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### Dark Moon

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*CUNY Hunter College*

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Dark Moon  
by  
Katie Mathews

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Integrated Media Arts,  
Hunter College,  
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2022

May 13, 2022

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Date

Kelly Anderson

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Thesis Sponsor

May 13, 2022

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Date

Andrew Lund

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Second Reader

Dedicated to my mother and father,  
the biggest champions of my dreams.

## Abstract

*Dark Moon* is a short narrative film that follows Billie as she comes home for the weekend to look after her father, Jack, who has recently been diagnosed with early onset Dementia. The appearance of a mysterious woman shines a light on their changing power dynamic, threatening to throw their world out of orbit. *Dark Moon* is a rumination on an ailing man's need for agency and a daughter's misguided attempts to keep her father safe. Inspired by my own relationship with my father, the film explores loss and the ways we try, however foolishly, to fight against it.

*The calling of art is to extract us from our daily reality, to bring us to a hidden truth that's difficult to access – to a level that's not material but spiritual.*

Abbas Kiarostami

## Project Description

Jack is losing his memory. After an alarming incident reveals just how quickly his Dementia is progressing, Jack's daughter Billie comes home for the weekend to check in on him and care for him. But Jack doesn't want a caregiver, particularly not one as controlling as Billie.

As trust erodes and their battle for control intensifies, Billie and Jack encounter a mysterious woman in need of help walking along the side of the road in the dark. Jack offers the woman a ride but Billie is more skeptical, quizzing the woman to verify her lucidity, much like she does with her father. As Billie struggles to find compassion and jockey for control, Jack makes a choice to take back his agency that will change their relationship forever.

This is the synopsis of my thesis project, a narrative short film called *Dark Moon*. *Dark Moon* was inspired by a December weekend in 2019 that I spent with my own father; as he began to show external signs of his cognitive decline due to early onset Dementia,<sup>1</sup> I struggled to find my place in our changing dynamic. After a Saturday of errands and ice cream we came home to find a disoriented woman on the street in front of our house in need of help. My father was quick to

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Alzheimer's Association: The term early onset dementia refers to dementia that first occurs in a person under age 65. The dementia may be caused by Alzheimer's disease or other diseases and conditions. People who have early onset dementia may be in any stage of dementia – early, middle, or late.

offer aid while I was more skeptical, more guarded. We ultimately watched her walk away without a ride and went to bed. But that night stayed with me and truthfully, haunted me: what could my father see through the compassionate lens of his own condition that I could not? How powerful was my desire to keep him safe and how tightly would I try to control our universe regardless of how fruitless it would be in keeping him well?

My father was diagnosed with early onset Dementia in 2015. The disease moved slowly at first; certain types of short term memory were impaired. But my dad spent his life working as a salesman and knew how to put it on, and this extended to coping and covering for his cognitive losses. What felt most significant to me in those early days was the anxiety that came with knowing he would have to be present for the loss of his own mind. The Alzheimer's Association lists anxiety and agitation as main symptoms of Alzheimer's<sup>2</sup> and other dementias, explaining the reasons for such extreme anxiety as: "the person with dementia is biologically experiencing a profound loss of their ability to negotiate new information and stimulus." By 2019 markers of his cognitive decline became more apparent in our everyday lives. I remember an airport pick-up where we searched for an hour to find his car in a seven-story parking garage at Newark airport, and how towards the end of our search he was in tears. By the time I had moved to Brooklyn from New Orleans in September 2019 to be closer to him and my mom, he had lost his driving privileges completely (his neurologist had sent a letter to the DMV<sup>3</sup> sharing his *moderate to serious cognitive decline* diagnosis without informing our family). He had the option to stop

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Alzheimer's Society: Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of young-onset dementia and may affect around 1 in 3 younger people with dementia. However, up to 2 in 3 older people with dementia have Alzheimer's disease. Alzheimer's disease develops when proteins build up in the brain to form structures called 'plaques' and 'tangles'. This causes brain cells to die and so affects functions controlled by the brain.

