Elsie: A Screenplay

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project in Television, Radio and Film

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Abstract

Elsie is a 57-page, one-hour screenplay. A modern adaptation of a true story, Elsie tells the tale of Elsie Whitman, a young housewife unhappy in her marriage and looking for a way out. When her estranged sister arrives, she finally finds the strength to do the unthinkable.

Our story opens with the arrival of Elsie's sister, Marianne, and the departure of her husband, John. Alone in the house together, the sisters' relationship grows complex. Marianne begins to see Peter, a young man with a mysterious past. However, when Elsie is wronged by John, she jumps into bed with Peter.

The interweaving plot comes to a close as Elsie and Marianne finally decide to take matters into their own hands. The story explores the theme of women's independence in a modern world. While women’s equality has progressed drastically in the last 50 years, major disparities still exist, especially in the way media portrays gender norms.

Elsie seeks to engage in this discussion by portraying strong, modern women in oppressive situations and by deviating from traditional gender portrayals in modern media.
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Executive Summary

Elsie is a one hour screenplay inspired by the true life story of Elsie Whipple, with a modern twist. Elsie Whipple was the daughter of two extremely well established families in 1800s Albany, NY. In spite of the advantages her birth, she found herself trapped in an unhappy marriage.

Her unhappiness led her to infidelity. She had an affair with Jesse Strang, a hired hand on the property. With Strang, she plotted to kill her husband. In spite of her involvement in the events, she was let off on all charges. Jesse Strang was not so fortunate. He confessed, and was ultimately hung in what was to become the last public hanging in Albany, NY.

My script is a modern adaptation of these events. Our story begins as Elsie’s husband, John, leaves home on business. An investigator for the State of Massachusetts, he travels to D.C. in order to assist with a federal investigation. Elsie’s sister, Marianne, has just arrived. She is forced to move in with her sister and brother-in-law as a result of unemployment and financial troubles post-grad. Her mother and father have both passed away, and she has nowhere else to turn. The sisters’ relationship grows complicated as they spend more and more time together.

Marianne meets Peter in town and they begin seeing one another. However, when Elsie is wronged by John, she finds solace in Peter. In discovering that Peter and Elsie have slept together, Marianne is angry. She seeks comfort in the bottom of a bottle. At the local bar, her and Peter get into a fight.
The fight leads to Peter’s arrest. At this moment, we learn Peter has a dark past and has been lying to both Marianne and Elsie all long. A turning point in the story, the sisters finally vow to get revenge and take matters into their own hands.

The plot comes to a close as Elsie and Marianne pull off the perfect crime. By deceiving both John and Peter, they manipulate Peter into shooting John. John succumbs to his injuries, while Peter faces jail time for his crimes. Elsie and Marianne, on the other hand, leave town to get away from the events, effectively riding off into the sunset with one another.

The story explores several themes, including gender equality, feminism in film, and what drives individuals to murder. I implemented a variety of common writing techniques in order to convey these themes in my final project.

First and foremost, I engaged in the “discovery” process. This is an integral part of any creative writing piece. The discovery process allows for total immersion within the world of a story. It is important a writer, whether it be a novelist or a screenwriter, spend ample amounts of time within the world of his or her tale. By doing so, they enable themselves to freely write within that world without fear of inconsistencies or over thinking.

Discovery is the part of the writing process where the overall plot, character motivations, setting, and even tone are ultimately developed. Because these elements form the base of any screenplay, the discovery process is tantamount in good storytelling.
A second technique I implemented in writing Elsie is the use of previously existing film styles to further emphasize theme. I relied heavily on the conventions of traditional film noir in telling my story. However, I played with the gender roles typically performed within a noir and turned them on their heads. This allowed me to create strong female protagonist and comment on unequal gender roles in society. The use of film noir also allowed me to comment on gender roles in modern cinema.

Film noir is one of the oldest existing film styles, existing nearly as long as the medium of film itself. In my script, the genre acted as a microcosm for the movie industry as a whole. By choosing a style so deeply ingrained in film history, I could pointedly reference movies in general.

The theme of traditional and nontraditional gender roles in film was not the only theme I hoped to portray in my piece. I also sought to explore the human condition, particularly humans’ ability and inability to kill one of their own kind. What is it that ultimately pushes us to the limit? To do this, I provided each of my characters with a “breaking point.” For Elsie, it was John’s assumed affair; for Marianne, it was Peter’s deceit; and for Peter, it was his will to protect others.

I was also able to use these breaking points as a major source of character exposition. By placing each character in their respective situations, I conveyed to my audience what meant the most to each. For example, Elsie valued her independence above all else; it was the thing she was willing to kill for.

A third major theme I aim to convey in Elsie is that of morality. It is important a reader note that I do not seek to pass any sort of judgment upon my
characters. Instead, I choose to best convey what actions they commit and why. I hope that in doing so, I open up the discussion of morality and responsibility within my work.

Additionally, I made a point not to include any characters that were inherently good or right. Therefore, there is no moral compass for an audience to latch on to. Because of this, audience members are forced to act the role themselves. Therefore, in reading or viewing Elsie, they must make moral decisions based on the characters’ actions.

Overall, the significance of my project is to contribute to the ongoing discussion of gender portrayal in film. It’s purpose to interplay with cinema both old and new to convey its underlying themes.

For example, in juxtaposing the traditional style of noir with modern characters, I am able to convey the theme of gender equality in film. Similarly, I use elements murder mysteries and romantic dramas to push my characters to the brink. These elements allow me to explore the concept of murder and man’s ability to kill one another.

It is my goal that my techniques and theme successfully comment on systematic inequalities in the film industry. As with my characters, I do not hope to pass overt judgment within the pages of my script. Instead, I hope to bring these issues to light as a means of furthering the discussion.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to extend a sincere thanks to Professor Rich Dubin, for sticking with me through it all. From conception to execution, you were there every step of the way, for advice, guidance and the occasional freak out. It's time to celebrate and "EAT CAKE, Dammit!"

For inspiring me with the story of Elsie Whipple, thank you Mrs. Heilsberg. Your energy and love of the subject brought it to life. It was this energy that inspired me to explore the story and myself more than I had thought it possible.

For teaching me more than I ever thought possible about character and "mutually exclusive conflicts," for helping me when it counted the most, thanks Lani Diane Rich.

Last, but in no way least, thank you Kate Hanson. You never stopped guiding me through every step of this process, keeping me on track. Thanks for never doubting my will and ability to cross that finish line.
Elsie

By

Eileen Spath
INT. ELSIE’S BEDROOM - 2 PM

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

An antique clock ticks on the wall. ELSIE, 27, gazes at her vanity mirror. She puts in her second earring before giving her reflection a long look. Elsie rehearses the same sentence over and over again in the mirror, in different ways.

ELSIE

John, I want a divorce. I would like to get a divorce. I want a divorce. I want a divorce. I think we should get a divorce.

Elsie lets out a long sigh. The clock chimes loudly. 2 PM. Elsie looks at herself once more. Hair perfectly in place. Dress perfectly pressed. Face perfectly made up. She looks at the clock again - still 2 pm.

EXT. A QUIET MOUNTAIN ROAD

A sign stands on the side of the road: "IPSWICH, MA. POPULATION: 13,175." A taxi drives by and interrupts an otherwise quiet scene.

EXT. THE WHITMAN RESIDENCE

A white house stands amidst a sea of rolling hills and evergreen pines. The shining sun adds an air of grandeur to the building. The taxi pulls up the long drive before pulling to a stop at the top of the driveway.

INT. ELSIE’S BEDROOM

From her seat at the vanity, Elsie peeks out her lace curtain to see the taxi pull up.

EXT. THE WHITMAN RESIDENCE

The taxi door swings open. A sneaker steps out onto the asphalt. Ripped jeans. A worn in T-shirt. MARIANNE has arrived. After stepping out of the cab, she lifts her sunglasses off her face and stares at the house.

(CONTINUED)
MARIANNE
Well, Shit.

The DRIVER gets out of the car and grabs Marianne’s bag from the trunk. He places her bags beside her. Still staring at the house, she pays him a bill. He reaches to make change. He hands the change to Marianne.

MARIANNE
Thanks.

MARIANNE picks up her tattered duffel bag and strolls out of the shot, toward the front door.

INT. ELSIE’S BEDROOM

Through the window, Elsie sees Marianne walk up and ring the bell.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

The sun gleams through the windows into the empty room. Wooden furniture and paintings line the walls. To the right, a staircase winds it’s way up along the wall and onto the second landing. The sound of the doorbell rings throughout the empty room.

INT. ELSIE’S BEDROOM

The bell reaches Elsie’s room. She closes the curtain and closes her eyes, collecting herself.

INT. JOHN’S HOME OFFICE

JOHN, 32, is seated at his desk, pouring over his computer. His office is clean and perfectly organized. He is handsome, tall, with a graying hair line. On his computer screen is the profile of KILLIAN BARNES, 54. A badge hangs on a hook beside the desk: DETECTIVE. A manila folder with the seal of the State of Massachusetts lies on the desk, recently disturbed papers sticking out of edge.

The bell rings again. JOHN shoves his chair forcefully back from his desk.

JOHN
Jesus Christ - can’t even answer the door for her own sister.

John reaches over to his office door. He slams it open.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

JOHN
ELsie! Elsie!? - GRAB THE DOOR.

John pauses to listen for signs of Elsie. Silence.

JOHN
PLEASE?!

John slams his office door shut in frustration.

EXT. THE WHITMAN RESIDENCE

MARIANNE looks over the front of the house, checking for signs of life inside. She turns and sees a a big black Sudan is parked in the driveway. Someone must be home. She turns back to the door and slams her thumb angrily against the bell.

INT. ELSIE’S BEDROOM

John’s voice echos through the house as he yells over the second bell. Elsie turns to look at her bedroom door, where the sound is coming through. She steals one last look at Marianne through the lace before getting up to greet her sister. As she does so the bell rings once more. Over the buzz, John yells once more.

JOHN
(OS)
ELsie!

EXT. THE WHITMAN RESIDENCE

Marianne lifts her hand off the bell. She raps her knuckles against the door before grabbing the knob. Unlocked. She slowly turns the knob, opens the door and sees...

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

Elsie is descending the staircase with grace. She looks up and sees Marianne has stopped on the threshold. Seeing her sister, Elsie pauses briefly. She plasters a large, fake smile across her face.

