yard - a boy and girl.

GIRL

Will I get to see baby Gus today?

MARGIE

I don't know, Honey.

(beat)

Don't get your good clothes dirty.

EXT. HALL - DAY

A shitty, beat-up orange van skids dramatically to a stop. NICKY jumps out and runs ahead. He's wearing a white tuxedo and shiny white shoes. He's a teddy bear, overweight but muscular. As he runs, his big body jostles around.

He's obviously late for something. He gets to a glass door and puts his hands on it. Jenny walks up behind him holding Gus.

INT. HALL - DAY

DANNY is inside. He's a skinny, handsome goofball with sad blue eyes and tousled brown hair. Margie stands with him.

He looks at Nicky anxiously tapping on the glass door and shakes his head. Danny is wearing a black suit with a gray shirt and black tie, the opposite of Nicky.

DANNY

What the fuck is he doing wearing white?

MARGIE
(whispers)
He looks nice, settle down.

DANNY
He looks like an angry marshmallow.

EXT. HALL - DAY

Nicky looks toward Danny. He talks to Jenny.

NICKY
Why's he wearing that black suit?
What's he trying to prove? We should
be celebrating Pop's life.

Danny appears at the door and opens it.

Nicky and Jenny walk in.

NICKY (CONT'D)
Thanks, nice suit.

DANNY
Yeah, you too. Where'd you get that?
Looks great.

They hug each other -- pretending not to hate each other's guts.

The two wives share a knowing look and kiss each other on the cheek and hug.

EXT. BACK YARD - DAY

Nicky spreads the scroll on a table and looks at it carefully.

NICKY
It's a treasure map...
(beat)
I'll go this weekend. Jenny, it's Pop's
treasure map! He left a map!

JENNY
Danny has one, too. Maybe you could
go together?

NICKY

What??

JENNY

There were two of them. Margie was there so she took one.

He grits his teeth.

NICKY

That little weasel.

(beat)

Doesn't matter. I'll beat him.

JENNY

Why don't you go together?

NICKY

I want nothing to do with him.

JENNY

He's your brother, can't you work this out?

NICKY

Screw him. I'm done with him and you know it.

INT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Margie stands over a car engine looking worried. She holds a phone to her ear.

MARGIE

What do I do?

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Jenny is on the phone with Margie.

JENNY

(whispers)

Just pull something out. A wire or something.

She waits for a response from Margie. She looks toward the hallway, thinks she hears something.

[end of scene excerpt]

I finally invented a different scenario for the A-story goal. An eccentric billionaire lost a kite at the top of the mountain, where it was now stuck in a tree. A reward was offered and the brothers believed that this was their ticket to financial prosperity. I liked that the premise was absurd, as I was looking for more ways to make the world of the story borderline surreal from page one, and try to avoid a jarring jump from realism before the mountain to the somewhat otherworldliness of the brothers together going up the trail. This A-story goal also seemed to work because it was clearly a “want” that the brothers may or may not attain, while I knew that Nicky’s more important “need” would be satisfied by the end of the story. It would be a case of Nicky thinking the answer was the A-story goal, a free ticket to financial freedom which would solve all of his personal and family problems, whereas the real answer to his problems would be found through personal growth he would attain in the process of seeking the A-story goal.

As a compromise, after taking the ashes out of the story, I nevertheless decided to retain Nicky’s concern that he was the less-loved of the two brothers as part of his internal conflict. He would still flip out over the gold watch and later bring up the father in conversation. The subplot concerned with the protagonist’s internal conflict and eventual growth as a person would still connect to his “issues” related to his father and his brother.

The third area of notes given to me by Stuart and Tom concerned

improving the structure, suggestions such as where the script should start (with the reading of the father's will), what the inciting incident should be (arrival at the mountain), and what the Act 1 break should be (a threshold for Nicky to cross – such as a decision to continue on the journey up the mountain after finding out that Danny brought the ashes without telling him or after finding out that their father once brought Danny to the mountain and didn't bring Nicky). I tried to address these concerns in the rewrite and I discuss the new structure of the screenplay in the next chapter.

Lastly, in a category of it's own, there was a problem with Act 3. Stuart said that the climax was too easy because of the hallucinations. I will admit up front that I don't believe I solved this problem in the revised script, which includes some changes to the climactic sequence, but still fails to hit the right beats. I think it goes back to the fundamental issues of balancing comedy and drama and my difficulty in finding a way to adequately take the protagonist's internal conflict subplot to completion while also handling the completion of the A-story – which is one way to define what a climax is, I suppose. While Nicky's internal conflict provided dramatic interest and comedy, I wasn't sure how to dramatize his internal change through action. I talk more about this in the next chapters.

