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# SO WE DEPART

Fraaz Khan

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Film & Animation

School of Film and Animation  
College of Imaging Arts & Sciences  
Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, New York  
August 12, 2017

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Abstract**

*So We Depart* is about a broken family that is abruptly reunited through a death in the family. The story is seen through the eyes of Furqan, a young Pakistani-American boy, who arrives with his mother Farida at the hospital after his grandmother's stroke. They meet with Farida's brother Akthar, whom she hasn't seen in a long time. At the bedside of their dying mother, the two estranged siblings struggle to find peace with one another as they blame each other for not taking better care of their mother. Furqan observes their relationship and contemplates how he will inevitably be at the bedside of his own mother.

## **ORIGIN**

The original idea for this film stemmed from what I experienced on the night of my grandmother's death. The significance of this night came not only from the death of a family member, but also from the effect that it had on the rest of the family. As one of the youngest children of my family, I've had a great opportunity throughout my life to observe the behavior and interactions of the adults around me. For many years, I've noticed a constant underlying tension between my mother and her siblings, often leading to long periods of silence. This all changed on that night in the hospital. I found it so interesting to see how it took a death in the family to finally bring everyone together. My mother and her siblings gathered together for the first time in years to be with their mother in her remaining moments. I was even meeting some of my uncles and cousins for the first time in my life. It was a very heartwarming experience, as we went through the funeral services together and caught up on each other's lives in the process. And then it was over. Everyone went back to their separate lives, and the bonds that we had quickly formed during that weekend slowly faded away. The tension and resentment between my mother and her siblings started to grow again, leading to another period of silence.

This is the atmosphere and feeling that I wanted to recreate for my thesis film. At the center of the film, there would be the story about a broken family of estranged siblings who are abruptly reunited by their dying mother. All of the tension that has been built up over the years, and the things that have been left



unsaid, would be released in bursts throughout a long night in the hospital room, as they struggle to cope with their mother's death. Additionally, as members of a Pakistani family who have lived most of their lives in America, I wanted to explore how religion and other elements of their culture would play a role in either giving the siblings some spiritual guidance through this tough time or breaking them further apart. All of this would be presented through the point of view of a young teenager in the family. In a way, he is a surrogate for myself. Through this perspective, we would get a sense of how the younger generation may learn from the mistakes of the elders. I also wanted to use this character to see how a younger member of the family would experience death, especially in relation to his own mother. All of this would lead to the family members finding some level of peace with one another, but we would still get a sense that it is only temporary.

## **WRITING THE SCRIPT: PART 1**

Throughout the script writing process, there were always two aspects of the story that I needed to keep constant. One aspect was that the events had to unfold and be seen through the young protagonist Furqan's eyes. This is a concept that I had originally planned to introduce in a dream-like sequence at the start of the film. The scene would begin by looking down over a group of men lined up together for Friday prayer in a mosque. As the imam is reciting the prayer, we see a small boy running through one of the rows of men. We then come down to ground level with the boy as the men tower around him. He looks up to each of the men as he runs by, but none of them pay any attention to him. Finally, he stops in front of a man

who he seems to recognize. This is presumably his father. The men suddenly bend down towards their next position in the prayer, and we see the boy's eyes engulfed into darkness. This would then fade into another pair of eyes – Furqan in present day. From this point on, I wanted to have Furqan constantly observing everything, whether it was watching his mother crying and praying to herself, or seeing the adult siblings argue with each other.

Of course, this introductory sequence wasn't in the final film, but it was meant to represent many themes that I was interested in fitting into the background of this story – specifically, religion and culture. One of the uncles in the story named Akthar, based on my own uncle, is a man of faith – not just born into the religion, but an actual practicing Muslim. Unlike his siblings, he experiences his mother's death in a much broader spiritual manner, according to the teachings of his religion. Meanwhile, his siblings are experiencing the situation much more in the moment. I wanted this disconnect in relation to faith to create friction between them. While Akthar would be trying to get his siblings to recite passages of the Quran for their mother, they would simply just want to sit silently by her side. Later in the story, I wanted the siblings to finally be able to connect on a more emotional level when Akthar talks about his inability to get his mother a new cassette player before she died.