ELSIE
Marianne! You’re here! You’re inside my house.

(CONTINUED)
MARIANNE
Yeah. Shit. Sorry. No one answered, and the door was unlocked, I just figured.

ELSIE
Of course. It’s perfectly understandable. Welcome.

Elsie outstretches her arms in a welcoming motion. Her and Marianne stand for a moment. Marianne remains on the threshold. Elsie remains on the stair.

Elsie’s forced smile reaches from ear to ear.

ELSIE
It is so nice to see you!

Elsie’s walks across the hall. The sisters share a tentative hug.

MARIANNE
Yeah, thanks for having me. Your house is, um, nice.

Marianne takes a look around the room before motioning to her tattered duffel on the ground.

MARIANNE
Um, I’ve got my bag?

ELSIE
Oh! Right, right! I’ll have John get those right away.

Elsie yells up the staircase to John.

ELSIE
John! Could you come down here please? Marianne’s here – give us a hand with her bags?

Elsie turns back to Marianne.

ELSIE
It is so nice having a man in the house to help with these sort of things.

Marianne does not respond. She is saved an awkward silence by John walking down the stairs. His affected manner is gregarious and welcoming.
JOHN
Marianne! So nice to have you. Elsie has told me great things.

Marianne raises an eyebrow and steals a quick glance at Elsie.

MARIANNE
She has?

JOHN
Of course she has! She’s very proud of her baby sister.

Marianne nods politely, a half smile on her face.

JOHN
So sorry we missed the ceremony. You know how things are. How’s life of a graduate?

MARIANNE
I’m unemployed and moving in with you, so I’ve got that going for me.

Marianne smiles wryly.

MARIANNE
At least I’m not an alcoholic.

John bursts out laughing.

JOHN
No worries, you’ll find something soon enough. Here - I’ll take this for you, let you two get caught up.

John grabs the bag and turns away from the girls. His smile quickly fades. Elsie and Marianne are alone looking at one another. The steps creak slightly as JOHN ascends the staircase. Creak. creak. creak. He reaches the top the steps, turns the corner. Footsteps. A door closes. Elsie lets out the breath she was holding. Marianne avoids eye contact. Finally, she looks at Elsie, raises her eyebrows before half-shrugging.

MARIANNE
Hi?

ELSIE
Hi.

(CONTINUED)
Elsie smiles and looks directly at Marianne. Marianne returns the smile briefly before crossing her arms and looking away. Elsie looks at her sister as she tries to find the right thing to say next.

ELSIE
So, I’m making dinner for tonight. Figured we should give you a proper welcome. Hope you like Haddock. I’ve got a great recipe--

Marianne looks back up at Elsie.

MARIANNE
Sounds awesome. I’m gonna go wash up. Room?

ELSIE
Right, no problem. Just up the stairs and to your left.

Marianne walks past Elsie toward the stairs. As she walks by, Elsie softly grabs Marianne’s arm. Marianne turns and makes eye contact with her sister for the second time in years.

ELSIE
Listen, Marianne, if you ever want to talk.

MARIANNE
I think I’m good.

Marianne motions to leave. She turns back to her sister for a brief moment.

MARIANNE
Thanks, though.

Marianne walks away up the staircase, leaving Elsie alone in the hall.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S DINING ROOM

Wine glasses and silverware glisten in the dining room’s low light. Napkins are neatly folded on each place setting. Windows along one side of the room reveal a slowly darkening sky.

(CONTINUED)
John and Marianne are seated across from each other at the table. They say nothing. Marianne fiddles with the napkin lain neatly across her plate. John observes Marianne as he picks his napkin up, shakes it out, and lays it gently on his lap.

Elsie breaks the silence as she walks through the swinging door with a platter full of haddock. She places the meal on the table with flourish, before sitting down at her own place.

    ELSIE
    Eat, please!

John reaches for the dish and begins to serve himself.

    ELSIE
    So, what are we talking about?

Elsie places her napkin on her lap.

    MARIANNE
    (sarcastically)
    We were just discussing the weather.

    ELSIE
    It’s been really nice. I think you brought the sunshine, Marianne.

Marianne stifles a laugh at Elsie’s forced conversation as she serves herself. She composes herself before passing the plate along to Elsie.

    ELSIE
    Marianne, we didn’t get to talk before. How is everything with you?

Marianne glances briefly at Elsie before ignoring her, turning to John.

    MARIANNE
    How’s the job, John? Catch any bad guys lately?

    ELSIE
    Marianne, honestly.

John looks at Elsie and shakes his head slightly - telling her to drop it.
JOHN  
(To Marianne)  
It’s going well! I’m working on a pretty big case right now. Unfortunately, it will take me out of town for a few weeks, but I’m sure you two will get on just fine.

MARIANNE  
(Sarcastically)  
Oh - I wouldn’t worry about us. I’m sure we’ll be thick as thieves before you return.

ELSIE  
John is just being modest. He’ll be assisting on a federal investigation. He’s flying out to D.C. tomorrow to work with the FBI. This case could make his career. What about you Marianne? How are things?

MARIANNE  
(Faking enthusiasm)  
Things are fine, Elsie. Why do you keep asking?

The company takes several bites in silence. The only sound is clinking of the silverware on dishes and the soft chewing of each mouth.

ELSIE  
You know what might be fun? To get a feel for the neighborhood! I could show you around. What do you think?

MARIANNE  
That’s a great idea! I think I’d like to explore a little on my own, if you don’t mind. Besides I would hate to take you away from John on your last night together.

Marianne gets up from the table and makes her way toward the main hall.

ELSIE  
Marianne -

Marianne continues walking without looking back.

(_CONTINUED_)
MARIANNE

Don’t wait up.

She smirks devilishly as she opens the door and leaves the room. The door closes behind her with a soft thud.

JOHN

Well, she’s a gem.

EXT. CONNOLLY’S PUB

Restaurants and various shops line the small side street, all closed and quiet for the night, with one exception. Music and rhythmic bass bump softly from a pub. Above the door, a wooden sign reads "CONNOLLY’S." The soft glow spilling from its windows provide the only light on the street. A small group of drunks mill around outside the door, pints in hand.

Marianne walks up in the same worn t-shirt and jeans as the drunks laugh at a crude joke. The laughter dies down when Marianne walks by. She smiles at the group as she strolls through the door.

INT. CONNOLLY’S PUB

The dimly lit pub is filled with the soft din of conversation, mingled with the sound of clinking glasses and juke box music. Neon signs for various types of beer hang on the wall. Patrons are scattered around, playing pool, laughing in booths, or at the bar.

Marianne walks past several groups as she winds her way to an open bar stool. Here and there, heads turn. Marianne approaches the bar where Peter is seated next to an empty seat, drink in his hand.

PETER, 26, turns and sees Marianne. He smiles and watches as she approaches. Marianne sits down next to him. The bartender walks over.

MARIANNE

Just a beer’s fine.

PETER

This one’s on me.

Marianne turns to look at Peter. He winks charmingly at her.
MARIANNE
Thanks.

Marianne smiles sweetly.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM

A large bookshelf lines one wall, an unused fireplace lines another. A sofa and recliner are situated around the room. A lamp in the corner provides light to the scene.

Elsie sits on the sofa. She is looking out the open window. The sun has set. The soft sound of crickets is beginning. The night is quiet.

John walks through the door, a glass of scotch in his right hand, a glass of white wine in his left. He sits down beside Elsie and hands her the scotch.

JOHN
Now, that wasn’t so bad, was it?

Elsie pulls a stray hair behind her ear and takes a sip of scotch.

ELSIE
No.

JOHN
I think you two will be just fine when I’m gone.

Elsie shakes her head.

ELSIE
No.

JOHN
Just give it time.

ELSIE
John, she’s incorrigible.

Elsie takes another sip as John drinks his wine.

ELSIE
Also - This will be the fourth time this year you’re leaving town.

JOHN
Oh.

(CONTINUED)
ELSIE
Of all the times to leave - you have to leave now?

John grabs Elsie’s hands.

JOHN
This is a major opportunity for our family, you realize that, right?

ELSIE
It’s a major opportunity for you.

John gets up and walks to the mantle, his back to Elsie.

ELSIE
You didn’t even ask me about it.

JOHN
Oh, like you asked me about taking in Marianne?

ELSIE
She’s my sister, John. It’s not a topic for debate.

John clenches his fists in frustration. He turns and takes a step toward Elsie.

JOHN
Your half sister. Who you haven’t seen in four years. Who comes begging at our door the second she can’t afford to support herself?

Elsie puts her glass down and stands up, facing John.

ELSIE
That’s not fair. You know she’s been through a lot.

INT. CONNOLLY’S PUB

MARIANNE
So what brings you to town, mysterious stranger at the bar?

Peter stretches out his hand to shake. He is very charming.

PETER
Peter. I’m here for work.

Marianne clasps Peter’s hand in hers.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

MARIANNE
Marianne. I’m not.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM

Elsie stands as she talks to John. John is once again facing the mantle.

ELSIE
I’m sorry if I would like to see my husband every once and a while. Do you know what it’s like for me? Work work work work work. It’s all you do. And I have to tell all of our friends how you got "held up" or "have a big case". God forbid you ever willingly spend time with me in public.

John turns around. He walks toward Elsie.

JOHN
You’re worried what out friends say?!

John forcibly grabs Elsie’s wrists. He looks down on her.

JOHN
I’m just trying to provide for you. You ever think of that?

John releases Elsie’s wrists, pushing her back.

JOHN
The least you could do is show a little bit of gratitude!

Elsie rubs her wrists where John had grabbed her.

ELSIE
Gratitude!

JOHN
Yes – gratitude! Who pays for the roof above your head? The food in your stomach? The fucking scotch in your hand?

ELSIE
Who pays? Who pays?

Elsie scoffs. She shakes her head.

(CONTINUED)
ELSIE
I want a divorce.

John looks as if he’s been punched in the stomach.

INT. CONNOLLY’S PUB

Marianne and Peter are seated close to one another at the bar. Marianne is leaning in closer as she speaks animatedly.

MARIANNE
So, unemployed and broke, I’m staying with my sister and her perfect husband, who hates that I’m there even though he won’t say anything to my face. And my sister who – let’s be honest – doesn’t really want me there either. Sure, she’s doing the ‘right thing’ and all by taking me, but it’s like she’s a fucking martyr.