CHAPTER 24: A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE CAN BE DANGEROUS

The arrival of the thesis rewrite semester, along with the completion of coursework, presented an opportunity to revisit theoretical texts on screenwriting and hopefully inform my rewrite with helpful concepts and techniques. The most consequential piece of theory that I came across concerned the protagonist's flaw and how it was expressed in the three acts of a screenplay. It seems that the midpoint, more commonly thought of as the place halfway through Act 2 where stakes are raised and the protagonist begins to take direct action toward his goal if he hasn't already, is also the place where the protagonist sees his own flaw as if looking into a mirror. Meanwhile the audience has been aware of the flaw since Act 1. Then, once the protagonist has seen his flaw, he must address the flaw if he is to succeed in Act 3. If he does not address the flaw, the story will have a tragic outcome. Additionally, addressing the flaw within the bounds of the story changes the protagonist so that he can solve existing problems in his life.

I already knew that Nicky's most important problem affected him in the broader context of his life rather than merely in the present-action of the story. His central problem was his psychological malaise, his unhappy state of mind, and the way it affected his relationships with family members. The next question became, What was the flaw in Nicky that was causing this problem and could it be addressed on the mountain?

I also read that a protagonist's flaw almost always derives from either fear or lack of compassion, so that when a protagonist succeeds in a story by addressing his flaw, this will involve getting past fear or developing compassion. Right away I sensed

that Nicky's flaw derived from fear. At times I thought I could work in the compassion side of things, but in the main I focused on his flaw being one of excessive fear. He was already terrified of "Indians" and assorted other entities he might encounter on a mountain, so this flaw seemed to be endemic to his personality. The next question was, How did fear lead to his central problem – the aforementioned unhappy and unproductive state of mind? I realized that Nicky was facing a threshold that he was afraid of crossing. It was obvious. He was afraid to grow up. I had already built this into the story. He was a man-child who, as Lucy tells him (in the rewrite), "won't take any responsibility."

Next, I needed a way for Nicky to address his fear on the mountain in a way that would imply the right kind of internal change, the specific kind that would enable him to go back to his Ordinary World and solve his biggest problems. The long-story-short truth of the matter is that I did not succeed in doing this, going back to my previous mention of the Act 3 problems and the hallucination making it too easy. Although Nicky eventually displays courage on the mountain in a variety of late Act 2 and Act 3 scenes, he does not specifically conquer fear in a way that directly leads to him changing so that he can resolve his central, internal conflict, and go back to his life and solve problems there. I made an attempt, but it is not convincing. I was not sure how he could do something on the mountain that would transform him internally in the right way. I sought solutions and came up with a dozen ideas, but ultimately I fell back on another method of resolving Nicky's inner conflict which I had used in the first draft – getting direct approval from his father, in the form of a hallucinated John Wayne face hovering in the sky saying special words to Nicky. This doesn't hit the crux of the issue because,

as I've said, his central problem was not that his father may or may not have preferred Danny. His central problem was fear, and even if their father preferred Danny, the sort of neurosis that Nicky blamed on his father and Danny was actually just a cover up for the underlying fear of standing on his own and growing up. In other words, feeling unloved – which got solved by John Wayne – was not the true problem. After the John Wayne moment, I then showed Nicky making a decision and taking action (a sacrifice for his brother) that would conclude the C-story relationship conflict with his brother, and also “confirm” his internal change, but this wasn't altogether satisfactory.

CHAPTER 25: THE REWRITTEN SCRIPT

The opening of the first draft of Magic Mountain was set in Nicky and Jenny's back yard, where Nicky had a conversation with his daughter, Lucy. I kept most of the conversation but changed the location and the "opening image" itself to that of an abandoned motel. This was intended to better reflect Nicky's flaw and what it had caused in his life – separation from his loved ones and self-destruction. Putting him in this location also gave him more distance to travel in the story. I changed the dialogue to reveal that it was Nicky's choice to be living in the motel at this point, away from his family and responsibility.

In the next scene I introduce a major change in the A-story goal for the story. The brothers aim to retrieve a billionaire's kite and be rewarded handsomely, rather than take their father's ashes to the top of the mountain. A television screen delivers the exposition and the kite scenario itself reveals something about the slightly askew world of the story. As I mentioned previously, this felt like a better choice for a comedy.