<sup>3</sup> According to the State of New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission: New Jersey law requires physicians to report to MVC information about recurrent seizures or recurrent periods of unconsciousness or impairment or loss of motor coordination due to conditions such as, but not limited to, epilepsy. Additionally, in 1999, the American Medical Association (AMA) reported that all physicians are ethically responsible for notifying their state motor vehicle department – in New Jersey's case, the Motor Vehicle Commission – if they believe a patient may not be able to drive safely.

driving or retake his driving tests; he failed the written test three times and accepted the loss of this greatest piece of his autonomy.

I began my MFA program at Hunter in the Fall of 2019 and came into the program with ideas for personal projects about my family. That semester I created a related work in an Emerging Media class: a three-panel installation about caregiving and chaos in my parent's home that focused more on my mother. I also took my first screenwriting class that semester. While my professional background has been largely based in nonfiction, my formative years were spent creating fictional characters and worlds on the page and theater stage. I was a part of a youth theater group from third grade through high school where we would use movement and improv to devise original pieces of theater. In high school I pursued creative writing, studying and writing poetry and prose. Creating fictional worlds provided the outlet I needed as a young person to express what was challenging in my life in ways that were healing and constructive. Haunted by the events of that December night with my father and this *woman in dark clothing*, I reached for this toolbox from adolescence, and the script for *Dark Moon* poured out of me.

This is not a film that I could have made without fictionalization given the sensitivity of the subject matter and my father's shifting abilities to consent to being a non-fiction participant. Over the course of my time working as a documentary filmmaker since 2015, and before that, as an ethnographer and researcher charged with telling a "user's" story to inform the design of products and systems, I have experienced many shades of participant agency. I have experienced documentary storytellers—including myself—doing harm in the well-intentioned but ill-conceived pursuit of amplifying a participant's story. I've also studied the history of

documentary and understand that the ethical mores that govern our industry advance over time. Scholar Calvin Pryluck asks, "what is the boundary between society's right to know and the individual's right to be free of humiliation, shame, and indignity?" He makes the point that "the right to privacy is the right to decide how much, to whom, and when disclosures about one's self are to be made." Without the full cognitive ability to remember the decisions and disclosures one has made, how can one fully maintain the right to privacy?

Filmmaker Kirsten Johnson was largely praised for her "bold" and "inventive" approach to telling the story of her father with Alzheimer's disease in *Dick Johnson is Dead*. In the film Johnson continuously casts her father in different scenarios or ways to die, like having an air conditioning unit drop on him while he walks down a New York City sidewalk. The film culminates with her putting him alive in a coffin for a faux-funeral for his closest friends in the name of documentary art. While the approach and the film was met with praise, I believe that time will offer a stronger repudiation of the power dynamics, parental love, and murky cognition that led to what Johnson labeled as enthusiastic consent. I did not want to tell my father's story this way. While there is no law or rule against it, I knew that my father's Dementia would make obtaining consent problematic. Furthermore, the story I hoped to tell was not an accurate reflection of our relationship but rather a projection of my ruminating and mourning: a wish. By using fiction in *Dark Moon*, I could write a different ending, an ending in which Jack, the father character, makes a decision for himself and takes his agency back.

While many films have been made about Dementia and Alzheimer's, I deliberately tried not to watch or rewatch films in the "canon" of Dementia films while working on *Dark Moon*. In part