Elsie swings back the rest of her drink.

PETER
Maybe we should get you home.

MARIANNE
She just doesn’t like that I’m getting in the way of her picture perfect marriage. They would be better off without me.

Peter coughs nervously.

MARIANNE
You know what? Let’s really piss ’em off.

PETER
What?

ELSIE
Come back with me.

PETER
You’re kidd – you’re serious?

Marianne brings her voice down to a whisper as the full effect of the alcohol finally hits her.

(CONTINUED)
MARIANNE
(Whispering)
Come back. Please.

Peter downs his beer. Smiles. He grabs his jacket off his chair, and throws a few bucks on the bar.

PETER
Let’s go.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM
John and Elsie sit in silence.

ELsie
I’m not happy.

JOHN
I don’t care. We’re not getting a divorce.

ELsie
You’re not happy, either! We’d both be better off.

Elsie gets up and walks across the room. In the next room, the front door slams shut. Elsie stops in her tracks and closes her eyes. Muffled whispers. Giggling. A man’s voice.

ELsie
Shit.

JOHN
She’s your sister.

Elsie remains standing, looking at the door.

ELsie
I’ll handle it.

JOHN
Good.

John rises from his seat and walks past Elsie, on the way out, he turns to her.

JOHN
You’ll have a divorce – over my dead body. And take care of that –

John points to the hallway and the voices.

(CONTINUED)
JOHN
- before I get back.

Elsie sinks into her chair and watches as John walks out of the room. She downs the rest of her scotch, and the giggling noises fade out of earshot.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

The early morning sun lends a soft glow to the hall. Elsie is looking out the window at the driver packing bags into a black car. A small attaché case remains in the hall, leaning neatly against the door frame. John buttons his coat, picks up his suitcase, and gives Elsie a quick peck on the cheek. Elsie does not move.

JOHN
Let me know if you need anything.

He walks out the door. Elsie watches as he gets in the car and finally departs. A door slams upstairs. Elsie turns around. Marianne is walking down the stairs.

MARIANNE
John leave? Thank God.

ELSIE
You. Have. No. right.

Elsie walks across the room and meets Marianne at the foot of the stairs. Her finger is pointed directly at Marianne’s chest.

ELSIE
Is he still here?

Elsie points her finger up the stairs. Marianne crosses her arms.

MARIANNE
Maybe.

ELSIE
I want him out. And the next time you even think about - Look at me - the next time you even think about bringing a stranger home, you can find somewhere else to stay.

MARIANNE
Fine. Maybe next time, I will.
Marianne smirks before she does an about face and walks back up the stairs. Elsie is dumbstruck in her anger. A door slams upstairs. A moment later, Marianne and Peter come walking down, hand in hand. Marianne gives Elsie a defiant look as they approach the bottom of the staircase.

MARIANNE
Peter, Elsie. Elsie, Peter. Now he’s not a stranger. Bye!

Marianne grabs Peter’s hand and forcefully heads toward the door, Peter behind her. Peter looks back toward Elsie on his way out, mouth hung open, lost for words. The door slams shut after he is pulled out of it.

ELSIE
(to herself)
The nerve!

Elsie storms out of frame angrily.

INT. ELSIE’S BEDROOM

Elsie is seated at her vanity. She sees the gardener trimming shrubs through her lace curtains. Marianne and Peter are walking up the drive. She cringes as the door slams shut. She hears voices downstairs. She looks back down and sees the gardener is heading out for the day. She looks at the antique clock. 1:00 pm.

INT. RECEPTION AREA, FBI HEADQUARTERS, DC

The reception area is clean and white. Large glass doors line the entrance to the office. A young professional sits behind a desk to one side of the office, talking on the phone. The room is filled with the hustle and bustle of agents carrying case files, talking on phones, and milling throughout the office.

INT. A BRIEFING ROOM, FBI HEADQUARTERS, DC

A bulletin board stands on one end of the room. Around the room, various officers are seated in folding chairs. John is seated front and center. SPECIAL AGENT KAREN DICKSON, 45, stands at the front of the room. Cropped hair, pantsuit, sensible heels. She is the embodiment of professionalism. She paces in front of her audience, a photo in one hand a push pin in the other.

(CONTINUED)
KAREN
Killian Barnes.

Karen pins the picture forcefully onto the board.

KAREN
Father, Family Man, Churchgoer, and the head of Boston’s largest growing crime syndicate.

DETECTIVE SANCHEZ
Tell us something we don’t know, eh?

KAREN
Thank you, Mr. Sanchez. Allow me to introduce Detective John Whitman, Massachusetts foremost expert on the Barnes’ Crime Syndicate.

John straightens his tie and buttons his suit jacket. He stands up and turns to address the room. He sees GINA, 36, sitting toward the front. Her legs are crossed, showing off her pointed heels and pencil skirt. She smiles seductively at him.

John clears his throat and straightens his tie, preparing to talk.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM

Elsie sits in the recliner, phone in her hand. The setting sun filtering through the windows lights the room in a warm glow. Elsie gets up walks around nervously as the phone rings.

JOHN
(OS)
Hello, you’ve John Whitman. I’m not able to take your call right now, but please leave a message and I’ll be sure to get back to you at my earliest convenience.

Beep.

ELSIE
Hey, John, it’s Elsie. Hope D.C. is treating you well. Everything is great here. Marianne’s adjusting, she’s made some new (MORE)

(CONTINUED)
ELSIE (cont’d)
friends. I think the change has been good for her. I just wanted to touch base about some of the upkeep around here. We’ve had a couple of issues with our landscaping staff. Nothing major, but if you could give me a quick call back, I’d appreciate it. Bye, John... I, um... Bye.

Elsie hangs up the phone and wipes a small tear from her eye. Takes a deep breath. Composes herself.

Fade to black.

INT. A BRIEFING ROOM, FBI HEADQUARTERS, DC

Early morning the next day. The bulletin board remains at one end of the room. Around the room, the folding chairs have been abandoned in various positions. John sits in the harsh glow of florescent lights, lounging across two folding chairs, looking through a folder of case files. Gina walks in, her heels clacking on the linoleum tiles.

John doesn’t look up from the folder. He gingerly picks up a page and holds it out, eyes staying on his notes.

GINA
All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

Gina reaches toward the paper in John’s hand.

JOHN
Here. Hang this on the board for me?

Gina takes the note and pins it to the board. She turns back to John. John has his head buried in the case file. The bags under his eyes are becoming more and more distinct.

GINA
You look exhausted. What time did you leave last night?

JOHN
I didn’t. Too much to do. John motions to the pile of folders and papers stack beside him.

(CONTINUED)
GINA
I think you need a break. At least get out of...

Gina motions to the room, trying to encompass the clinical nature of the office. She drops her hand at her sides, at a loss for words.

GINA
Here.

John looks up at Gina, his head finally lifting from the file.

GINA
Come back to my place.

JOHN
I’m not sure - it’s a little unprofessional.

GINA
You’re sleeping in the briefing room. That’s a little unprofessional. C’mon, I’ve got coffee and a couch. A little more comfortable than these fold out chairs.

JOHN
People will notice if I’m not in the office.

GINA
It’s a Saturday. No one will notice.

John is disoriented and drowsy.

JOHN
What?

GINA
Yeah - it’s the weekend. C’mon, we can look over case files somewhere else.
INT. THE WHITMAN’S KITCHEN

The small kitchen is clean and white. White cabinets and marble counters shine without clutter. Elsie enters, carrying bags and holding a folder in one hand. Placing everything down on the island, she begins to sing as she unpacks the groceries. Her voice is beautiful. Elsie is almost happy in her music.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

Peter is walking through the sunlit hall. Elsie’s voice carries from the kitchen. Hearing her song, Peter walks into the Kitchen to listen.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S KITCHEN

Peter opens the kitchen door slowly. Creak. Elsie stops and turns toward the door. Seeing Peter, she stops.

ELSIE
(coldly)
Oh. It’s you.

PETER
Sorry. I heard you singing. I didn’t mean to interrupt.

ELSIE
(shortly)
Don’t worry about it.

PETER
I’m sorry, have I done something to offend you?

Elsie laughs at the absurdity of it all.

ELSIE
Yes, actually, you have. Screwing around with my sister ring a bell? Under my roof? Real classy.

PETER
I’m sorry. I never meant to disrespect you. And your sister – I’m not trying to hurt her.

ELSIE
You’re not trying to. Doesn’t mean you won’t.

(CONTINUED)
PETER
Maybe I should go.

Peter turns to leave. He is halfway to the door when he sees the folder Elsie placed down. Papers are loosely sticking out of the top. Elsie sees Peter’s line of sight. She hurriedly grabs the folder off the counter, out of his reach.

MARIANNE
(OS)
Peter?

At that moment, Marianne walks through the door. Marianne looks back and forth between Elsie and Peter. She settles her puzzled gaze on Elsie.

MARIANNE
(to Peter)
Are we heading out?

Marianne looks at Peter for a response. Peter continues to stare at the folder Elsie is now holding.

PETER
Yeah. C’mon. Let’s go.

Peter puts his arm around Marianne and leads her out the door.

After they leave, Elsie looks out the kitchen window. The gardener is asleep in the shade. Elsie turns to the island and grabs her phone up from beside the bags. She dials and hold her phone up to her ear.

GINA
(OS)
Hello?

Elsie slowly brings the phone down from her ear and looks at the screen. JOHN WHITMAN. No mistake. This was the right number. She brings the phone back up to her ear.

GINA
Hello? Hello?

A click. A tone. The line goes dead. Elsie stands, in shock, her phone still to her ear.
INT. GINA’S APARTMENT

Gina is seated at her couch. Various case notes are lain out on the coffee table in front of her. John’s phone is in her hand. She puts it down on the coffee table slowly. John’s phone slowly. John walks in the room, coffee in hand. He stops in his tracks when he sees her mortified face.

JOHN
What’s wrong? Are you okay?

GINA
Your phone rang. I figured, could be important.

JOHN
Oh... who was it?

GINA
I think that was your wife. I had no idea - she seemed pretty upset. I think. Maybe she got the wrong idea. About us.

JOHN
Just great. Fuckin’ great.

John punches the back of the couch in anger with his free hand, making Gina jump.

GINA
I’m sorry.