Following this, when the brothers have their first scene together in Nicky's van, I chose to keep their conversation about what hypothetically happens when Danny's wife goes to the grocery store. I added some dialogue in which Danny calls Nicky out directly on the consequences of his flaw, without directly holding a mirror up to Nicky (that would have to wait until the midpoint). After Nicky has complained that Danny's flirtations with single women should stop, Danny points out that Nicky is letting his wife and family down in a much more significant way. With this scene we get a restatement of "the thing that the protagonist cannot or will not do in Act 1 that he can or will do in Act

3.” We also potentially are getting a statement of theme by Danny directly to Nicky: “step up to the plate.”

The next few beats follow the progression found in the first draft. Nicky notices the gold watch on Danny’s wrist, tries to stay calm, but flips out and gets ice cream. I changed things around so that the wrestling match over the watch happens right after this, rather than later once they have started walking up the mountain. I felt the scene, which captured so well the C-story “brother versus brother” conflict driven by Nicky, should be moved up to Act 1. It also served to quicken the pace and add tension to a first act that was largely dialogue-driven.

Then the brothers make a discovery that I tried to use as the inciting incident of the A-story. They realize that the place they have to go to get the kite is at the top of a mountain. They see the mountain while driving and then we cut to them at the base of the mountain and right away Nicky protests that he won’t continue the journey – thus refusing the call, entering “the debate” section before the Act 1 break. In the previous draft, when the story opened they had already decided to go up the mountain. I made this change because it seemed to better dramatize the A-story line of action. They could hear of the mountain from a television newscast about the kite and resist the call from their homes, or they could find out a mountain was part of the deal when they showed up to the mountain.

I then added a section where Nicky resists going up the mountain because he is afraid. I put Danny into the role of “mentor” to some degree in this space by having him try to convince Nicky to take the challenge. Additionally he states what might be the

C-story theme: “combine our strengths.” Lastly, before Nicky makes his decision to start up the mountain trail, we get a little peak into his mind in the form of subjective flashback. Nicky sees his wife and his kids essentially viewing him as a failure if he doesn’t take the challenge. Part of the purpose of this was to remind the audience of the stakes involved in the A-story: Nicky might lose his family if he doesn’t succeed. I don’t find this section very convincing and honestly it feels like it was placed there formulaically to satisfy the dictates of what is supposed to happen between the inciting incident and the Act 1 break.

So off they go up the mountain trail. Right away Nicky finds the injured bird and decides to “save” it. In the first draft, this also happened as soon as they started up the trail. One thing I had done in the first draft without realizing it was to make the bird a symbol of Nicky’s “death of the old self” that precedes the birth of the new self in the process of character change. I had always known that the bird was important for the way it showed us more of what was going on inside Nicky. While working on the rewrite I tried to connect Nicky resisting his flaw after the midpoint reveal of his flaw to Nicky keeping the dead bird in his backpack as they continued up the mountain.

I also connected the bird to Nicky’s false self or old self by having Nicky say that the bird was going to protect them while they were on the mountain. A character will cling to an outmoded survival system (old self) long after it has ceased to be useful. In this way, Nicky taking the bird with him was a mirror of his still childish mentality that had ceased to be self-preservative and was now self-destructive.

The next change I made was to move the scene where Danny lists all the

father's belongings he was given from the second half of the script to this place before the midpoint. There were a few reasons for this. One, I knew that with this draft I wanted Nicky to get through most of his concern about their father early in the script and then head toward a more direct confrontation with the real problem, which I now identified as his own fear – in other words, like I have said, it's not about his father it's about himself. So I tried to put his outward expressions of concern about their father earlier in the script. The false problem of the father would live in the first half of the script before Nicky's true flaw and real problem was revealed to him.

I then lead them directly in the path of the wolf for a good stretch of comic relief and dramatic tension. One major change I made to the wolf scene was to place the talk of "Indians" here instead of in the van on the way to the mountain. It just seemed like I could sneak it in while things were already batshit crazy and the brothers' fear level was at the max. I had in mind that the trepidation surrounding "Indians" on Nicky's part stood for many other things relating to his core flaw of fear. I also thought maybe later on in the low point sequence that Nicky would be forced to call out for the "Indians" to help him after everything else had gone wrong – in a way, embracing his fears. I also changed the Alaskan Malamute to a real wolf for two reasons: they were on a fairly remote mountain with no one else around, no houses, et cetera, so having someone's pet dog wandering around didn't seem to make sense. It seemed to call out for a second shoe to drop – the owners of the dog showing up. Plus, I thought that actual danger from a real wolf would be good for Nicky's arc toward courage and manhood.