because I didn't want to fall into cliches or be distracted by approaches other directors have taken, and in part because I have had such a specific experience with my dad, I wanted to tell a story that illuminated aspects of my experience, particularly how the mundane can feel very different, even surreal at times. I was also disappointed with media about Dementia and Alzheimer's that largely depict people with the disease in very advanced stages, perpetuating a myth that the journey from cognitive lucidity to forgetting those closest to you happens overnight. *Dark Moon* approaches the disease from the perspective of a daughter (Billie) who is a reluctant caregiver of a parent (Jack) with the disease. Jack is in the early stages of Dementia, and this is intentional to illuminate how core relationships can be challenged as an individual with the disease begins to lose their autonomy. As I got deeper into script refinement, I worked more closely with Dr. Marc Rothman of the Dementia Spring Foundation, a grantor for *Dark Moon* and for other artists making work that serves the Dementia community. With this relationship, and Dr. Rothman as a technical advisor for the film, I was empowered to look more closely at some of the signs and symptoms of the disease<sup>4</sup> to ensure that Jack's symptoms as represented in the script reflected those common in people with mild to moderate cases of early onset Dementia. After meeting with Dr. Rothman, I felt reassured that my own experience of my

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<sup>4</sup> Dementia symptoms as shared by the Health in Aging Foundation are as follows:

- Remembering. People with early Alzheimer's disease may only occasionally have trouble remembering names, words, or where they put things. This is different from advanced dementia, when the patient may no longer recognize people they are close to.
- Paying attention.
- Repetition or 'looping'.
- Struggling to carry out daily tasks such as shopping, cooking, or taking medications.
- Making decisions, planning, and getting organized.
- Finding their way from one once-familiar place to another.
- Changes in mood, such as becoming more agitated, anxious, or depressed.
- Seeming drained of energy, or as though they don't care.
- Changes in behavior, such as becoming more aggressive or behaving inappropriately. Aggressive behavior may range from cursing and spitting to physical attacks.
- Wandering.
- Having hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't there).

father's early onset Dementia had prepared me for writing the character of Jack. Many symptoms of Dementia are reflected in Jack's character journey in the script (like forgetting, forming coping mechanisms for carrying out daily tasks and planning, wandering, changes in behavior), in Reed's performance (changes in mood, seeming drained of energy), and even in the surreal touches (hallucination or delusions) like the use of vortexes, or visual interludes that portray an abstract jump through time and memory.

The artistic approach of *Dark Moon* is inspired by filmmakers and artists who bring elements of the surreal or unknown into the everyday lives of normal people to illuminate a deeper truth: Filmmaker David Lynch, particularly in his film *Blue Velvet*, uses story, sound, and surreal interludes to cast a pall over the cheerful suburban landscape where his story is set; painter Edward Hopper and photographer Gregory Crewdson use light, framing and perspective to bring beauty and depth to mundane and often lonely American scenes; Filmmaker Maya Deren, particularly in her film *Meshes of the Afternoon*, uses repetition of visuals in new settings to disrupt the linear nature of time and our perception of the world she has created. As I began to refine the script and craft the vision for *Dark Moon*, I was inspired by these artists to use unsettling sound, symbolism, surrealism, and repetition/looping in the cinematic approach. I was also inspired to root the film in an iconic yet fading suburban landscape of commuter towns in northern New Jersey. All of these elements helped me illuminate the constant seesaw between stability and chaos while navigating a relationship through early onset Dementia.

Throughout the film I use symbols to bring to life the sacred. The black diamond earrings Jack purchases for his ex-wife are overall a symbol in the film of Jack's agency, his vitality, and a

fantasy of an alternative life or transformation where he is healthy and his family (or the old ways) are intact. I chose red for the earring box not just for the aesthetic pop of color but because red symbolizes health, luck, vigor and courage (among other things). Black diamonds specifically in the earrings were important to me because some believe they symbolize “transcendence,” connecting to the deep wish Jack has to transcend his current state. The post-it notes were both a more literal symbol of Jack’s coping, and a symbol of Billie’s only access point to Jack’s inner mind and his deteriorating state—ultimately directing her to know the truth about his condition and her place in his heart. Finally, the open road—used throughout the film in vortexes, the meeting with the Woman in Dark Clothing, the ending—symbolizes the unknown that lies ahead, offering our characters the choice to either fear it, accept it, or embrace it. Certain moments I also chose to reach for the surreal or unexplainable. For instance, I had the idea of creating jumps in time that could be created in camera but altered in editing to visualize invisible jumps or lapses of time and memory. Where does someone go when lost in memory and cognitive degradation? I didn’t know the answer and so vortexes became my way of visualizing the unknown. As I will more deeply explain later, in obscuring the meaning of things I sought to situate the viewer in a position of grasping for more information, both to mimic the experience of living with and loving someone with Dementia.