Gina gets up. She takes his coffee out of his hand and motions for him to sit down on the couch. He moves to take a seat.

JOHN
It’s not your fault. It’s just - Everytime! Everytime she does this.

Gina sits beside him.

GINA
You wanna talk about it?

JOHN
Not really.

Gina motions to pick up a case file, getting back to business. As she does so -

(CONTINUED)
JOH
It’s just always - about her. I’m working my ass off, and it’s not good enough. I’m not home enough. Selfish bitch.

John scoffs and shakes his head.

JOHN
And now. You answered my phone. And it’s my fault. I must be in the wrong.

Gina picks up John’s phone instead of a case file. She hands it to him.

GINA
Call her back. Explain what happened. I’m sure she’ll understand.

John places his phone back down.

JOHN
No. No, I shouldn’t have to explain myself. I’ll deal with it later.

Gina watches John nervously as he picks up one of the file folders.

INT. A LOCAL DINER

Marianne and Peter are seated at a window booth. Outside, people can be seen walking by, shopping. WAITRESS comes over to their booth, placing a coffee in front of both of them. She drops a handful of creamers and walks away. Marianne picks up her coffee, black, and takes a sip. Peter grabs a creamer and empties the contents into his mug.

MARIANNE
So. What the fuck’s going on with you?

Peter is opening a sugar packet. He stops and looks up, directly at Marianne.

PETER
Excuse me?
MARIANNE
With Elsie.

Mid-sip, Peter coughs and wipes his mouth with his napkin. He places it back on the table.

PETER
What? Nothing.

MARIANNE
Look I know this is mostly about -

Marianne looks to see two young children in the next booth, staring at her.

MARIANNE
(lowered voice)
S - E -X for us.

Marianne smiles at the two kids dismissively.

MARIANNE
But I still find it a little weird to come down in the kitchen to see you and my sister...

Marianne pauses as she searches for the words.

MARIANNE
...macking it.

PETER
(chuckles)
Macking it?

MARIANNE
Yeah - all hot and bothered or whatever. I’m sorry. It’s just fucking awkward and that’s how I feel about it.

PETER
Trust me, nothing is going on with your sister.

MARIANNE
Whatever.

PETER
You’re insane.

A brief silence follows as they both take a bite of their meals.
PETER
How are things with your sister anyway?

MARIANNE
Are you fucking kidding me?

PETER
Marianne, I’m sincerely interested.

PETER
Things seem weird between the two of you. Everything okay?

Marianne gives Peter a sidelong look.

MARIANNE
Why should I tell you?

PETER
Don’t. I don’t care. We can eat in silence.

MARIANNE
They are weird. With Elsie, I mean. It’s not like we’ve ever been close. Elsie was the perfect child and I was... Well, me. When our dad died she just, she didn’t know how to handle me.

PETER
That blows.

MARIANNE
That’s not even the half of it. Elsie went to live with her mom, who had married some rich banker. My mom married a douchebag.

PETER
Is that why you’re not staying with her?

Marianne shakes her head sadly. At that moment, the waitress returns, placing a plate of food in front of both of them.

PETER
You don’t have to tell me.

(CONTINUED)
MARIANNE
I know, but I will. My mom passed away a few months ago. Suicide.

PETER
Oh, shit. Marianne, I’m... I’m really sorry.

Marianne shakes her head one more time before changing the subject.

MARIANNE
It’s not fair to keep talking about me. What about you?

EXT. OUTSIDE THE DINER

Peter and Elsie are strolling along the walk outside the diner.

PETER
My parents are happily married - 3 dogs. But, I’m their only child. Pride and joy. God, they were so pissed when I didn’t go into a "respected profession." Doctor, lawyer or something.

MARIANNE
What do you do?

PETER
It’s hard to explain. I guess you could say I work in research. Look into competing companies, that sort of thing.

MARIANNE
Sounds thrilling.

PETER
It is.

Peter pulls Marianne in close for a kiss.

PETER
So - your turn. How’s life with John?

(CONTINUED)
MARIANNE
He’s out of town, but from what I can tell he’s a major dick.

PETER
Oh. Everything okay with him and Elsie? She’s... happy?

MARIANNE
Elsie. Happy. That’s funny. I mean, she has the "perfect marriage," but she’s miserable.

PETER
His work take him away a lot?

MARIANNE
He’s away now, but I just moved in. I don’t know.

PETER
For work?

MARIANNE
Apparently it’s the case of the century. You should see Elsie go on about it. It "could make his career". "Federal investigation." Blah, blah, bleh.

PETER
They’re making it federal?

PETER
(To himself)
That’s a big deal.

MARIANNE
What?

PETER
For John, it’s a big deal.

MARIANNE
I guess?

PETER
Elsie sounds like she knows a lot about it.

MARIANNE
I don’t – I don’t know. Why do you care?

(CONTINUED)
PETER
I don’t, I’m just...

Peter’s phone buzzes. He holds up a finger to Marianne apologetically as he digs her cell out of his pocket. He quickly glances at the number. BLOCKED.

PETER
...interested. I’ve got to take this. Work stuff. Might be a little while. Meet you later?

Marianne smiles flirtatiously.

MARIANNE
You know where I live.

Peter kisses her before walking out of earshot. Marianne continues down the street toward her home.

INT. MARIANNE’S BEDROOM

Marianne and Peter are in bed.

PETER
You were - wow.

Marianne gives him a flirtatious kiss on the cheek.

MARIANNE
Thanks.

Marianne and Peter lay in silence.

PETER
I think I’m gonna head out.

MARIANNE
What?!

Peter kisses Marianne on the forehead as he gets out of bed.

PETER
Just some business to take care of.

MARIANNE
At midnight? What the hell kind of job do you have?

PETER
I’m sorry. It’s just work stuff. I can’t talk about it. Do you trust me?

(CONTINUED)
Marianne looks at Peter long and hard as she considers his question.

MARIANNE
Sure. Of course.

Peter sneaks out of the room quietly. After he goes, Marianne closes her eyes and talks to herself convincingly.

MARIANNE
It’s just sex, Marianne. Just sex.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

Peter descends the staircase. A sliver of light illuminates an otherwise empty hall. Peter avoids the light as he makes his way to the kitchen.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S KITCHEN

Peter enters quietly, gingerly shutting the door behind him. Tiptoeing, he begins to look around the room. Finding nothing, he rifles through some drawers until - bingo. The folder Elsie had.

He picks it up and looks at it, as if he’s found a prize. He opens it and lays it on the table. Divorce papers.

PETER
Divorce - shit.

Peter shuffles through the papers, making sure he isn’t missing anything. He’s not.

He gingerly puts the folder back in it’s place and shuts the drawer slowly. He creeps out of the room and back into the hallway.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

Peter shuts the kitchen door slowly and quietly behind him. He makes his way toward the front door, but stops as he passes the light coming through the living room door. He approaches. Through a slit in the study door, the back of Elsie’s head can be seen through the door.

PETER
(To himself)
All right, Elsie, let’s see what you know.
Peter knocks softly on the living room door and enters.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM

As he does so, Elsie whips her head around to see who is at the door. Peter slowly opens it.

PETER
I’m sorry.

Elsie brings a hand to her face, wiping away some tears.

ELSIE
You again.

PETER
Are you -is everything alright?

ELSIE
I’m perfect. Everything’s perfect.

PETER
Well, I see watery eyes and a runny nose. Let me guess – bad allergies?

Peter walks across the room and sits beside Elsie. He places a strand of hair behind her ear.

ELSIE
That’s a really stupid joke.

PETER
Yeah it is. But – you’re smiling, so it worked a little bit. Are you going to be okay?

ELSIE
Yeah.

PETER
Good. So – what’s with the water works?

ELSIE
Why should I tell you?

PETER
I’m a good listener.

(CONTINUED)
ELSIE
That’s not a good reason.

PETER
Fine. I’ll leave you here to cry, and I’ll go home.

ELSIE
No – don’t go. I don’t... I don’t know, I don’t want to be alone.

PETER
Okay.

Peter sits beside Elsie on the sofa.

ELSIE
John’s cheating on me.

Peter places an arm around Elsie.

PETER
I’m so sorry – is this what the divorce papers were about?

Elsie draws away from Peter when he mentions the divorce.

PETER
I didn’t mean to pry – I saw you had them today. You know, my parents went through a pretty bad divorce when I was a kid. But they were happier for it.

All lies.

ELSIE
It’s always about him. He makes the money, why should he talk to me about anything? I just smile and look pretty.

PETER
No. No. You do so much more than that. I just met you and I know that.

Peter kisses Elsie on the forehead.

ELSIE
Great – can you tell my husband that?
PETER
I’m sure he loves you. He just -
takes you for granted.

ELSIE
He’s probably not even on a case -
just fucking this bitch.

PETER
Don’t say that. What, do you think
he just made all of it up?

ELSIE
It’s not like he tells me
anything. It’s "confidential."

A flash of frustration crosses Peter’s face, but he collects
himself.

PETER
I’m sorry.

Elsie looks into Peter’s eyes. Peter breaks eye contact as
he glances at his watch.

PETER
It’s getting late - I should
probable head out.

Peter moves to get off the sofa. As he does so, Elsie grabs
his hand and pulls him into a kiss on the sofa.

ELSIE
Wait. Please stay.

PETER
What about Marianne?

ELSIE
She doesn’t have to know.

PETER
Elsie, I can’t.

ELSIE
Yes you can.

Peter looks towards the sky and sighs. He looks Elsie in the
eyes. He nods. They kiss once more.

Fade to black.
INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM

Peter is asleep on the sofa, in his boxers. His jeans lay crunched up in a ball beside the couch. His sweater is hanging behind the sofa’s back. The living room door is cracked open behind him. Sunlight streams through the open window.

Through the open door, Marianne can be seen walking by, a crumpled up t-shirt in her hand. She glances in the study as she passes. She stops. She looks back in the study. She storms through the door, and sees Peter asleep on the couch. Elsie’s empty glass. His pants lying on the ground.

MARIANNE
You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.

PETER
Marianne. Shit. Sorry – I just didn’t want to walk home last night.

MARIANNE
Looks like you did a lot more than walk. I’m supposed to trust you? What a load of bullshit. I hope Elsie was good company at least.

Marianne throws the shirt violently at his face.

MARIANNE
You left this in my room.