The next thing is a conversation in which Nicky says he is going to let

Lucy's pet bird go. This was in the original draft, but now I see it as foreshadowing Nicky's change of self, with talk of letting a bird be free, even as he is still in the dark and carrying a bird in his backpack.

The next section of changes has to do with my attempt to create a more appropriate midpoint sequence for the script. I knew that Nicky's flaw would be revealed to him at the midpoint as if he were looking in a mirror. I also thought I would try having a "false victory" to precede that beat. The 'X' scene in the original draft seemed to be a nice false victory for the C-story, insofar as the brothers apparently succeed in putting their differences aside, and literally embrace each other and say 'I love you' back and forth a dozen times. The fact that this scene already ended with them smoking pot, which caused Nicky to be paranoid, seemed to work nicely in canceling the false victory as "fear" returned. I had already decided that "the mirror" that showed Nicky his flaw would come from the family members back at home. Hearing criticism from Danny was nothing new. But if Nicky heard something critical of him – especially if it were candid – from his wife or Danny's wife, it could have a major effect on him. So I decided that the brothers would have lunchboxes and somehow Nicky would open Danny's lunchbox and read a note from Margie that spelled out Nicky's flaw. Since I knew from watching movies that people sometimes get hungry after smoking pot, this sequence of events almost seemed fortuitous.

My next step in the midpoint sequence was to have Nicky resist addressing his flaw. He's a childish man. He's not going to admit fault right away. So he blows up after reading Margie's note to Danny, and storms off on his own. He rants about

how he will live by himself on the mountain and forget everyone else. A classic case of pride and denial. Soon enough, fear shows up again when he tries too-carefully to cross the river and ends up falling into the water. The river scene ends with Bert dead, as a result of the way Nicky's flaw made him fall in the water. I was trying to show Nicky his fear-as-flaw again right after he had denied it.

Following the river scene and Bert's death, the next scene is largely unchanged. Danny dismisses Nicky's sentimental attachment to the bird, Nicky goes crazy and chases him and then Danny gets hurt, ending the fracas. Soon after this I added a line of dialogue where Nicky says that he is worried because Bert can no longer protect them on the mountain, which I saw as a step toward facing his own fear.

Then the next thing is that the brothers re-assess the situation. They have lost a lot of ground from floating down the river. They have also lost the trail they were on. And it's going to get dark before they make it down the mountain (something Nicky was afraid of). So I was trying to raise the stakes by making everything more difficult for the brothers, and thus making it feel like A-story victory was in danger. I also had Danny re-state the reasons why Nicky had to get the kite, that if he didn't there was no telling if he could preserve his family and his dignity. Following this, the brothers basically charge up the mountain with renewed vigor. The problem is that I glossed over this moment for Nicky. This should have been a threshold moment for him where he has to start addressing his flaw – I suppose I mean he should struggle a bit before he takes action and runs up the mountain. Something internal needs to happen here, but he just gets the courage from out of nowhere. I can see where I tried to find the moment but didn't take it

to the right place.

NICKY

When we were going down the river after you jumped in I had a vision of trying to do something good. Like something special for once.

DANNY

Yeah.

Danny smiles. He squeezes Nicky's shoulder.

DANNY

Let's do it, man! Ready?

NICKY

We got this?

DANNY

Shit yeah!

[end scene excerpt]

Then I cut back to the wives at home watching TV. We learn that a comically gargantuan lightning storm is headed for the mountain and that the storm will also cause wildlife to act violently toward humans. When we return to the brothers, they are getting zapped by lightning, but they keep running up the trail. They then have to fight raccoons, a turtle, and a moose before continuing. This sequence ends with Nicky saying he is hungry, followed by Danny saying they can eat the mushrooms for dinner if they boil them, thus removing the psychedelic part. I think the lightning storm and insane animals can work in this place in the story but what is lacking is them actually hitting a wall. They run through the storm, and get blown off the trail by bolts of lightning, but they keep going without any serious trouble. Then they get attacked by animals but they

punch the animals and the problem is solved. What needs to happen is them taking action and then hitting a wall that stops them. Just after Nicky started to address his flaw (if I had properly written that post-river scene), they should make a little progress and then hit another wall.