With Furqan as the protagonist, I felt that we should also identify more with his mother, Farida, among the rest of the siblings. Like my own mother, Farida is a single mother, separated from her husband. Through the dialogue with her

siblings, I wanted to give a sense that this is and has always been a very tense topic of discussion. Given their old-fashioned cultural values, Farida's brothers – especially Akthar – see her as a weak woman who isn't properly raising her children, given the absence of a father figure. This would have connected to the introductory sequence in which the younger Furqan is searching through the rows of men for a familiar face. Even if it didn't relate to a major plot point in the story, I wanted the lack of father to be part of Furqan and his mother's history in some way.

One of the first suggestions given to me by my committee members was to change the setting of the story from a hospital to a house, since a hospital room wouldn't be that visually interesting and would actually be quite difficult to obtain for filming. A house could also provide greater opportunities for staging, given the extra spaces for the multiple family members to interact in. This suggestion made me think of the Johnathan Demme film *Rachel Getting Married* (2008). It takes place mostly in a house as a bunch of family and friends prepare for a wedding. It has a very home-movie feel and manages to simply observe the family dynamics, introducing us to multiple characters and giving a sense of their background. I thought that I could maybe adopt this kind of documentary style for my film, which would casually introduce the viewer to each family member. As the family members arrive and gather at the house, the camera could float around them, just picking up bits of conversation here and there. This would allow me to subtly put in dialogue relating to their culture and religion, without making it at the forefront of

the story. I was also told to watch the films of Robert Altman such as *Short Cuts* (1992) to see how to manage a story with a large cast of characters.

Another aspect of the story that I always wanted to remain constant was that the family would finally come together and find peace with one another in the end. Much like the real life event, I wanted to have the characters reach a point where they could finally put their differences aside and focus on their shared memories of their mother. For the majority of the story, the family members would be very separated in different areas of the house. The ending of the film would have them finally grouped together as their mother is taken off life support. My committee members mentioned that not only has this type of ending been shown many times before, but it would also be a much too neat and happy way to end a short film. However, I thought that a key difference would be that we would get a sense that this reunion was sadly, only temporary. Through the characters' dialogue throughout the film, and even after they say their final goodbyes to their mother, we would see how this family doesn't have the strength to stay together after this event. Once again, they will slowly begin to drift apart and only reunite when the next family member passes away, creating an endless loop.

## **CASTING**

Casting the film was quite a struggle. My committee members warned me from the beginning that it would be very difficult not only to get Pakistani/Indian actors, but also the right actors for the roles, and they were correct. Early on (but still not early enough, apparently), once I completed a first draft of the script, I

posted casting notices online on *Backstage*, *Craigslist* and *Facebook*, looking for actors from Buffalo to New York City. I felt that a smaller radius would help keep the travel costs down later on. Unfortunately, the actors that submitted through *Backstage* were completely unfit for the roles as I had envisioned them. I realized pretty quickly that the age ranges that I needed for the characters were seemingly impossible to find amongst the available Pakistani/Indian actors online. For the main roles, I needed a teenage actor around 15-18, a few middle-aged men and women around 40-50, and a much older woman to play the grandmother. All of whom would be expected to be able to speak both English and Urdu. On top of that, I wanted to have a bunch of extras (also Pakistani/Indian) who could help provide a realistic atmosphere of an actual family gathering in the house. The majority of the actors online were in their 20s-30s and looked like models. The younger actors were also way too young, around 8-10 years old. I started to get a little worried. I was scheduled to go into production in just a few months and didn't have any casting options at the moment. During my next committee meeting, I was rightfully advised to consider changing the ethnicity of the family, since this is a universal story that could be told through families of any ethnicity or culture. Now I was even more worried. While this was clearly true, I still felt that I could only authentically tell the story through faces and people that I related to and understood.

