

“The Designated Driver”

The story of my proposal is, in many ways, the story of my college experience as a whole. I came to Michigan wanting to be a doctor. The morning of the second day of class, I was called home to be with my dying grandfather. Already quite the introvert, the time away from school and the subsequent depression following my grandpa’s death made it difficult for me to meet people, to talk to anyone, or to make friends. I spent much of that year alone in my dorm room, watching movies.

However, several good things later came of that experience. The following semester, I wrote an essay about my grandfather – a moving, personal, 13-page memoir of our final months together. That essay was the sample I submitted to the Minor in Writing (which I’m now in), and served as the first draft of the treatment for my second feature screenplay (also inspired by some of the movies I watched during my freshman depression), which punched my ticket into UM’s selective and prestigious screenwriting sub-concentration. In addition, the failure of my freshman year in terms of my personal and social growth forced me to make changes for my sophomore year – among these changes: driving my drunk friends around to parties and Taco Bell.

With that, I present the culminating project of my college experience, my most ambitious screenplay yet: The Designated Driver.

The story begins with Zach, a college sophomore. He has no friends, is lonely all the time, and spends most of his free time watching TV alone, eating candy on his couch. But, at the beginning of his sophomore year, he moves in with three guys he has never met before:

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Lance, Paul, and Sam. It is Sam's 20th birthday coming up, and his girlfriend, Zoey, decides to throw Sam a big surprise party.

Sam's party goes exactly as planned: he's very surprised, and all his friends and all of Lance, Paul, and Zoey's friends show up, too. Zach knows nobody at the party, except for his roommates and Zoey. He spends the beginning of the evening throwing up alone in his room, nervous and scared. He's never been to a party before, but now he's throwing one for a bunch of people he doesn't even know.

While he's upstairs alone, Zoey comes up and yells at him for being anti-social and forces him to go downstairs. He's immediately greeted by a group of girls who know who he is, but who he's never met. Their names are Kim, Gina, Amanda, and Laura. Laura then forces Zach to play beer pong with him. Throughout the game, Zach misses cup after cup while being chastised by Kim and Laura. When the game is over and he's forced to drink up, he reveals his big secret: he's never had a drink. He can be their designated driver.

To Zach, being a designated driver offers him the opportunity to make friends. While he's initially reluctant to be an aid to underage drinking, he realizes that not only is it his best option for making friends, but that everybody needs somebody in their life they can trust, and he has the opportunity to be that guy for his new friends, and keep them safe.

Over the course of the next year, armed with his new Mustang, Zach will balance his new gig with mounting academic pressure from his mother, his struggle to find his passion and choose a major, and a potential romance with one of the girls he drives around.

The climax of the movie puts Zach in his lowest position: because he spent too much time focusing on his new social life, he is put on academic probation by the university and

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is forced to retire as the designated driver, until one of his friends calls him in dire need of a ride and brings him out of his retirement for one last drive. And, maybe, he'll have to have a drink along the way.

What initially attracted me to writing this story was the overwhelming encouragement of everyone I shared the idea with. One line I heard several times, in initially considering a novel on the idea, was 'I would buy that in a heartbeat.' What is exciting to me is the comedic potential in the story. The way I envision it is a comedy about drunken people and the stupid things they do, but through the eyes of the sober person taking care of them, and grounded in his story and his growth.

In screenplay classes, one thing that is stressed over and over to me is that a protagonist has to have clear goals, a mission, and needs to be active in his pursuit of those goals. I've found that I tend to write passive characters, in large part because I believe that in real life, things happen to people; people don't happen to things. The latter, though, is the belief of most writers and movie critics. I like realistic movies though. So, I'm trying to balance my own desire to stay real with the need (for the sake of selling this things) to make the character an active character. I think the fact that he is the one driving people around means he literally "drives" the story, and his journey to make friends will guide his character arc. With a goal as simple as making friends, though, the key to keeping the story exciting and interesting will be to constantly challenge Zach and throw obstacles at him, force him to make choices and be the active protagonist I need. Among those obstacles are his academics, his choice in a major, his sobriety, his virginity, and a potential romance.

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For the character of Zach, becoming the designated driver for his friends is, as he sees it, the best and only option for him to make friends; his refusal to drink and go to parties severely limits his options. And that goal of making friends is important because without that, he continues to live the empty, lonely, and sad life he has been living. So the stakes are big for him going into it. What he realizes later is that the stakes are even bigger, because in devoting his nights to his new “job,” he puts his academic career and his family relationships in jeopardy. Ultimately, in the end, he learns to find balance in his life and realizes that he can’t let his friends use him as he had been doing, and is able and confident enough to maintain friendships.

Then there is the comedy. I am a big fan of physical comedy and situational comedy not reliant upon one-liners and jokes. I want to put the characters in situations that lead to humor, which is easy when many of the supporting characters will be drunk throughout most of the movie. I will draw upon a long list of situations I’ve been writing down over the past few years, things my friends have done in my presence that I found particularly entertaining. Among them are:

- A girl drunk texting me vague landmarks to identify her location, then me discovering her in the bathroom of an ice cream shop that had been closed for over an hour
- My friends “sexting” a mysterious guy and getting offbeat responses, then going on a hunt to find him
- Going to a party sober and being kicked out for being creepy because my friends asked me to take their pictures
- Sharing a bed with a girl for the first time
- Pulling off a Chinese Fire Drill at a stop light
- Being hit on by a gay guy
- Friends vomiting in my car
- Helping my friends steal marijuana from a house party

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As far as the writing process goes, I'll outline later a week-by-week process used in my screenwriting courses. In short, it begins with a short summary, progresses to what I call an "overview outline," then to a treatment and a "step outline." Then, I will write about 15 pages per week until the end of the semester, going back and revising each section along the way and doing a final, major revision at the very end.

As far as research goes, I will look to several movies and screenplays that I want to emulate. The two most prominent of these are Judd Apatow's *Funny People* and David O. Russell's *Silver Linings Playbook*. Apatow's movie is an admittedly personal film, a vehicle for his college roommate (Adam Sandler), his wife (Leslie Mann) and frequent collaborators (Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill) to star in, and based very loosely on his early days as a stand-up comedian. *Funny People* is a comedy about funny people – hence the title – but manages to be a very serious and oftentimes dark film. I liken that to my project – a story about funny people (Zach's drunk friends) but serious and dark at the same time. The latter film/script, *Silver Linings Playbook* is similar but the in the reverse way; it is a movie about very serious people (a bipolar man arrested for assault, his OCD father recently fired from his job, and his sex-addicted and depressed love interest who just lost her husband) but manages to be very funny at the same time. This is like the storyline of Zach, a depressed, lonely student who decides to make changes in his life.

I own the screenplays for both of these films, and will be looking to them often.