So they reach a plateau that overlooks a valley, eat the boiled and presumably safe mushrooms, and soon realize they are closer than they thought to the A-story goal, the kite in the tree at the top of the mountain. But they also see that giant bears are guarding the kite and the final clinching of the goal is either going to be impossible or will require a new strategy. Nicky reacts with very straightforward fear for his life upon seeing the bears through binoculars. He also says he wishes that Bert were still alive to protect them. I think it was a wrong move for me to have Nicky react with exactly the same type of fear we have seen in him previously on the mountain. Seems like something should be qualitatively different about the fear he now feels. He should be at a different stage of addressing his flaw. Similarly, I don't think at this point he should be expressing exactly the same sentiment about Bert "protecting them" on the mountain. In a sense he should be maturing as he gets closer to the climax. It is disappointing to see him here acting like he hasn't changed at all.

Danny calls Nicky out on his Bert nonsense and lets him know that he basically killed the bird through his dumbness, selfishness, and false sense of reality. Nicky gets mad and storms off, and in so doing is effectively still denying his flaw, or at least hiding from the truth. This is also a wrong move. Not only is it redundant (repeats the same decision pattern Nicky followed after reading Margie's note), it also negates

whatever progress he has made (or should have made) up to this point. As he storms off, Nicky lets Danny know that he plans to go get the kite by himself and leave Danny in the dust. This is wrong too – insofar as I have taken the script almost to the end of the page count and not really forced the protagonist to change. The intention with having Nicky declare here that he will do it alone was to set up what Nicky eventually does, which does succeed in showing a small amount of (nearly spontaneous and unearned) change. He returns from his hallucination and decides to make a sacrifice for Danny – the intervening character change having been brought on by a visit from his father in the form of John Wayne. He gives up on the kite and allows the billionaire to retrieve it from the tree (negating any reward) and instead goes to help Danny get up from where he has fallen. Going back to the moment when Nicky storms off saying he will get the kite alone, the next thing that happens is he goes to the cliff's edge to “let Bert go.” He takes Bert out of his backpack and throws him into the air over the valley below, a sort of ridiculous attempt at sky burial. The letting go of Bert seems to cause the hallucination to begin, seems to bring about almost a reward of some kind for Nicky, as if letting the bird go earned him a “trip” to visit some nice Indians and talk with a loving version of his father. Unfortunately, the letting go here is only symbolic and should not earn him grace and deliverance into “understanding” and character change. He lets go of a dead bird. He didn't let go of what the bird symbolically stood for, which was his “old self.” Then, as I mentioned, he changes “too easily” based on the hallucination. I added a moment in which Nicky declares he will do “the thing the protagonist can do in Act 3 that he could not do in Act 1” – go be a responsible husband and father – but it feels very tacked on.

APPENDIX A: FIRST OUTLINE

EXT. MOUNTAIN – DAY

MIKEY and NICKY take their backpacks out of Nicky's car, at the base of the mountain. Small talk. Nicky asks Mikey if he can see their father's ashes. Mikey shows him. Nicky wants to divide them up, so they do. He came prepared, with his own container.

INT. MIKEY'S HOUSE - DAY – FLASHBACK

Mikey goes in his bedroom-closet safe and takes a hand gun with him for the trip up the mountain. He puts it in his new hiking backpack (had to buy one for the trip because he's a city boy). He also notices a photograph of Nicky's wife, NICOLE, in his safe. He pockets it. He exchanges "I love you" with his wife, MARGIE. Mention is made of him going up the mountain today. His wife asks him to make love to her. He says no for whatever reason or there's no time. She thinks this might be the last time she sees him?

EXT. MIKEY'S HOUSE - DAY - FLASHBACK – CONTINUOUS

In private, having just stepped away from Margie to head out to Nicky's car for the mountain hike, Mikey burns a photograph of Nicky's wife, NICOLE (though we wouldn't know who this woman is in the photograph, yet).

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Mikey and Nicky walk up the trail. Talk is of prison. Mention is made that Nicky was very recently released. Nicky asks Mikey what kind of fun stuff he did while Nicky was locked up.