Sound is a key component of unsettling the world of these characters. During production I worked with our sound recordist Ian Berman to record the soundscape of the area—the echoes of New Jersey Transit commuter trains in the distance, the reverberating rumble of the garage door opening and closing in the house, high pitch or high frequency sounds made using distortion and crossed radio channels. In post, I have the honor of working with musician and sound designer

Alex Chappo who has helped me merge the eerie edges of naturalistic sounds with different frequencies, bass sounds and synthetic noises to build toward the climax of the film.

The Northern New Jersey landscape I grew up in of small formerly rural, now ex-urban towns that serve as “bedroom communities”—traditionally advertised for men to commute into New York City to their jobs each day—provided a backdrop that conveyed to me the aging patriarchy, an American promise unraveled. Remembering Phillip Roth’s *American Pastoral*, I wanted to centralize location in the piece. While the locations we chose convey this fading Northern Americana—like the diner, house, road, and even car—plans for a driving montage that would bring to life the area, inspired by the treatment of New Jersey locations in films like the *Big Night* and *Paterson*, did not come to full fruition given timing during production.

Finally, throughout the film, I envisioned repetition or “looping” of actions, symbols, locations and framing of shots—a choice I made to illustrate the experience of loving someone with Dementia, where the same words and questions play on a loop. In the script I examined looping literally, with Jack repeating his desire to get a gift for Billie’s mom (his ex-wife), and other desires. However, beyond the script, I played with mirrored actions, matching shots, and repetition of similar frames between the journey of Jack and Billie to show the ways in which symptoms and outcomes of Dementia envelop the lives of not just the diagnosed but their family and caregivers as well. For instance, I edited the first scene where Jack is lost on the road and the scene of where Billie is looking for Jack on the street similarly to evoke a repetition.

Furthermore, there are matching shots throughout the film with Jack center frame on the road into the diner, with Billie in windows, and with the hood mount framing of Jack and Billie sitting

side by side on their drive juxtaposed with the penultimate shot of the film, with Jack and the Woman in Dark Clothing next to one another. Even the film itself can be read as one large cycle or “loop.” The film begins with Jack, lost, wandering a dark road at night. While not explicit in the film, he has gotten lost while driving—a common outcome<sup>5</sup> for those with progressing Dementia who are still behind the wheel. When we meet him in the first scene of the film, he is wandering in the dark, looking for a familiar marker. Ironically, years before my father’s Dementia had progressed to the point of impairment while driving, a stranger had come to our door very confused, asking where we were (or where he had ended up in his car). It was this fragment that inspired the first scene of *Dark Moon*, where a woman driving by Jack pulls over and asks him where he is trying to go, to which he responds “I don’t remember.” Jack’s inability to drive safely and his desire to do so is a fixture throughout the film, and comes to stand as one symbol of his autonomy. The film ends on the same road where we began, this time with Jack driving the mysterious “woman in dark clothing” into the night. While I won’t prescribe this reading of the film, I love the idea of the film starting at the end or of the film’s structure actually playing as another loop. Looping and repetition throughout the film can call into question what parts of what we are seeing are real and what parts are fragments of memory, hallucination, or even fantasy.