Bending over, she grabs Peter’s jeans. She throws them into his stomach.

MARIANNE
You might need these too.

Marianne walks out.

PETER
(Calling after Marianne)

PETER
(to himself)
It’s not like that.

Peter punches his t-shirt into the couch out of frustration.
INT. THE WHITMAN’S KITCHEN

Elsie is unloading the dishwasher, placing clean plates back into the cabinet. She is singing, her voice a cascading soprano - something out of a fairy tale.

The kitchen door bursts open. Marianne.

    ELSIE
    Oh great - you’re here - I wanted to -

Marianne shoots Elsie a look to kill. She turns around and walks back out the door into the hall.

    ELSIE
    Marianne?

Elsie rushes out of the kitchen into the hall after Marianne.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

Marianne is halfway up the stairs. She runs the rest of the way, tears streaming down her face, ignoring her sister’s pleas from below.

    ELSIE
    Marianne!

Marianne’s door slams. The noise echoes from the upstairs around the hallway, resonating around the hall. A creaking noise captures Elsie’s attention. Peter is standing in the doorway of the living room. Elsie looks at him.

    ELSIE
    I think you should go.

    PETER
    Elsie, I -

He is left alone in the hall.

INT. FBI HEADQUARTERS, DC

John and Gina are gathered in a conference room. The bulletin board, now scattered with case files, has been moved to the center of the room. A scattered bunch of chairs fill the remaining space. John lounges in one as Gina paces. On the board behind her, several different faces and rap sheets can be seen.

(CONTINUED)
JOHN
We’re going about this the wrong way. Of course we can’t find any of these guys -

John motions toward the various faces on the bulletin board.

JOHN
They’re in Barnes’ inner circle. He needs them too much. He’s protecting them.

GINA
Yes - but if we can find just one of them -

JOHN
But we can’t. I’ve been looking for months, the FBI’s resources aren’t helping. We need a different approach.

GINA
Fine then. Enlighten me.

JOHN
We’re going after the big players, right? Well, they’re proving impossible to find and if we find them, they’re not gonna talk. Too much loyalty there. We need to find someone disloyal.

GINA
Disloyalty - in a crime syndicate?

JOHN
Mercenaries!

GINA
What?

JOHN
Mercenaries - you trust mercenaries the least on the battlefield. All the money in the world might get them to fight, but it won’t get them to die. They’re disloyal.

GINA
Barnes doesn’t have mercenaries.
John claps his hands in excitement.

JOHN
Now, we just have to find our mercenary.

GINA
Wait.

Gina rushes to her briefcase, she pulls out the same "Massachusetts" folder that John had on his desk.

GINA
I saw this earlier.

Flipping through the pages, she pulls out a picture.

GINA
Nick Orton.

Gina pins the headshot to the board. We still cannot see the face in the image.

GINA
A few misdemeanors. Nothing to keep him for a while, but enough to put him in a holding cell. Suspected involvement in several of Barnes’ cases. We might be able to get him to talk.

JOHN
Brilliant. I think we found our songbird.

John approaches the board and looks the image right in the eyes.

JOHN
Nick Orton, where are you?

Close up of the image hanging on the board. Peter’s face is staring back at John.
INT. PETER’S ROOM

Peter’s face fades to reveal the actual Peter. He is sitting on the foot of his bed, phone to his ear. His voice is raised in a heated conversation.

PETER
I’m telling you - she doesn’t know anything. We’d get more from one of his buddies, to be honest. The guy’s a pig. Barely talks to his wife, always out of the house.

While Peter talks, he catches site of himself in a mirror by the bed. The bags under his eyes have gotten bigger. Peter’s gaze breaks when the voice on the phone gets louder.

VOICE
What should I tell him?

PETER
The truth. The wife’s a dead end and I’m here awaiting further instructions.

Peter hangs up the phone and throws it onto the bed in frustration.

INT. CONNOLLY’S PUB

Marianne is seated at a bar stool drink in hand. She gestures animatedly while talking to a BAR PATRON at the bar.

MARIANNE
Have you ever been cheated on? Cause it fucking blows.

BAR PATRON
Can’t say I have.

MARIANNE
He slept with my sister. Douchebag. You know what, you’re cute.

BAR PATRON
Thanks, darlin’. You heading out anytime soon?

MARIANNE
Probably. Maybe not. I don’t know.

(CONTINUED)
BAR PATRON
You have a way home?

MARIANNE
Probably. Maybe not. I don’t know!

BAR PATRON
Well, I bet if you and I put our heads together and thought real hard, we could come up with some way to get you back alright.

Peter enters through the front door. Peering through the crowd, he sees Marianne seated at the bar. He weaves his way toward her. The crowd clears. The bar patron is now visible as well. He whispers into Marianne’s ear. Pushes her hair out of her face. Places a hand on her leg.

Peter walks directly up to the man. He places a hand on his shoulder, shoves him off of Marianne, winds up and throws a punch, knocking him off the stool.

Enraged, the bar patron throws a return punch. The two struggle back and forth.

The Bartender goes to the phone behind the bar and dials a number as he watches the fight progress.

Eventually, the squabble is broken up by several other patrons. When the dust has settled, the Bar Patron retires with his friends, angry and out of breath. Peter and Marianne are left alone.

Marianne begins pushing Peter out the door.

MARIANNE
Come on, let’s go. It’s not worth it.

Marianne leads Peter begrudgingly out of the pub.

EXT. CONNOLLY’S PUB

Marianne leads Peter out the door of the pub. They walk down the street, past the laughing patrons on the sidewalk, toward the Whitman’s home.

PETER
Come on, Marianne. At least talk to me.

Marianne shakes her head.
PETER
Listen, it’s not what you think.

MARIANNE
I think you slept with my sister.

Marianne stops and stares defiantly at Peter.

PETER
I did, but I don’t – ughh – I had to!

MARIANNE
Had to!?

Marianne keeps walking angrily. Peter follows close behind.

PETER
I meant that – I care about you, Marianne, not her.

MARIANNE
Oh so you don’t even care about her. You realize that’s my sister, right?

PETER
God, you’re being irrational.

MARIANNE
I’m pretty sure I have every right to be pissed off...

Marianne trails off as flashing blue lights appear behind the pair. A cop car pulls up from behind, slowing down next to them. They stop. He stops. OFFICER rolls down the window and leans over to speak.

OFFICER
Excuse me.

PETER
Is there a problem, Officer?

OFFICER
Have you two been drinking tonight?

PETER
Yes, but I don’t know what the problem would be. We’re not driving.

The officer gets out of his car and walks to where Peter and Marianne are standing on the street.

(CONTINUED)
OFFICER
I got a call not too long ago about a altercation at Connolly’s Pub. When I got there, the suspects had left. Your face looks pretty shitty. Any chance you were involved?

Peter grabs Marianne’s arm and speaks to her softly.

PETER
(To Marianne)
Let me handle this.

Marianne shrugs his arm off.

MARIANNE
Yes, officer. He was involved. And if you think he looks bad, you should see the other guy. Definitely assault, at least. Disturbing the peace. I say take him in.

PETER
What my friend means to say is that it was just a small misunderstanding. I believe it was all settled.

OFFICER
Unfortunately, there was some damage done to the establishment. Nothing major, but I am going to ask you come down to the station.

Peter sighs and closes his eyes.

OFFICER
You have a name?

MARIANNE
Why, yes officer, his name is -

OFFICER
You too, miss, I’m sorry.

MARIANNE
What?

(CONTINUED)
OFFICER
Report says a male and female. I’m gonna have to speak with both of you.

Marianne looks at the officer in shock.

MARIANNE
Marianne McKay.

Peter looks at Marianne.

PETER
I’m so sorry, Marianne.

OFFICER
Name, sir?

PETER
Nick Orton

MARIANNE
What?

OFFICER
No shit. You know, we’ve been looking for you.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM

Elsie is seated on the sofa, scotch in hand, once again looking out the window. The phone rings. Elsie rises from her seat and makes her way to the phone on the other side of the room. She picks it up.

ELSIE
Hello?

INT. HOLDING CELLS

Marianne and Peter are standing in holding cells next to one another. Peter is leaning against the bars of his, facing Marianne. Marianne has her arms crossed, staring defiantly at Peter.

PETER
Marianne, please. Let me explain.

MARIANNE
Why should I? Be honest, is there anything you haven’t lied to me about?

(CONTINUED)
PETER
Yes. My family. That was true. I might've lied to Elsie about them, though.

MARIANNE
What the hell? You’re not helping your case.

PETER
Marianne, I never meant to hurt you. And I was honest when I said I care about you.

MARIANNE
Great! Maybe next time, you can care about me enough not to fuck me over.

PETER
Listen, I wanted to tell you everything, I just -

Peter is interrupted by the sound of the holding cell door opening. Elsie walks in accompanied by the GUARD, looking as put together as always. Peter shies away as Elsie approaches Marianne.

ELSIE
I knew it was only a matter of time.

MARIANNE
That’s not fair -

Elsie holds up a hand to silence Marianne.

ELSIE
Later. Come on, I"m taking you home.

The guard unlocks Marianne’s cell and opens it with a large clink. As he does so, Elsie walks over to Peter’s cell. She leans in close to the bars where he is standing.

ELSIE
You. You can rot in here, for all I care.

Elsie leads Marianne out of the jail cell and her cell shuts once more -

CLINK.
INT. JOHN’S OFFICE, FBI HEADQUARTERS, DC

Glass walls at the front of his office reveal a busy hallway, in spite of the late hour. John is once again looking at a profile on his computer, this time of Nick Orton. The pale glow of the computer screen lights his face in his otherwise dark office.

A knock. John looks up from the screen. Detective Sanchez is peeping his head through the door frame. He has a sheet of paper in his hand.

JOHN
What is it?

DETECTIVE SANCHEZ
We got a hit.

John looks at Detective Sanchez for a moment, allowing the information to sink in. He jumps up from the desk, crosses the room in two large strides and grabs the paper from the detectives hand. As he scans it’s contents, his face falls. He rushes out of the room, Sanchez right behind.

INT. GINA’S OFFICE, FBI HEADQUARTERS, DC

Gina’s office is larger than John’s. She sits at her large oak desk, typing on her high tech computer. She, too, has one large glass wall looking out onto the hallway. Gina looks up just in time to see John coming down the hallway, followed by Detective Sanchez.