EXT. SOMEWHERE IN TOWN - NIGHT – FLASHBACK

Nicky and Margie talk on the phone. Talk is of their plan (already conceived, we gather) to take advantage of Mikey on the mountain trail, to extract something of value - it may or may not be clear what exactly (it's forcing Mikey to do an electronic money transfer). Mention is made of the trip occurring tomorrow. Nicky is packing his back pack, and we see that he is bringing a gun.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Nicky asks Mikey if there is anything he wants to tell Nicky. Mikey says there isn't anything.

INT. NICKY'S HOUSE OR? - DAY – FLASHBACK

Mikey and Nicole have sex. Afterwards, they say something like, “This is good-bye.” Mention is made of Nicky getting out of prison the next day. Mikey says, “I love you.” Nicole very obviously does not say it back, although she is not cold to him. “You need to keep your shit together,” she says, “I love my husband.” Mikey says, “I do, too.”

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Mikey and Nicky walk up the trail. Somehow Nicky sees that Mikey’s backpack contains a handgun. I’m not sure how this realistically happens without making it totally contrived. I thought something about sunscreen, but how does Mikey allow Nicky to see what’s in his backpack?

INT. PRISON - DAY – FLASHBACK

Nicky is on a closed-circuit phone, looking through a glass wall at Mikey’s wife, Margie, who has come to visit. She tells him that Mikey and Nicole are sleeping together. He is crushed, hurt, angry.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Mikey and Nicky walk up the trail. Nicky asks Mikey, “What’s the gun for?” Mikey doesn’t have a good answer. Nicky takes off his backpack. He pushes and punches Mikey out of nowhere. He hits him and kicks him. Nicky then ties Mikey’s hands behind his back and takes out his own gun and orders Mikey to walk up the trail. Their backpacks are left on the trail as they continue to walk. Nicky throws Mikey’s gun into the woods.

ACT II

INT. PRISON – DAY – FLASHBACK

Intercut with:

INT. MIKEY’S HOUSE - DAY – FLASHBACK

Over the phone, Nicky (in prison) tells Mikey that Nicole’s ex-boyfriend is trying to move in on her. He’s successful, etc. Mikey says, “What do you want me to do?” Nicky says something like, “Spend some time with her. See if Margie will hang out with her. Tell her you’ll fix stuff around the house. Go over and visit with the baby.” Mikey says he will do it, but it’s clear from his words and demeanor that it’s a chore. He has no interest (right?).

Mikey carries in some groceries or something for Nicole. She says she will cook something for him. He says no Margie would be mad if I came home and already ate. She makes him a snack. They eat together. She thanks him for fixing a certain thing at her

house. There is no physical closeness, since they aren't sleeping together, yet. Nicole mentions the ex-boyfriend who's been calling her and stopped by earlier today.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Mikey and Nicky walk up the trail, Nicky with the gun, Mikey with his hands tied. Nicky says something like, "You're a great brother, Mikey. Y'know, I can always count on you." Mikey runs off the trail into the woods, trying to escape. He tumbles down a hill and keeps going. Nicky follows and catches up to him. Nicky takes out his gun and puts it on Mikey's cheek, as Mikey is on the ground. He asks, again, if Mikey has anything to tell him. Mikey says, "She still loves you." Then, he says, "I love her, but she loves you. I'm sorry, Nicky. I messed up."

Nicky then proceeds to make Mikey transfer money (via cell phone) from Mikey's own bank account into one that Nicky and Margie set up for this purpose (this is money left over from their criminal enterprise). The possibility is there (for the audience) that Nicky might shoot his brother.

INT. HOSPITAL – DAY – FLASHBACK

Intercut with:

INT. PRISON - DAY – FLASHBACK

Nicky's son is born. There's the moment of drama before Nicole pushes the baby out and just after, but the hospital scene also contains the less tense aspects of a birth: baby in incubator, doctor talk, hospital hallway stuff, etc. Nicky (in prison) is noticeably not there for this event. Mikey is not there, either.

Nicky is receiving a nasty beating from two prison thugs. One says something like, "You ain't got no connections now that your pop is gone. Now you gonna pay his debts. Big Joe hasn't forgotten your family did him wrong."