As a result, I upgraded my search for the actors. I went back and forth in the Buffalo/Rochester areas, putting up casting notices at the local mosques, Indian

restaurants and grocery stores. Through one restaurant owner in Buffalo, I was connected to a non-profit organization in the area called WNY Muslims, and after a brief meeting with one of the coordinators, my casting notice was sent out through their Facebook group. A few days later, I was contacted by a local Pakistani actor. We met and had a long chat about the film and his background in the film industry back in Pakistan. Unfortunately, while I was hoping to find actors to play the uncle characters, this man was much older, closer to the age of the grandmother character. In my desperation, I wondered whether I could have him play either the eldest of the brothers in the film, or simply change the grandmother to a grandfather. This is a change I would have been very hesitant to make. About a week later, before I could come to a decision, the actor emailed me asking for \$2000 for his two days of shooting. So that was no longer an option.

Around this time, I started “street casting”. I went back to the mosque and certain restaurants frequently, on the lookout for the right faces in the right age ranges. Particularly at the mosque, there were plenty of faces that seemed fit for the uncles, but getting their interest in the project was very difficult. With a freshly printed casting notice in hand, I approached each of them as soon as prayer would end and gave them my quick two-minute pitch: “I’m a film student...Pakistani family...grandmother dies...need actors to play the uncles...”. Not many of them were interested, and they were even less impressed when they tried to communicate with me in Urdu, and I could barely keep up with them. Often, they would

immediately point me in the direction of a friend of theirs who they felt would be perfect for the role. That would never work out either.

One day at the mosque, after a couple of the usual rejections, I noticed an elderly woman being escorted out of the elevator with the help of a younger woman. I realized that I also needed to be looking for women to play the female roles of the family. I approached them with my two-minute pitch and to my surprise, they were both very interested in the project, especially the older woman. I thought she looked perfect to play the role of the grandmother and she agreed. I also figured it was a good sign that her name was Farida, the same name as the mother character. After a few days, I went to meet with her to talk in further detail about the film. We ended up having a fascinating conversation about her life - growing up as a very independent woman in Pakistan, riding motorcycles and flying planes against her parent's wishes, and eventually becoming an English professor at the University of Rochester. Despite her somewhat rebellious nature, she was still very religious and was a devoted Muslim her whole life. She was living in her son's house at the time due to some medical issues, and would spend most of the day by herself, either reading Quran, praying, or occasionally walking to the park with the help of an aid. It seemed like I had finally found my grandmother. I called her a few days later just to check in, but her daughter-in-law picked up the phone instead. I found out that Farida had Alzheimer's and her condition was getting worse. Her son explained that she would not be available to participate in the film. It was a strange situation, knowing that I was asking his mother to play a role in a story

that could very well mirror what his family was about to go through. Of course I understood, but I was once again left without any actors.

It was around this time, that I thought about casting my actual family members. Actually, ever since my thesis proposal, I always had some kind of fantasy scenario in my head where I would get everyone who was there that night to play themselves. I never really took it seriously, but now this seemed like my only chance to cast the film. The funny thing was, just like the story in the film, I hadn't spoken to much of my extended family and they hadn't spoken with each other very much since the weekend of my grandmother's death. I already knew it would be a long shot to get many of them involved. My mom and uncle agreed to be in the film right away. Luckily, besides the protagonist Furqan, they were playing the two characters – Farida and Akthar - who I had developed and thought about the most. I then proceeded to call and text many of my aunts, uncles and cousins. Unfortunately, they were all too busy to participate. Within the next couple of days, I was also able to cast Naeema Rahman as the grandmother character, who was my mom's coworker's mother, as well as the lead actor Viren Fernandes, who submitted for the role of Furqan through *Backstage*. My producer Phillip Leteka also referred me to an actress, Emily Mills Woodruff, to play the nurse. Now, I had a significantly smaller cast than I had expected and time was running out.