He barges through Gina’s door, Detective Sanchez is close behind.

JOHN
We’ve got a hit.

GINA
We’ve got a hit? Where?

DETECTIVE SANCHEZ
Massachusetts.

JOHN
Ipswich.

A flash of recognition crosses Gina’s eyes. She looks at John with concern.

(CONTINUED)
GINA
John?

JOHN
It’s fine.

GINA
Detective Sanchez, would you mind excusing us for a moment?

DETECTIVE SANCHEZ
Of course.

Detective Sanchez exits politely and makes his way down the hall.

GINA
What’s going on?

JOHN
Nick Orton’s been picked up for assault. Bar fight.

GINA
And I suppose the location was just a coincidence?

JOHN
Of course not. It was with Elsie’s sister. He’s been around them, this whole time. We had no idea. I had no idea. God, why does Elsie have to be so stupid? Letting a stranger like that - ugh.

GINA
John, calm down. Look at me. He’s in custody. That’s all that matters. I’ll take a team up tomorrow for questioning. I don’t want you on this - it’s gotten too personal for you.

JOHN
They can’t hold him indefinitely for a bar fight, Gina!

Gina gives John a look.

GINA
Trust me. I know what I’m doing. He’s got no family or close relations. Barnes doesn’t care

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)
GINA (cont’d)
about him. He’s a fall guy if they
need him, that’s it. He’s staying
there for a while.

JOHN
(begrudgingly)
Yes ma’am.

GINA
Warn them what’s going on. Go home.
Make sure they’re safe. But you are
under no circumstances to approach
Orton about anything.

JOHN
Yes ma’am.

GINA
John, I am serious. If you fuck up
this investigation, so help me God.

JOHN
Yes ma’am.

GINA
Go.

John turns and begins to rush toward the door. As he pulls
on the handle –

GINA
John!

John turns around.

JOHN
What?

GINA
Use your office phone - it’s a
secure line.

JOHN
I know that. You think I don’t know
that?

GINA
Just - take care of yourself, alright?

John nods and walks out the door, back down the hallway.
EXT. THE POLICE PRECINCT PARKING LOT

Elsie and Marianne walk to one of the few cars in an otherwise empty lot. Marianne has a phone to her ear, with Elsie trailing shortly behind.

    ELSIE
    Alright. See you soon. Bye.

Elsie hangs up the phone as she opens the drivers side. Marianne climbs in the passenger seat. One door closes after another.

THUD. THUD.

INT. ELSIE’S CAR

Elsie pulls her seat belt on and clicks it shut. She turns to Marianne.

    ELSIE
    John’s coming home.

Elsie starts the car and pulls out of the lot.

    MARIANNE
    What? Why?

Elsie glances at Marianne, concerned.

    ELSIE
    There’s something I need to tell you about Peter.

    MARIANNE
    Nick.

    ELSIE
    Right. Nick. You know this case John has been working on?

    MARIANNE
    The big ‘federal investigation’.

Elsie nods.

    ELSIE
    That’s the one. Well, John is consulting on the FBI’s case against the Barnes Crime Syndicate.

(CONTINUED)
MARIANNE
The what?

ELSIE
Remember all those bodies they found by the South Shore a few summers ago?

MARIANNE
Yeah.

ELSIE
Well, that was Barnes.

MARIANNE
Shit.

ELSIE
John was working there at the time and became somewhat of an expert on the case. The syndicate grew big enough, eventually John became the go to guy. But here’s the thing. Guess who’s an up and comer in the organization?

MARIANNE
No fucking way. God – I can’t believe I trusted him.

ELSIE
He’s been snooping around looking for case files since you guys met.

Marianne pulls her knees to her chest on the passenger seat. The ride in silence for a moment.

Elsie begins to cry.

ELSIE
Marianne, I’m so sorry.

MARIANNE
It’s okay. I know you are.

ELSIE
I was upset about John, Peter was there, it just... happened. I’m so sorry, Marianne, I’m so sorry. I know you think our marriage is perfect but it’s not. It’s not.

(CONTINUED)
Elsie’s voice trails off. Marianne watches as she takes several deep breaths and wipes her eyes. Elsie pulls the car over to the side of the road and continues breathing deeply.

MARIANNE
Elsie, what’s going on?

ELSIE
John’s cheating on me.

MARIANNE
Elsie, I’m so sorry I had no idea.

ELSIE
Neither did I.

MARIANNE
Oh. God, men fucking suck.

ELSIE
There’s more.

Elsie slowly rolls up the sleeve of her cotton blouse. A large, purple bruise shines on her wrist, swelling ever so slightly.

MARIANNE
John? John did this? Elsie, why didn’t you go to the police?

ELSIE
John is the police. They love him at work. They wouldn’t listen to a word I had to say.

MARIANNE
What are you going to do?

ELSIE
I don’t know. I asked for a divorce. "Over his dead body," he said. Sometimes I just wish – ugh.

MARIANNE
It’s not the 1950’s anymore. You can divorce him on solid enough grounds.

ELSIE
Don’t you get it? He won’t let me. Nobody will believe me. Over his dead body...

(CONTINUED)
Elsie shakes her head in frustration. Mid-shake, she stops. She thinks. Looks at Marianne.

ELSIE
Wait. I know how I can get rid of him. I can be free. I have an idea.

EXT. A MOUNTAIN ROAD

Elsie’s car starts back up. However, instead of heading home, it does a U-turn on the empty street, heading back to the police precinct.

INT. HOLDING CELLS

Peter is seated alone in his holding cell. A clanging noise is heard. Marianne comes running into the holding cells. She grabs the bars to Peter’s cell, the guard following her.

MARIANNE
I’m getting you out. You have to come now.

Peter gets up from his seat and runs to Marianne. He places his hands over hers as the guard works on the lock.

PETER
Oh, so you’re talking to me know?

MARIANNE
It’s John. He knows.

A look of terror crosses Peter’s face

PETER
He knows?

MARIANNE
About the affair, yeah.

PETER
The affair?

MARIANNE
He’s pissed. I think he might hurt Elsie. I’m not saying I forgive you - but we need you at the house. I’m scared.

(CONTINUED)
PETER
Don’t worry - I won’t let anyone hurt you. I promise.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

The front door opens in the empty hall, breaking an eerie silence. Marianne runs into the room, followed by Peter. She runs to the staircase, grabs the rail with her hand, and looks up toward the second floor landing.

MARIANNE
Elsie? ELSIE?! Shit!

ELSIE
(OS - from the kitchen)
Marianne?

Marianne runs into the kitchen with Peter close on her heels.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S KITCHEN

Marianne enters the room to see Elsie sitting at the island. The sisters share a small smile and nod before Peter walks in. The sisters hug.

MARIANNE
(Whispering in Elsie’s ear)
Be strong.

ELSIE
Thank God it’s you. I saw the car and I thought John had beaten you back.

PETER
How are you - are you hurt?

ELSIE
No, no. I’m fine. Just -

Elsie looks Peter directly in the eyes. Marianne is watching from near the entrance to see what will happen next.

ELSIE
Peter, he knows.

PETER
And you’re sure John would hurt you over this?

(CONTINUED)
ELSIE
You don’t know him like I do - he, he has anger problems. He always said if I ever - you know - that he would.

Elsie glances over at Marianne before burying her face in her hands.

MARIANNE
He’s done it before.

Peter and Elsie both stop to look at Marianne.

PETER
What?

MARIANNE
He’s done it before. Show him, Elsie.

Elsie takes a deep breath and brushes her hair off her face. She rolls up her sleeve, revealing the bruise to Peter. In the white of the kitchen, it looks even darker than before. Peter gasps.

ELSIE
I went into John’s safe, just in case, he gave me the code for emergencies and...

Elsie turns around and grabs a black handgun from the counter. She holds it out to Peter.

ELSIE
Just in case.

Peter looks at the gun outstretched in Elsie’s hand.

PETER
Elsie, I -

A large bang is heard as the door flies open in the next room.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

John has walked through the threshold. He is breathing heavily. He runs to the staircase and looks up it.

(CONTINUED)
CONTINUED:

JOHN
Elsie? ELSIE!

INT. THE WHITMAN’S KITCHEN

Peter grabs the gun from Elsie’s still outstretched hand.

PETER
(whispering)
Go up the back staircase. Hide upstairs. I’ll talk him down and come find you when it’s safe. Go.

Elsie and Marianne exit the kitchen. Peter turns to leave with a deep breath.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S FRONT HALL

JOHN
ELSIE!

John storms into the living room. Peter enters. He sees John’s back as he exits. Peter places the gun in the back of his jean’s waistband.

INT. THE WHITMAN’S LIVING ROOM

Peter calmly opens the door. John can be seen through the crack. He opens it the rest of the way, his palms raised in a peaceful gesture.

John turns around. He grabs his gun from his holster and trains it on Peter.

JOHN
Get out of my house.

Peter takes a step forward, maintaining his calm pose.

PETER
John.

JOHN
Where is Elsie?

PETER
She’s safe. Let’s just talk about this.

(CONTINUED)
JOHN
Where is Elsie?

Peter takes another step.

JOHN
Tell me where my wife is or so help
me God i will shoot.

Peter is silent.

JOHN
I know who you are, Nick.

PETER
What?

JOHN
Now, you can tell me where my wife
is, and I’ll put you in jail for
the rest of your miserable
life. Or I can shoot. It’s pretty
simple.

PETER
I thought -

JOHN
What, that you’d get away with
it? Where. Is. She?

PETER
Why - so you can knock her around
some more?

JOHN
Tell me where my wife is, you son
of a bitch!

John cock’s the gun. In the same moment, Peter draws the
gun from his pants and fires. John immediately drops to the
ground. Blood slowly pools on the floor around him. He
gasps in pain. Reaching his hand up to his chest, his
fingers come away bloody. The, the life leaves him and he is
still.

Peter drops to his knees, putting his gun down.

PETER
My god, what have I done?

(CONTINUED)
ELSIE
I believe what we have here is a straight forward homicide.

Elsie and Marianne have quietly entered the room. Elsie has a second gun trained on Peter. It is already cocked. Marianne walks slowly toward Peter and picks up the other gun with a gloved hand.

MARIANNE
Wouldn’t want to tamper with the evidence.

PETER
What? I was - protecting you. What is going on?