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<https://www.helpforalzheimersfamilies.com/learn/the-basics/alzheimers-faqs/driving-and-dementia>

*The enemy of connection is control.*

Brené Brown

There is so much about the mind and this disease that cannot be explained or controlled. Edoaurd Glissant’s concept of opacity has been fundamental in informing my approach to writing and making the film. Glissant describes opacity as “a diversity that exceeds categories of identifiable difference.” Opacity is not about seeing “otherness” by making it transparent, but rather by accepting the lack of clarity and confusion. Opacity seeks to go beyond normalizing or even assimilating cross-cultural differences. And while Glissant was responding to a post-colonialist world and particularly members of the African diaspora that had been oppressed across the Global South, I am extending this theory to the difference of disability, in this case that of the neurological condition of Dementia. There is so much fear of the unknown—and maybe fear of death—that we carry and use to stigmatize those with Dementia and Alzheimer’s. There is no controlling the outcome with this disease, and stepping more deeply into opacity with both the narrative resolution as well as in my process of working with creative collaborators on this project was fundamental to its success. There has been a strong urge or narrative inclination to seek to clarify the *Dark Moon* script and to suggest cutting parts of it that can’t be easily explained. It’s been important to me in bringing to life a piece of art about a man with Dementia’s “right to opacity”—the right to make decisions and take agency for himself—to not over-simplify or make overly literal the surreal or symbolic elements of the film; in trying to over clarify, one is trying to control something that is uncontrollable. I similarly learned a valuable lesson throughout the process about my own desire for control and the ways in which it can get in the way of connection and creativity for myself and my teams. Often in my projects I

can be impatient with what I perceive as slowness or stagnation while also feeling protective in the face of others' passion for the project for fear of losing control. During the process of making *Dark Moon* I learned to jump into the flow of momentum when writing, fundraising, and attaching cast—"don't say no" became an unofficial motto for me, as did accepting disappointment as a natural part of the process which kept us in a flow state. In the past I have led by telling not showing. During pre-production and fundraising, I gave team members inspiration and pep talks instead of pressure. During production, when things went off the rails, I stayed deeply focused and on task, not micro-managing but rather using my composure to set an example of what the set should feel like. Like Billie, I learned to accept the unknown and let go of the uncontrollable, and in this project it served me well.

The film began to truly take flight in June of 2021 when a friend and Broadway actor, Nick Mills, asked to read the script for *Dark Moon*. He was passionate about the story and offered to help me set up a script read with actors that he cast. That script read was incredibly powerful to see the script on its legs and for Nick and I to realize its true power beyond the page. Nick asked if he could produce the film from there and also brought in Michael and Mikaela Izquierdo of Sunnyside Films to help produce the picture with him. They comprised the producing team along with the extraordinarily talented line producer Zach Fleming. Nick had a wild idea: what if he asked Reed Birney, whom he had acted with in the Broadway run of *The Humans*, to star as Jack in the film. Reed read the script and signed on immediately, and another idea emerged: Reed suggested we reach out to actress Marin Ireland to play Billie. Nick reached out and Marin said yes. Without fully comprehending it at the time, I now understand this casting choice would set us up for success; Reed and Marin are close friends and have a supportive working relationship

with built in chemistry and rapport that makes their relationship as father and daughter that much deeper on screen because of the tenderness and care that already exists between them. I had met Renata Friedman in the first script read and loved her interpretation of the Woman in Dark Clothing. The final pieces of our puzzle came into place with the casting of actor-writer Lauren Whitehead as Teresa, the woman who pulls over to help Jack in the opening scene, and actor Lizbeth McKay as the diner waitress, Ronnie.

In October 2021 we held a script read for the attached cast. I had previously met one-on-one with each cast member to discuss their characters and script questions. The script read turned into a big discussion and feedback session on the script, with the actors diving in to ask questions and give notes on how to make the film even more believable. The diner scene was a particularly tough nut to crack as it needed to do a lot of expositional work in a subtle way while also establishing Jack and Billie's relationship and Jack's disease. While I wasn't expecting this amount of feedback from actors at the script stage, it was an important step in the process in gaining trust and buy-in, forming a shared language around the world of the characters, and pushing the script forward. I have some friends who are directors who refuse to take feedback on a script from actors. I definitely believe that would have created a negative environment where our experienced senior actors felt they were not being heard by their freshman director. However, it became clear in rehearsals that I also needed to respectfully and tenderly hold my ground so as not to lose our actors' faith in my ability to lead. I could never give a perfect answer to every one of their questions, but I could comport myself in a way that communicated that the buck ultimately stopped with me. As someone who has always wanted to be liked, this was a great exercise in realizing that being liked by my actors had no consequence on the outcome of our

work together—rather, earning their respect by giving it in equal measure was key to our creative collaboration.