## **WRITING THE SCRIPT: PART 2**

I started to imagine the film in a completely different way. Since my mom and uncle were basically playing themselves, I thought it might be interesting to turn



the film into a documentary-fiction hybrid in which a family reunion would be both re-enacted and actually taking place at the same time. The viewer would be made aware of this too and I would show the actors break character if they ever had to adjust themselves emotionally or talk about how a certain moment actually played out in real life. The “documentary” aspect of it could even be scripted, and they could argue with each other or even address me behind the camera to bring up any issues they might be having by reliving this event in such a bizarre way. It’s crazy now to think that I would be trying to change the film in such a dramatic way so late into the process. I quickly abandoned this idea and thought of something else.

I decided to change the setting of the story back to a hospital. As much as I liked the idea of having it take place in a house, I just felt that with a much smaller amount of characters, it would be more interesting to contain them in a small hospital room together. I just couldn’t see the version in the house anymore without having what looks like an actual family gathering with people filling in all the spaces. I also decided to eliminate certain scenes and minimize much of the dialogue, not only because of the smaller cast of characters that I now had, but also because I was using non-actors to play the major speaking roles. After talking with my mom and uncle, I felt it might be better to explain to them the importance of each scene and how it would move from one point to another. I could then draw from their memory of the events and use that to fill in each scene with its emotional weight and finer details. This would allow me to keep my outline of the film, while

hopefully having the dialogue come out organically, from a familiar place and a shared memory between the two siblings.

There were three very important scenes between Farida and Akthar. The first scene occurs as Furqan and Farida arrive at the hospital and see Akthar in the waiting area by the entrance. I wanted to immediately give a sense of the distance between these two siblings. They are presumably seeing each other for the first time in quite a few years, and it was important to capture that reaction. Farida would comment on his appearance, how thin he has gotten, ask questions about his health, and he would calmly deny any health issues and divert the same comments and questions back to her. At the same time, there would still be a lack of warmth between them, even under the given circumstances. I felt that the interaction at this point needed to be very mature and to the point. Akthar would clearly lay out what the situation is: Mother had a stroke, there's no chance of recovery, and she'll be put on life support for the time being. This would help explain the situation to both Farida and Furqan, as well as the audience. Farida would then move past Akthar, unable to accept that information, and go towards the hospital room. All of this would be quietly observed by Furqan. The end of the scene would have Furqan and Akthar left by themselves for a moment and finally greeting each other, showing how this troubled relationship between the siblings has distanced the younger family members as well.

The next scene, which also serves as the main point of conflict in the story, takes place inside the hospital room. Farida and Akthar get into a heated argument

that is rooted in their shared guilt over not taking better care of their mother and putting her in a nursing facility. As a result, they find excuses to blame each other in various ways. The argument would begin by each person complaining that the other had better means to have their mother live with them instead of being left alone unattended. This would escalate to bring in the themes of religion and culture into the conversation. Akthar would bring up Farida's lack of a husband and father figure as the reason why she's so busy working all the time, and how she would have otherwise had time to look after their mother. This would provoke Farida to bring up how Akthar hides behind his religious values and looks down upon other members of the family. This would lead to Farida leaving the room.

Later on in the film, I wanted to have a scene where Farida and Akthar could find some peace and understanding with one another. This is where the radio cassette player story would come in. I've always had a very fond memory of a specific moment involving my uncle Akthar in the days following my grandmother's death. My family was staying at his house for the weekend and one night, he was leading me and my cousins in a prayer just as he always did. Usually at the end of the prayers, he would stay seated on the floor and turn around to tell us some religious stories or give us bits of wisdom about life in general. On this night however, he didn't turn around right away after the prayer was over. We all remained in silence for some time. When he did turn back to talk to us, he started to reflect on himself as a son. He talked about how he tried to take care of his mother as best as he could. She lived in an apartment in New Jersey close to where