EXT. MOUNTAIN WOODS – DAY

The brothers are sitting or standing in the same place they were before, somewhere off the trail in the woods where they ended up after Mikey's escape attempt. Mikey explains what happened with Nicole. He again admits that he not only had sex with her but that he is in love with her. He sheds a tear over it. "It's over. I know." Nicky then proceeds to make Mikey tell him everything. Mikey is looking away, while Nicky is looking at him, demanding details of what they did sexually and otherwise. Extremely uncomfortable, but it serves to bring it out into the open and purge the secrecy of it all. Lastly, Nicky asks if his son is his own (when did Mikey and Nicole start?). Mikey swears to God that nothing happened until Nicky went away and the kid was already born. Nicky has at least

this one thing to be relieved about.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - DAY – CONTINUOUS

Nicky returns to the backpacks and gets his half of the ashes (container) and heads up the trail from there. Mikey walks through the woods, gets to the backpacks, and takes his own half of the ashes with him up the trail (Do they leave their backpacks?). He also brings the audio recording (it's on his phone?). The two of them are separated but headed the same direction.

INT. HOSPITAL - DAY – FLASHBACK

Mention is made between the old man (their father) and staff that Mikey is on his way to the hospital. Before he arrives (he doesn't) the old man dictates into a phone or a tape recorder or something his last words to his sons (we don't hear this). A staff member suggested because the man cannot write very well, due to his physical state, that he just speak into the staff member's phone (a recording app), "Do you want to try this?"

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Nicky walks up the trail. He looks back to see if Mikey is anywhere to be seen, behind him.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - DAY – CONTINUOUS

Mikey walks up the trail. He looks back down the trail because he thinks he heard something. He looks into the woods for a long moment.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - DAY – CONTINUOUS

When Mikey catches up to Nicky, he finds Nicky standing outside a small, mountain store for hikers. The place is closed. They don't have to talk much to figure out what comes next. They throw a big rock through the glass front door and then casually pick out some food and some beer. Mikey mentions that he thinks there's something out there (following them). He asks Nicky to see the gun so he can walk back a bit and maybe see what this animal is. Nicky brushes it off, says no. They leave, starting to drink the beer.

MIDPOINT

EXT. CAR – NIGHT – FLASHBACK

Intercut with:

EXT. CRIME SCENE – NIGHT – FLASHBACK

Mikey drives away very fast from someplace, looking nervous, looking back, looking angry, sad, etc. “Goddamnit, Nicky!” He calls Nicky’s walkie-talkie. Nicky hears the call, says hello, doesn’t go on or doesn’t answer. At the crime scene, as sirens and flashing lights approach, Nicky is kneeling beside his father, who has been shot. Nicky is doing something that might be keeping his father alive, pressing on the wound to stop blood escaping, etc. The father says, “Go. Quickly. Leave.” Nicky will not leave his dad. We can see Nicky’s gun, his ski mask or whatever, to indicate to us they were in the middle of doing a crime that went awry.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

The brothers have had a few beers and are stopped somewhere, sitting on boulders or a big, fallen tree. They get to where they are joking about things. Mikey and Nicky are sort of “over Nicole,” or so it might seem. Nicky says he’s done with her, etc. Mikey reminds Nicky that Nicky once had a thing for Mikey’s girlfriend in middle school. Nicky denies it. Mikey says something like, “You asked her out the day after the first time I kissed her. You asked her to go roller skate with you.” So, this is sort of a honeymoon section for them, where their relationship seems greatly on-the-mend. They even joke about bringing guns on this trip in case they wanted to kill the other one. Mikey says he heard the animal again that he thinks is following them (or saw it), and they look into the woods for a moment.

EXT. HOUSE, BACKYARD - DAY – FLASHBACK

Backyard grilling party. Nicky is with Nicole. Mikey is with Margie. Each brother is coo-cooing with his own lady. They are in love with their wives.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Mikey and Nicky walk up the trail, again. Nicky tells Mikey that their dad actually isn’t Mikey’s biological father. Mikey asks questions like, Who is my father, Did mom cheat on Dad, How did this happen, etc, and of course there is denial and disbelief on Mikey’s part. Mikey gets angry at Nicky for talking about their mother like this. Nicky explains that their mother was pregnant with Mikey when she met their dad, and that Mikey was adopted once they got married. Nicky sort of spells out the facts and evidence, also pointing out that Mikey and their Dad look nothing alike. This probably hurts Mikey more than Nicky was hurt by his wife and brother sleeping together. Nicky doesn’t do this angrily or forcefully. He doesn’t have to. Before going into this he says, “Do we have anymore secrets?” Mikey says no. “Because brothers can’t have secrets.” Nicky might add something like, “But you know he loved you more than me, any day.” Actually, I’m really not sure to what degree Nicky is telling Mikey this to hurt him.