I used several forms of visualization and collaboration with my Director of Photography to create a plan in pre-production that would bring the film to life. I began pre-production by storyboarding the film on post-it notes. I then used reference websites like Film-Grab and Shot Deck to compile references for each scene. From there, I compiled a master shot list spreadsheet that would later be a tool used by our 1st Assistant Director. These resources became vital communication tools with Director of Photography Mia Cioffi Henry. I wanted to work with Mia because beyond being a brilliant cinematographer she has a background in acting and understands story and performance deeply, and is the Director of Cinematography at the Graduate Film School at NYU; I knew her confidence and expertise would help support the professionalism on set, and that I could find in her a true collaborator. Throughout pre-production, Mia and I would meet once a week at a cafe near her home in the West Village to walk through the script and discuss the vision. She pushed me to examine not just the beauty of a shot but what it did to advance the story and to think deeply about authorship and perspective; I began to ask if shots were gratuitously from the “director’s perspective” or integral to the world we were creating. With Mia I created a map of sorts that would guide me in conversations I had moving forward about production design, lighting, locations and more.

The diner scene continued to be a challenge. Our initial location dropped out and other locations that could have worked refused to close down for production because our scheduled shoot time on a Friday morning was a prime time for their business. Producers Nick and Michael found a

bistro in the town of Ridgewood that was closed during the day but the location was white and sterile. Three weeks out from the shoot we still didn't have a location and the producers were increasingly pushing me to settle for the location they had found. On weekends in January I found myself driving around nearby New Jersey towns looking for a diner that could work. I remembered a local chinese restaurant called Baumgart's that I went to as a child that was outfitted like a 50s or 60s diner, and didn't open until midday on weekdays. The price Baumgart's wanted was higher than we wanted to pay and the manager was initially uncomfortable with us using their electricity, being paid by check, and demanded we order an expensive lunch from the restaurant. They had us over a barrel, and it was ultimately one of our biggest expenses. However, my persistence and vision won out and the diner scene sets an important aesthetic tone for the film. With the diner, I learned an incredibly valuable lesson about the importance of believing in and advocating for my vision as a director; and that if I wasn't willing to fight for something that was important to me, it wouldn't happen.

Lessons of leadership were also central to my experience directing the film during production. The magic of narrative filmmaking is that so much time and preparation leads up to a few short days of filming. In those days you are completely "in the moment" and every person and every minute counts. In my non-fiction filmmaking, leadership in directing has at times felt like a Sisyphean task, slowly rolling a boulder up a hill and remaining steadfast in the face of disappointments, setbacks, and scarcity. Directing and leading the narrative filmmaking efforts on *Dark Moon*, however, felt different. Leadership felt like an act of commitment to my own vision and a responsibility to set the tone for the mood of everyone else around me. When on the afternoon of Day One we were hours past our schedule and our First AD began to get quiet under

the pressure, I understood that it was my responsibility to stay calm and make strategic cuts to many of our shots and set-ups so we could make our day, while also reassuring the actors that we would have what we needed to make a strong film. Sleep was impossible throughout the shoot and I woke up on Day Two of production feeling gloomy about all the shots we had lost on Day One. I knew that I could not let my self-doubt linger or share it with other members of the crew because it would infect the confidence of everyone on set and could even affect our progress. I turned to meditation and it was an incredible tool for me throughout shooting to calm my nerves, stay positive and center myself. Meditation on Day Two shifted my perspective and I went into our afternoon and evening shoot incredibly focused. For the scenes in the house, our most emotional performances, I was able to reflect an energized but focused calm that offered the actors the platform they needed to feel safe to go to the most vulnerable places. Day Three was our last day of shooting and our true overnight, outside on a dark road in near freezing weather. The first half of the day went beautifully, but as the exhaustion of a 12 AM lunch set in, one of our actors grew impatient and obstinate, the producers began to panic, and in the face of criticism from the crew our 1st AD broke down. Because the crew and cast was spread out between a nearby house as our warm indoor holding area and a road guarded by a police check-point, I couldn't do the same check-ins with our crew and cast as I had in previous days. Instead, I tried to remain patient and accepting of our slow set up and to be efficient with each take, knowing that at any point one of the many factors keeping us spinning could turn us in a new direction and out of balance. That night the production felt akin to a spinning top, and I tried my best to hold the center.