he lived, so he would stop by to bring her groceries, take her to medical appointments, or to the mosque. However, there was one thing that he regretted not being able to do for her before she died. She had an old 90's Sony radio-cassette player that she loved to listen to, and she had many cassettes that she collected over the years of either Indian songs or Quran recitations. My uncle explained that the cassette player had broken down in the past couple of weeks and wasn't playing tapes properly, so my grandmother asked him for a new one. For whatever reason, my uncle just kept forgetting. Every time he would stop by the apartment, she would ask him about the player. He would just tell her he forgot and would bring it the next time, but that time unfortunately never came and now it was too late. I specifically remember the way my uncle explained that last part: "Now she's not here anymore, and I *still* didn't bring her the tape player...". At that moment, his voice started to break and he was tearing up. I had never seen my uncle like that before. He was very compassionate and had good intentions about the lessons he would tell us, but I had never seen him in such an emotional state. He proceeded to tell us how he now didn't have any parents alive with him anymore. He told us that we were lucky to have both of our parents still alive and that we should appreciate and take care of them while they were still here with us. With this story in mind, I wanted to have a scene in a hospital multi-faith area where the three characters would be praying together and afterwards, Akthar would tell the story. This would allow Farida to feel safe to open up about her regrets as well, such as putting her

work before everything else and as a result, never making time to come and visit her mother.

During these scenes and others, Furqan would still be quietly observing and taking in what is going on. I wanted to make it clear throughout the film, that by seeing his mom in this situation, he was starting to think about how he would one day be in the same position as her, when she passes away. This is established right from the beginning of the film when Furqan and Farida are driving in the hospital parking garage. I wanted to have Furqan in the passenger seat looking off camera towards the driver's seat, and focus on his eyes just watching. In the background, we would hear someone murmuring to herself. We would then reveal that person to be his mother Farida, who is very lost in her thoughts while trying to find a parking spot as quick as possible. It is clear right away that something is wrong, and I wanted to see Furqan just watching his mother in the state she is in.

The only scene where I had Furqan actually speak took place outside of the hospital room, where he meets his cousins for the first time. I wanted this to be right after the big argument between his mom and uncle. After remaining quiet for the whole film up until this point, Furqan would finally be able to talk to someone around his age about the whole situation. The three of them briefly discuss what's been going on in their lives such as school and friends, before talking about how unfortunate it is that they had to meet under these circumstances and not earlier in their lives. I wanted this scene to show how the troubled relationship between the mom and uncle also affects the younger members of the family as well. It also puts

up a question of hope within the family, depending on if the younger generation learns from the mistakes of their parents.

Another major change I made was to the introduction to the film. After abandoning the dream sequence in the mosque very early on, I thought of having a scene with a younger Furqan, around six years old, and his grandmother. The scene was based on a memory I have as a child of watching my grandmother check her blood sugar levels at home. I wanted it to start on Furqan's eyes, as he kneels on the floor by his grandmother's bed, looking up at her. We would then see her put the blood lancet up to her finger and press the button. Furqan winces, expecting it to be painful, but his grandmother assures him she is okay. She squeezes out a drop of blood onto the glucose reader and Furqan helps to read the numbers while she slowly writes them down in her logbook. I initially thought about moving right from this scene into the hospital room, with Furqan looking at his grandmother in present day, as if that memory is lingering in his mind at that very moment. I realized that I would have to take out the parking garage scene to make this connection, and as a result, it might put more of Furqan's focus on his grandmother versus his mother.