EXT. HOUSE - DAY – FLASHBACK

The boys are being told that their mother is dead. They are 12 and 13 years old. They don't cry. They are too stunned. Their father is there.

EXT. MOUNTAIN RIVER – DAY

Mikey loses his container of ashes in a small river they had to cross. He goes in after the container and ends up getting it back (after some ordeal), but finds himself a quarter mile downstream. He gets out of the water and realizes he has his phone in his pocket, and the recording of his dad is gone, because it was on his now-ruined cell phone. He begins walking alone through the woods.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - DAY – CONTINUOUS

Nicky is by the river where Mikey jumped in. He's calmly looking down the river for any sign that Mikey might be walking back along the water (Mikey is a good swimmer. Nicky's not concerned his brother is in trouble).

He turns and notices something weird, a fox sitting not too far away, on the trail behind him, where the brothers had been walking. Nicky and the fox just sort of look at each other for a moment.

INT. SOMEPLACE WHERE? - DAY – FLASHBACK

The mother is “getting the father to not be a criminal anymore (trying to).” The father totally agrees and feels reasonably good about it. The 12-13 yr old brothers are there, in the background. Does this have a religious element? The father is getting baptized? The mother's item that they now carry up the mountain is in this scene.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – DAY

Nicky walks along the trail, looking to see if he can spot Mikey making his way out of the woods and back onto the trail. It's getting close to dusk, so he makes a fire and waits for Mikey.

EXT. MOUNTAIN WOODS - DAY – CONTINUOUS

Mikey is going through the woods, shivering because he's wet and the water was cold.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL – NIGHT

Mikey and Nicky sit around the fire that Nicky made. They talk of getting better jobs, possibly starting a business together. Mikey then says he's going to move away to a different town or state with his wife and start a family. The relocation is almost like a

courtesy to Nicky because of the Nicole situation. He says he will come visit for the holidays. They consult the map and agree that they will easily make it to the place in the morning.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TRAIL - DAY

Mikey and Nicky bury the ashes and their mother's item. We hear the father's audio recording in voice-over narration (that the brothers never got to hear).

Notes to class:

There is no ACT III break in this outline, because I am really not sure how the story unfolds from the midpoint to the end. There are definitely scenes missing (on the mountain and in flashback), and probably an entire other conflict emerges or re-emerges in the second act, and I don't know what it is, yet.

Other scenes that will go somewhere:

I think maybe in flashback we will see their father being something less than the world's greatest dad, abusive, angry, disinterested? This would be in the second act, after the affair thing seems to have been resolved. Not sure how much to include about the death of their mother. I like it being mysterious, but perhaps there will be flashbacks to that time or leading up to it.

APPENDIX B: THE ECSTASY SCENE IN FIRST DRAFT

EXT. MOUNTAIN - DAY

Danny is giving Nicky a shoulder massage.

DANNY

I love you, man.

NICKY

I love you, too, man.

DANNY

I seriously love you.

NICKY

I know, I seriously love you, too.

DANNY

Like. A lot.

NICKY

I feel it, brother. You feel me?

DANNY

Yeah, I can feel you.

NICKY

That's love.

DANNY

Ready? I'm gonna close my eyes
and love you real hard for a second.

NICKY

Ok, go.

DANNY

(Closes eyes)
You feelin it?

NICKY

I do, and I love it.

MOMENTS LATER

They have traded positions and now Nicky is giving Danny a foot massage.

NICKY (CONT'D)

I love your feet, bro.

DANNY

I do, too. I love them. I love your hands.

NICKY

My hands love you back, sweet buddy.

They both focus for a second.

DANNY

Love you, guy.

NICKY

Love ya, big fella.

DANNY

I never told you this before, but I love ya.

NICKY

I never told you before, either, but I do. I love ya, cowboy.

DANNY

Best older brother, ever.

NICKY

Best younger bro. Lovin you, D.

DANNY

Back at you. Times infinity.

NICKY

Back at you. Times a zillion infinity.

Danny sighs.

Nicky sighs.

DANNY

Wanna smoke a joint?

NICKY

Yeah. I love joint.

Danny reaches into his backpack. He gets the paper bag. Out comes a joint.

He finds his lighter and takes a puff.

DANNY

Smooth.

He hands it over. Nicky takes a huge hit. And holds in the smoke. Then he exhales and talks at the same time as smoke billows out of his mouth.

NICKY

Fuckin' love this shit.

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