I feel proud of the performances and footage that came out of production but I also feel proud of the overall mood on set. We definitely overcame challenging obstacles in three short days: our hair and makeup person tested positive for covid the morning of the first day (actors did their own hair and makeup throughout the shoot), our gaffer had to be replaced days before shooting with someone who normally works as a swing, our production designer was in a car accident and sustained a head injury a week before shooting, the spots we had blocked off with an expensive permit for the parked car scene in front of the jewelry store were ignored by local community members and completely filled by the time we arrived to shoot, and we had a torrential downpour during load-in the morning of Day One and a winter squall during load-in for Day Two. But even with all that went wrong and the moments of stress that it caused, the mood on set was one of friendliness and care. Many of the crew had worked together before, as had Reed and Marin, and there was a lot of laughter and joy between setups and on breaks. On Day Two when we shot in my family's home, there was even a sense of sacredness to the work. It's the day that captured the end of the film, when Marin and Reed both give their most emotional performances and being in that space collectively, there was a palpable sense of intention about the work everyone was doing.

We finished filming on February 21st and I took a break to rest. In early March I began to organize footage and sync sound. In mid-March as I endeavored to begin post-production on the project in earnest, my father was admitted to the hospital and quickly diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that had spread to his lungs, liver, and a collapsed gallbladder. After months of asking doctors why he was losing so much weight and being told it was due to his accelerating Alzheimer's disease, by the time we got an accurate diagnosis, we lost him just a week later.

I was fortunate to have a friend, editor Paavo Hanninen, who offered to help me do a first pass on assembling the film. This editorial support provided me time I needed to grieve and get back on my feet. While I wasn't initially sure if returning to work on *Dark Moon* so quickly after my dad's passing would be good for me, the film called me back. I returned with a renewed sense of passion for the project; for me, there was no greater salve for grief and loss than working on a film inspired by a weekend my dad and I shared together.

Unlike editing non-fiction where one is often finding the story in the edit and the process of editorial can take years, I found editing *Dark Moon* to be a fun and dynamic process of creative problem solving. We didn't get all the setups we wanted for every scene due to time constraints so how might we make the best of what we did have? How could I look at footage I didn't think was useful or valuable and recycle it in new ways? How could the choices I make support or break the intimacy of the world between our father and daughter characters? Shots I loved—like the two-shots of Billie and Jack from the hood mount in the parking spot and on the road before coming upon the Woman in Dark Clothing—ended up not working in the film. While they brought a sense of visual repetition they also pulled us out of the interior space the two characters are inhabiting, and the shots ultimately detract from the impact of the scene where the Woman in Dark Clothing punctures the perceived safety of the world shared by Billie and Jack.