To avoid this problem, I decided to have a beginning scene with just the grandmother by herself. I remembered back to that night in the hospital, the way my uncle described finding my grandmother unconscious on her couch in her apartment, after she hadn't been picking up the phone. It was very sad to think about her being alone by herself in her remaining moments. After talking to Farida

(from the mosque), I got even more of a sense of the feeling of loneliness that an elderly person might feel when they are living by themselves and have to spend the time alone. I decided to have a scene that would show the final moments of the grandmother character, and set the rest of the story into motion. I thought I could present her damaged radio-cassette player at the beginning of the film and have it come back later when Akthar tells his story. The start of the film would have an audio tape playing over a black screen. Gradually, the tape would start to distort and we would suddenly see the grandmother's hand stop and eject the tape. At this point, I wasn't sure exactly what would be playing from the tape. It was either going to be a classic Indian song from old Bollywood film, or a Quran recitation. Also, I wasn't sure for either choice, whether the words that were being spoken should correlate to the story of the film, or if it didn't matter. After she ejects the tape and it unspools as it is pulled out, I wanted to focus on the grandmother's fragile hands slowly winding it back. As this is happening, we would see parts of her apartment such as the kitchen table, the sink, the bedroom, everything clean and quiet. Suddenly, the hands would stop winding and the tape would fall to the floor, unspooling itself once again. I felt that this image would give a feeling of loneliness as well as someone who is at the end of their life looking back on it. To add to this feeling, I only wanted see the grandmother's hands and hear her moving around, but never actually see her face until Farida and Furqan arrive at the hospital. With the grandmother in a scene by herself, the rest of the film could have

Furqan focused on his own mother and show him watching her react to what is going on.

## **LOCATIONS**

There were six different locations that I would need for the film: the grandmother's apartment, a parking garage, and a hospital entrance/waiting area, hallway, patient room, and multi-faith area. As soon as I decided to have the story take place in a hospital, I knew that the hospital room was the first thing that I had to look for. To be clear, I needed to have an inpatient room that had a telemetry bed with monitoring equipment, not just a small clinic room. This would allow me to have an authentic looking room with the right equipment, and hopefully be large enough to fit the cast, crew and filming equipment while shooting. I figured that as a student, I might have a better chance looking for medical facilities at schools in the area. Since I was living in Buffalo at the time, I started at the Jacobs School of Medicine at the University at Buffalo. The admissions office directed me to the second floor where I met two professors in the department. I gave them a different version of the my two-minute pitch: "I'm a film student at RIT...thesis film takes place in a hospital...need an inpatient room...". Admittedly, while I had a basic sense of what kind of room I was looking for, I didn't know the terminology very well and it was interesting how specific the medical professors I approached needed me to be. Unfortunately, they only had clinic checkup rooms on that floor. They also informed me that even if I had wanted to use one of those rooms, I would only be allowed a couple of hours during the week (I needed it for the weekend, but that's



when students were using them the most), I would have to pay for the room by the hour, and also pay for a teaching assistant to stay there while we filmed. The professors were also understandably very reluctant to even show me the rooms, because as they warned me repeatedly, the medical equipment in each room was worth tens of thousands of dollars. So that didn't seem to be an option.

I was suggested to go try my luck at the UB School of Nursing next. I showed up to the department chair's office, gave her my two-minute plea, and she graciously gave me a tour of their facility. There was a row of beds lined up against the wall, with an expensive dummy in each. Within that area, was an enclosed inpatient room. Just as my committee had warned me, the room looked very dull and was small. I was also told once again that it would probably come at a price and only be available for the small amount of time when the students weren't using it. It was an option, but not a very promising one. In the meantime, she told me I should try contacting Dr. William Erdley back in the Jacobs School of Medicine where I thought I had already gone. Apparently though, on a different floor there was a relatively new state-of-the-art simulation center that would be perfect for what I needed. She also suggested I check out the University of Rochester Medical Center, and the Nazareth College and St. John Fisher College nursing programs when I head back to Rochester.

I emailed Dr. Erdley and was able to set up a meeting with him at the Behling Simulation Center later that week. When I arrived there, I thought I had finally found what I was looking for, even more so. It truly was state-of-the-art.