ELSIE
You see, Nick. Do you mind if I call you Nick? Or would you prefer Nicholas.

Peter stares at Elsie, dumbstruck.

ELSIE
Nick, then. My husband was a bad man.

PETER
Elsie, I -

Peter begins to move.

MARIANNE
Don’t you dare.

Marianne jabs Peter in the back with her gun, warning him to stay put.

ELSIE
My husband was a bad man. He really did hurt me, we didn’t make that up. The only thing I wanted was to be free. A divorce - so simple.

MARIANNE
And you - you’re not too good of a person either. Mob ties, lying to us. Not to mention - screwing both of us over. Figuratively and literally. Tsk tsk tsk.
ELSIE
So - we decided to something about it.

MARIANNE
Something lasting.

Marianne holds her hands to her chest in mock-fear

MARIANNE
(Mockingly)
Please, Peter, protect us. Don’t let John hurt my sister.

MARIANNE
John wasn’t coming to hurt us, he was coming to hurt you, Nick.

Police sirens are heard from a far.

ELSIE
Great. They’re almost here.

Elsie motions to Peter with her gun.

ELSIE
(To Marianne)
Watch him.

MARIANNE
Do you think they’ll go with vicious mob crime or crime of passion?

Peter remain on his knees, head hanging. Next to him, John’s body lay unmoved.

EXT. THE WHITMAN RESIDENCE

Police cars surround the property. Yellow crime scene tape Peter is being led to a police car in handcuffs. Around the property, police officers are taking pictures and milling around.

On the front porch, Elsie is crying as she gives her statement.

ELSIE
John came home to make sure we were okay and Nick had already forced his way in the house. We couldn’t stop him. Thank God I remembered the spare gun in John’s safe.

(CONTINUED)
Marianne stands on the side of the house, surveying the scene. Two officers roll out John’s body in a bag.

ELSIE
(Voiceover)
I didn’t know when Nick Orton walked into my life, he’d change it forever.

EXT. THE WHITMAN RESIDENCE

The police cars and tape are gone. Elsie’s car is in the driveway, trunk open. Elsie stands by the trunk as Marianne brings out her bag. Together, they finish loading the car.

ELSIE
(Voiceover)
He was a son of a bitch, but he was the son of bitch I needed. Marianne, too. We left Ipswich, for good.

Elsie and Marianne climb into the car.

ELSIE
(Voiceover)
John was gone, I was finally free. Peter - well - Peter turned states. Helped arrest 13 other players in the organization. He’s gone for good too. Witness protection. As for Marianne and I? We’re on to our next big adventure. Not sure what that’ll be, but at least we’ll be together. Funny how family works sometimes.

The car pulls out of the driveway one last time.

Fade to black.
Reflective Essay

Committing to writing a screenplay is a little like stepping onto a roller-coaster: a steep uphill climb, a big drop, unexpected twists and turns, followed by a deep sigh as the car finally pulls back onto the platform. In writing Elsie, I experienced it all. There were times I had to step away from my work for days as I waited for inspiration to strike. Other times, the story flowed out of me with barely a second thought. The pace of my writing constantly shifted. By hanging on for the ride, however, I eventually made it back to the platform - safe, sound, and accomplished.

That was my main goal in this process: to make it back to the platform. I quickly learned throughout the course of this project that screenwriting is an extremely introspective process. I had to delve deeply into history, my story, and myself. For me, the introspective nature of screenwriting is the biggest challenge of all. I had to explore myself at such a deep level, and to then use that understanding as a fuel for writing a very public work. However, by recognizing my own strengths, weaknesses, and personality quirks, I was able to better convey the strengths and weaknesses of my characters.

In spite of this emotional challenge, I made it back safely, script in hand. There were twists and turns, but I was able to hold fast. As a result, I improved my creative process, broadened my knowledge of history, and created a world in which to tell a really interesting story – the story of Elsie Whipple.
Getting Inspired

I was fortunate in knowing exactly what I wanted to write about.

Inspiration, I’ve come to learn, can come in the strangest of packages and at the most unexpected times. For me, inspiration was practically hiding in my backyard.

I was born and raised just outside of Albany, NY. For years, our history classes would include major local events: the building of the Erie Canal, Henry Hudson’s exploration, and other instances reaching as far back as the settlement of the Dutch. It was all very textbook and, to be perfectly honest, boring. Until one lesson, 8 years ago, in the 8th grade the classroom of Saint Thomas the Apostle School.

During a unit on local history, we covered the 1827 murder at Cherry Hill, a colorful, if dramatic, chapter in the history of Albany, NY. The events left one woman widowed, one man dead, and another hung for his crimes. Sex, deceit, and murder all intertwined to create a real-life tale that seems more fitting to a Hollywood blockbuster than a small city in Upstate New York. I was sincerely surprised I had not heard of the event before. In fact, most people in Albany haven’t.

Allow me to elaborate. The murder at Cherry Hill begins with Elsie Whipple. Elsie was the daughter of two founding families in the Albany area - the Van Rensselears and the Lansings. Even today, Rensselear and Lansingburgh are two major towns in Albany County. In spite of her family status, she was not happy. She was stuck in a marriage and a life she never wanted to be a part of.
Her life changed drastically upon the arrival of Jesse Strang to the house. Strang was hired as a pair of hands to work on the land. While he became a permanent resident at Cherry Hill, Elsie’s husband, John Whipple, was there less and less. He often traveled for work, leaving Elsie alone and lonely. It did not take long before Elsie and Strang began an affair that would deeply affect everyone in the house, John most of all.

Elsie and Strang carried on their romance, having house staff pass notes between them in secret. Eventually, they began to plot a way out. Together, they planned to murder John and escape to Canada. Their first attempt - arsenic - was unsuccessful. Elsie forced a slave working in the house to slip some into John’s coffee. John came down with an illness, but ultimately survived. As a result, their next attempt was much more drastic.

Strang and Elsie knew this attempt had to be successful. Were it to fail, they would likely be found out. Strang took a shotgun and shot John in the head through a second floor window. As John lay dying, Jesse ran into the woods on the back of the property. He made his way to a nearby store and established an alibi before ultimately returning to Cherry Hill.

By the time he got back, the house was in chaos. Police were investigating the crime. He was questioned, and ultimately confessed. Were it not for his confession, he and Elsie may have escaped without anyone being the wiser. Instead, Jesse would be the victim of the last public hanging in Albany.

Elsie, on the other hand, took a different approach. While Strang was honest about his involvement, Elsie denied everything. How was she to know
what Strang was planning? Here she was, a widow betrayed by her lover. She was already facing the ultimate price for her indiscretion. Her portrayal of the events made her just another victim, rather than a criminal. The court took pity on her, and she was cleared of all charges.

So ends the story of the Cherry Hill Murder. The tale struck a chord with me. Perhaps it was my romantic sensibilities, or my flair for the dramatic, that allowed me to connect with it so well. I sincerely believe, however, it was Elsie. I felt for her. I even identified with her on some level. In spite of her crimes, she provides an example of a strong female character in a time where women were traditionally oppressed. I found her victory to be a source of inspiration.

**Discovery**

My first step in the develop process is what I like to refer to as “discovery.” Essentially, it is the complete immersion into the world of my story, through books, movies, and the simple act of spending time within my own head. To an outsider, this step may seem insignificant, but it was an integral part to my creative process. The discovery phase allowed me to build Elsie’s world within my mind, making it that much easier to populate that world with stories and characters moving forward.

While the story of Elsie Whipple is inspiring, I was (rightly) advised to shy away from writing a period piece. Although an accurate retelling of events was my initial goal, I found this approach to be limiting. I would be forced to worry about anachronisms and historical context. Essential things such as plot, structure, and character would be overlooked. For the sake of both my sanity and
my creative freedom, I choose to develop the story as a modern adaptation. Because of this decision, my discovery process was two-fold.

First, I engaged myself in the world of Elsie Whipple, the 1827 housewife. I relied heavily on research in this part of the discovery process. It was here I found an invaluable resource in my 8th grade teacher, Mrs. Heilsberg. In returning to where I first learned of Cherry Hill, I was able to find both primary and secondary sources that brought a new light to the story. First person accounts, including the written confession of Jesse Strang, gave me a deeper understanding of the events as they unfolded.

I did not stop my research at these resources. The Cherry Hill farm is now the Cherry Hill Museum in downtown Albany, preserved in the same state as it was in 1827. I was able to contact the curator, Beck Watrous, who also provided me with some invaluable materials. In addition to the first hand accounts, I acquired several works written by noted historians on the family history, the events themselves, and even other aspects of the 1800s at Cherry Hill. Suddenly, my story had a background and I was able to further my already extensive knowledge on the subject.

All this research gave me a strong idea of what happened - essentially, the “plot” of the story. In spite of this information, the characters still felt like historical figures - something I’ve read about on the page, not someone I know or understand. In order to fully understand character, I took my research one step further. I went to Cherry Hill myself, where Ms. Watrous gave me a personal tour.
On the tour, I had the unique pleasure of walking in Elsie’s footsteps. I saw where she lived, where John died, and even where Strang stood as he pulled the trigger. Through this experience, the characters of history became living, breathing people. I developed a better understanding for their motivation. Elsie’s loneliness and frustration became real. Jesse’s love for her became real. John’s tragic fate became real.

So ends the first half of my discovery process. I know the plot; I know the major players. I have fully embedded myself within the murder at Cherry Hill. Essentially, I know the two most important aspects to any script: my characters and their story.

The next step was to discover the modern world in which my characters would now live. Modern screenwriters all approach this process differently. Some write short stories or anecdotes within the world they have created. These stories are not intended to be used in the script, but act as a way to further build the environment within their creative space. Others create collages of inspiring images to prompt further inspiration.

I turned to Pinterest. It may sound juvenile, but through my personal “Elsie” Pinterest board, I was able to build a board full of inspirational images, quotes, and other creative works. Elsie’s modern life came alive. In searching for pins, I found a modern day setting: Ipswich, MA. While setting the story in modern Albany would be fitting, Ipswich was perfect. It maintained the quietness of Albany in the past. Modern Albany is loud and busy. Although the location would technically be the same, it is not the same place as it used to be.
Additionally, Ipswich acts further emphasize the emotional isolation Elsie is experiencing in my work. It simply felt right. Once Elsie lived in Ipswich, it was as if she had never lived anywhere else. It simply was where she lived, and I knew I could not set my script anywhere else.