I always knew that sound design was integral to the film and that it would replace a traditional score. I was introduced to the wonderful Sound Designer and musician, Alex Chappo, and he has embraced and elevated this vision by blending tones and using distortion on songs from the 40s and 50s into the ambient soundscape of scenes to augment the feeling of Jack's familiar world slipping away. I scoured old films from the 60s for references for our graphic designer, Lauren

King, and she created a graphic language for titles and credits that evokes classic film from the US, France and Italy from that period but also has a modern, even eerie twist with a glow effect and a combination of sans and serif fonts. Finally, an old editor friend of mine stepped in to help with color grading, and I shared with him a vision of saturated primary colors —particularly reds — and we have begun to have the opportunity to explore giving the digital files a texture and warmth akin to film. It truly takes a village to make any film and I have been blown away by the way this project has attracted some of the most talented and generous contributors and collaborators. In post-production, many contributors—like our sound and graphic designer—were eager to get into working in film and deferred pay indefinitely so that they could have the chance to use the work for their portfolios. We have fundraised step by step and were able to compensate everyone fairly for their work on production—except for myself and two producers—and our hope is that we will be able to take this cut to our initial funders and raise a bit more so we can compensate our post-production contributors as well.

As we move forward with the film, I will use the cut I screen for the thesis presentation to get final feedback on the edit, color, and sound design. From there we will use the cut to raise finishing funds and spend the summer finalizing the film—in particular mixing and mastering in a professional studio and getting our DP’s input on color. We are also working with a music supervisor and will use the time to begin to prepare the film for screening publicly, both in negotiating music licenses but also in preparing the materials, social media presence, and reaching out to shared connections at film festivals.

My goals for the distribution of *Dark Moon* connect to my favorite part of documentary filmmaking—the chance to generate dialogue about a contemporary issue with a film. I am making this film to reach those at the beginning of their journey with early onset Dementia and their families, to acknowledge the agency and capacity those newly diagnosed have to contribute to society, and to recognize the challenges for caregivers, often family members, who need care too. I also believe this is an important film for a broader group of aging people and their loved ones. So many people will experience Dementia and Alzheimer's<sup>6</sup> either personally or through loved ones but because there is such a fear and stigma around the disease there is an isolation and denial of its reality and many forms. Stories can help change that; particularly stories where the diagnosed is portrayed as someone who still has agency and dignity.

Our first goal is to premiere the film at a prominent film festival and then to pursue widespread distribution with a streaming on-demand distributor or a distributor with a built-in audience of aging members, like AARP's Movies for Grown-Ups platform. This strategy provides the film with buzz and reach. From there, we will partner with Dementia and Alzheimer's support organizations, aided by our relationship with the Dementia Spring Foundation and Dr. Marc Rothman, to screen the film and facilitate live discussion amongst an audience afterwards. These screenings will be directed at audiences of those newly diagnosed with early onset Dementia and their family, loved ones, or caregivers. This group is often left out of stories about Dementia as media portrayals of the disease often ignore earlier stages of Dementia and the questions and dynamics that moment brings up. These screenings will offer these communities a cinematic

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Alzheimer's Association, **10% of all people over the age of 65** have Alzheimer's disease, and as many as 50% of people over 85 have it. The number of people with the disease doubles every 5 years beyond age 65.

gateway into dialogue around issues such as shifting interpersonal relationships, loss of agency, and changing needs and desires with Dementia.

The creation of *Dark Moon* has been the most powerful artistic experience of my life. In the process of making the film I have grown as an artist, a leader, and a daughter. It has given me confidence in my abilities as a writer, director, and collaborator. It has given me a window into a new form of filmmaking, and it has been an opportunity for healing in the face of my own father's passing. In writing and working with others to bring a vision to life, I feel empowered to turn challenges into beautiful experiences.

Since my father's death, I like to imagine him not as he existed in his final days but expansive, full of possibility, encouraging the same in me. Free now from the confines of a declining mind, he has autonomy and a mischievous grin. There's something shared in this version of my dad, the world we created with *Dark Moon*, and the performance of Jack that Reed Birney brought to life. In creating *Dark Moon*—in working with actors and in stretching my father and my story beyond ourselves—I have been able to access something expansive and universal. I feel I understand Kiarostami's words now more than ever—that “the calling of art is to extract us from our daily experiences and bring us to a hidden truth that's difficult to access”—through *Dark Moon* I was able to access the hidden truth that to love someone is to let them go; to move past the boundaries of “the material” with that love and to access “the spiritual.”

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