Each inpatient room was very spacious and had all of the proper medical equipment and props that I would need to create an authentic hospital setting. They had their own large sliding glass doors and there was even a long hallway that went along the outside of the rooms. After a long talk with Dr. Erdley about the film and the different aspects of the facility, I was told that it would cost at least \$3,000 to use one of the rooms for just a few hours. That was much beyond what I was willing to pay for, so I sadly had to move on.

I came to Rochester to check out the other schools that had been suggested to me. First, I went to the URMC-University of Rochester Medical Center, and was told to contact their public relations department. After a few days of emails back and forth, I was eventually told that it wouldn't be possible. Next, I went to the St. John Fisher College School of Nursing. Unfortunately, the person I needed to speak with was out of town in Florida and was stuck there due to the weather. Later on, I spotted the Monroe Community Hospital while driving and thought I might as well give that a try. The entrance was beautiful, with great looking furniture, and warm light coming in through the stained glass windows. I immediately wanted to use it for the entrance scene of my film. I was told to call public relations and eventually spoke to a man who sounded hopeful, but said he had to get back to me. After many follow up calls and messages back and forth, the man eventually stopped responding to me. Around this time, I found out about RIT's very own Clinical Health Sciences Center. Somehow, I had never heard of it before. After speaking with a professor in the department, I unfortunately found out that they were also

too busy to have students filming in their facilities. However, I noticed that the entrance to the building very much resembled a hospital entrance when looking in one particular direction. I took some reference photos to show my producer Phillip Leteka and cinematographer Manojh Reddy, and they agreed.

A few days later, I was able to obtain a second location. I went to the Nazareth College School of Nursing and was lucky enough to meet the department chair Mary Dahl Maher right when I got there. I told her about my film and she gave me a quick tour of their facility, including an inpatient room that I could possibly use. While it was a small space, it still had a proper telemetry bed, monitor and other medical equipment that would create an authentic atmosphere. I was also allowed to use the space for five hours on two separate days on the weekend for just the cost of a school credit in the film, so I couldn't complain.

After finding the hospital room and entrance, I still needed a hospital hallway. My producer Phillip suggested that instead of looking for a hallway in an actual hospital, I should find one on campus at RIT. We started looking in many of the buildings for a hallway that could be believable. There were obviously many white floored hallways everywhere, but we were also trying to find somewhere that had interesting colored walls and not too many posters or indicators of a school building. Eventually, Phillip found a hallway right in front of the School of Architecture that looked perfect. It had light blue colored walls, just like one of our hospital reference photos, and didn't have too many distracting posters or text for the whole length of it.

The rest of the locations weren't as difficult to find. I decided to use my friend's house as the grandmother's apartment, and already knew of a parking garage in downtown Rochester that I was hoping to use. Filming in the parking garage was a slight risk, since it was recommended to me to get a permit from the city police. I decided not to though, not only because it would have cost \$90, but also because I wasn't planning on having any equipment set up outside of the car while filming that scene. Finding a multi-faith area was a bit of a challenge since I wasn't exactly sure what it should look like. I tried to find some references online and found that most of them are just comfy, carpeted rooms with either a cross or some prayer rugs. I tried to get permission for an area in the Interfaith Center at RIT, but they wouldn't allow it. Instead, I ended up getting permission to the Fireside Lounge. It was a carpeted area, and of course, had a fireplace which I thought could add a very soothing and peaceful feeling to the scene.

### **ART/SET-DESIGN**

After finding the hallway at RIT, my producer Phillip had the idea of adding handrails to the walls to make it feel even more like a hospital setting. I didn't have a proper person for art so we would have to do this ourselves. We searched online and realized that not only would it be very expensive to buy the actual handrail materials, it would also be a really complicated and timely process to attach them to the wall. Instead, we decided to go to Lowes to find a lighter material such as small strips of wood to mimic the rails. Those proved to too heavy and expensive as well. Then we saw some large foam insulation boards and