Another common technique among screenwriters is turning to other films for inspiration. For example, I knew I wanted to experiment with film noir. Knowing this, I watched film noir after film noir. Everything from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* to *Chinatown*. I found *Double Indemnity* particularly helpful. It provided a simple, well executed example of a love triangle portrayed in a noir style. Because I was creating a noir-inspired script with a love triangle, *Double Indemnity* provided good examples of structure and plot conventions I might use in my own work.

In addition to exploring works that are consistent with my desired style, I also submersed myself in works with common themes. Woody Allen’s *Match Point*, for instance, explored themes of life, love, and murder. Ultimately, it asked the question “what drives a person to commit murder?” It’s a question I explore in my own work, experimenting with how far I can push Elsie and Marianne before they ultimately break. By watching Allen’s characters go through a similar experience, I had a better idea of how far I could push Elsie and Marianne before they would kill.

Through my steps of my discovery process, I slowly built a world on which to base my script. I had story, character, setting, and style. These four things created a foundation on which to build my screenplay. Without a strong
foundation, I could not create a strong story. For this reason, the importance my
discovery process cannot be emphasized enough.

**Modernizing Elsie**

Now that I’ve built my foundation, so to speak, all that was left to
do was write. It sounds simple enough, but even the best preparation cannot
eliminate every challenge that comes with finally putting your pen on paper and
writing out a creative piece.

I found my biggest challenge came in the modernization of my
story. Above all else, it was my goal to preserve the underlying character of Elsie
Whipple. Although I was placing her in a modern environment with modern
luxuries, I wanted her struggle to remain. Even though I was ever so slightly
changing her name, I wanted to translate her unwavering determination in life into
unwavering determination on my pages.

In modernizing the events, Elsie’s circumstances change drastically. Elsie
Whipple was an isolated housewife, unable to change her life due to the
inequalities women faced at the time. Elsie Whitman, on the other hand, is alive
well after the Women’s Liberation movement. She has the Internet, a cell phone
and other modern conveniences that prevent her from the total isolation Elsie
Whipple felt in 1827. How was I to translate the loneliness and oppression Elsie
Whipple felt, if Elsie Whitman is not facing the struggles?

Simply put, modern Elsie *is* facing the same struggle, but in an entirely
different manner. Where Elsie Whipple was physically isolated, Elsie Whitman is
facing a personal and emotional isolation. She has the Internet, she has her sister,
but she does not have the willingness to open up emotionally. Although not overtly addressed within the script, she is partially unwilling to discuss her circumstances due to the social stigma surrounding them. Gender equality has come a long way since 1827, but stigmas against women and divorce still exist. For this reason, John is unwilling to admit their marital problems and Elsie is unwilling to discuss it with others. Her isolation is a direct result of her oppression.

A Film Noir

At the very core of the story, Elsie is a strong female protagonist who is ultimately able to overcome her oppression and isolation. Playing with the style of film noir gave me a unique challenge, and a unique opportunity. By nature, film noirs are inherently misogynistic. For example, let’s observe the simplest of film noir plots: a man is manipulated by a woman; he is led to do something he otherwise would not do; it is ultimately not his fault, because the woman “made him” do it. After all, who can blame a man for acting out of his own sexual desires?

In this narrative, women are constantly portrayed as the villain. I suppose one could paint Elsie to be the villain in her story. In fact, many who hear the story do. However, I sincerely believe this to be untrue. Although she knew what she was doing, she was acting out of desperation – and that action, however heinous, was her only means of escape. As a result, Elsie is simultaneously the epitome and antithesis of the Femme Fatale.
The Femme Fatale is an archetype character common to film noirs. A Femme Fatale is known to use her appearance to manipulate the male narrator into a dangerous situation. Both Elsie and Marianne conform to this archetype insomuch as they use their sexuality to lead both John and Peter into compromising and even deadly circumstances. However, they break the archetype by being sympathetic characters. Femme Fatales are the villain. Rather than playing the villain, they play the unlikely hero, able to overcome their situation in an unexpected way. Through the characters of Elsie and Marianne, my script is able to conform to conventional film noir style while rejecting traditional film noir themes.

**Themes**

**Female Empowerment:** Thematically, it was a goal of mine to use story arch and the film noir style to emphasize an overall feminist message in my work. By taking a traditionally misogynistic genre, and giving it a pointed theme of female independence, I hoped to emphasize gender inequality both in the real world and the fictional world portrayed in film.

My attempt to observe gender inequality in the modern world can be seen in the Elsie’s story arch. She is repeatedly oppressed by her husband. This is not necessarily the norm in all relationships. However, I attempted to use her marriage as an example of how unequal gender roles cause shift in power and insecurities within a traditional marriage. John consistently tries to assert his power over Elsie. Elsie does little to combat this. As a result, resentment grows. John becomes obsessed with asserting his power over Elsie at any opportunity.
Their marriage shows how conforming to perceived gender roles ultimately causes tension, and even abuse, within the household.

Through my choice of style, I hope to emphasize gender difference as portrayed by the film industry as a whole. Film noir is deeply engrained within film history. It has been around nearly as long as film itself. As a result, I was able to use the genre as a microcosm for the entire motion picture industry.

Another way I hoped to convey my feminist message is by conforming to and highlighting various modern film studies. One aspect of modern feminist film theory to come to light is the Bechdel test. For a script to pass the Bechdel test, it must meet three requirements:

1. It must feature two female characters.
2. They must at some point speak with one another.
3. The conversation must be about something other than a man.

In my attempts to comment on the modern motion picture industry, I made a point to ensure my script passes this test, even though most film noirs do not. Like my use of the film noir style, I used the Bechdel test as a sort of microcosm for modern film theory. In conforming to the rules of this test, I hope to once again further the discussion of female portrayal in movies.

**Man’s Drive to Murder:** A second theme I sought to explore is that of humanity and murder. Generally, individuals seek to conform to social norms. It is partially for this reason gender inequality is so deeply ingrained in our culture. Male dominance has been the norm for centuries. Similarly, it is against social norms to commit grievous crimes such as murder. How, then, does murder
happen regularly? What is it that drives an individual over the edge? I played with several different scenarios throughout the work in attempts to answer that question.

First, I delved into Elsie’s circumstances. For Elsie, she was driven to plot John’s murder by feelings of desperation. As a protagonist, her objective was to get out of an unhappy marriage. Independence was her ultimate goal. She was willing to kill for self-reliance. However, the situation is more complex than that. Why did she choose to plot homicide over other means? While the in depth response to the question is extremely complex, at it’s heart it is fairly simple. Elsie felt she had no other option. John refused to budge in his stance. His obstinate refusal made him as immovable as a brick wall. Because reason or other motivation would not change John’s mind, it was only in John’s death that Elsie was able to find her own way.

After fleshing out Elsie’s struggle, I looked toward Marianne. Marianne’s goals, while similar to Elsie’s, are somewhat more complex. She is not the protagonist. Therefore, she does not have one overall goal that John is standing in the way of. Instead, Marianne as a complex combination of motivations that causes her to act.

On the most basic level, she is looking out for her sister. Through her actions, Elsie meets her goal. However, that motivation in and of itself is not strong enough to entice Marianne to act. One must keep in mind the crime Marianne ultimately commits. Not only does homicide reject social norms, it also is in direct conflict with Marianne’s moral code and comes at a great risk to all
those involved. Jail time, or worse, could face the sisters. Because of this, Marianne’s motivation must be substantial.

When we combine Elsie’s interests with Peter’s betrayal, Marianne’s interest grows. What if she could get revenge on both men simultaneously? Her motives are stronger, but not quite strong enough. That is, until you consider her family history. I placed several allusions to Elsie and Marianne’s childhood within my script. Their father was not a good man. Marianne’s mother faced a pattern of bad relationships. As a result, Marianne is inherently mistrusting of the men in her life. Her affinity towards revenge comes from emotions that have existed since her childhood. In combining all of these motives, it is understandable why Marianne acts as she does. Through her character, I analyzed how one can be motivated by several small, yet significant, factors.

Peter was my final character to experiment with. Unlike Elsie and Marianne, his action was not premeditated. Instead, it was done in the heat of the moment, part self-defense, part defense of Elsie and Marianne. Because Peter did not know of the murder plot, he was truly acting in reaction to the situation at hand. Peter provided me, and my audience, with an example of “warm-blooded” murder, in contrast to Elsie and Marianne’s “cold-blooded” plot.

**Morality:** The final theme I sought to explore is the morality of each character’s actions. Do the ends truly justify the means? While I typically shy away from ambiguity, I made a conscious effort to keep the morality of each characters’ actions ambiguous. There is not “moral compass,” no “voice of
reason” within the narrative. Rather, my goal was to challenge readers and viewers to take on the role themselves.

My process of accomplishing this was two fold. First, I made sure each character within my story had strong motivation. Elsie wanted her independence; John was fighting for the law; Peter was acting in the role of protector; and Marianne was acting for her sister and herself. In doing so, my readers and viewers will sympathize with the characters in spite of the heinous acts each commit.

Second, I made a point for each character to behave in a way that is immoral by traditional social norms. In doing so, I sought to juxtapose my audience’s sympathies with their moral values. The purpose of this is to create internal conflict within my readers or viewers.

By creating internal conflict, my audience is forced to look deeper into the issue of morality within Elsie. In a sense, I attempt to drive them into acting as their own moral compass.

**My Process**

In spite of several complexities that grew as my script was written, my process was fairly simple. To summarize my creative process is:

1.) Find an interesting story to act as a source of inspiration.

2.) Immerse myself entirely within the world of my story during the discovery phase.

3.) Outline my major plot points and character motivation.

4.) Write, write, and write.
5.) Rewrite, cleaning up any major issues and emphasizing major themes.

6.) Complete step 5 as many times as necessary.

**The Takeaway**

Screenwriting, or any creative work, is a bit of a contradiction. It requires a large amount of introspection to create something for display. In this process, I learned an invaluable amount of information about the creative process and, more importantly, myself.

Elsie acts a testament to my process. It was difficult, and times frustrating, but ultimately, extremely rewarding. Here I stand, able to say that yes, I stepped onto the roller coaster, yes, I hung on for the ride and yes, I made it back to the platform.
Works Cited