realized we could cut them down, paint them, and then stick them on much more easily because of how light they were. Before buying it, we went back to the hallway at RIT to measure the entire length of the hallway. There were going to be three scenes in that location, and we knew that in two of the them, the camera would be able to see all the way down. We also took some reference photos of the bottom wall trim, so that we could find some spray paint to match that color. At that point, we figured that spray paint would be the fastest method of painting the boards. We ended up buying two large foam boards, cut them in half, and then made another half out of that. We bought two different colors of spray paint to test out on a couple boards and see if they matched the trim at school. None of the colors were perfect, but we decided on one of them and started spraying the boards on Phillip's driveway at his house. After many hours of this, we realized that we were running out of spray paint much too quickly, and it was taking too long to paint just a small number of boards. We decided to roll the paint on instead. This time, we found a tiny piece of the wall trim and brought it Lowes to get the color matched as close as we could. With a much more accurate color match, Phillip then painted the rest of the boards. After they were finished, we ended up sticking on the boards with some double-sided tape, the night before the shoot. We wanted to put them up as close to the shoot time as possible to avoid having someone take them down. It was a lot of work, especially for my producer, but we felt that it added a nice touch to the scenes in that location. Early on, we also talked about putting temporary hospital appropriate signs or notices on top of the classroom

signs that are hanging outside of the doors, but we ended up running out of time to do that. Luckily, they're not too easy to see in the shots for the film.

The other scenes in the film required less of a complicated process. In the hospital room scenes, there was enough equipment and hospital related materials to fill the space, so we just added little things here and there. There was a light teal colored lamp placed on the bed stand, and a light blue blanket used as the bed dressing. We felt this color went well with the nurse's light blue scrubs. For the beginning scene, I just needed to have a slightly older style radio-cassette player. Unfortunately, since it was based on my grandmother's actual radio, I couldn't quite get that exact image out of my mind. What was even more unfortunate, was that up until the summer before shooting, I still had kept the radio at home. I ended up dropping it off to the town electronics recycling area just a few months prior. When I looked in thrift stores or online, I could only find either brand new radios, or very old classic radios. At first, I thought I was being too stubborn and didn't need to have the exact same one or even similar, but after showing my producer a picture of the one my grandmother had, he said I definitely had to try to find it online. I ended up finding almost the exact same radio as my grandmother's on the website *Etsy*, just a couple days before shooting began. The radio itself wasn't too expensive – around \$20 - but I needed to have it shipped overnight. For the same radio that I kept in my possession for six years, and then willingly tossed away just a few months before, I ended up paying over \$100! That was rough, but there wasn't much time to think about it, because shooting was about to begin.

## **PRINCIPAL PHOTOGRAPHY**

The shoot lasted three days over a weekend. Due to their work schedules, I wasn't able to see my mom or uncle until the first day of shooting on Friday. My lead actor Viren, who is under 18, arrived on the same day with his mom. I was also only able to rehearse with the actors individually either over the phone or on skype. Once everyone got settled in, we all went together to eat at Pizza Hut. I figured this would allow everyone to meet and be comfortable around each other. Ironically, my mom and uncle, who were seeing each other for the first time in a couple years that day, had already gotten into an argument as soon as they both arrived in Rochester. I asked them to get along, but also save some of it for the next day in the hospital room scene.

The first scene we filmed was in the parking garage. We didn't want to call any attention to ourselves so my mom, Viren, my cinematographer, sound mixer, and myself were all stuffed inside the car. We somehow managed to fit in the camera equipment - the Sony FS700, shooting at 4K resolution with a Shogun monitor – and a couple of car Kino lights as well. I wanted to be able to see the actors' faces come in and out of the overhead lights as the car drove through the garage, so we didn't end up needing that much additional light from inside the car.

Working with my mom was surprisingly a very easygoing process. I needed her to quietly talk to herself and say some prayers under breath. At first, she seemed to be really overdoing it, but from the second take onward, I was very pleased with her performance. I ended up doing multiple takes just to get as much

of it as I could. The next shot was directed towards Viren in the passenger seat. I needed him to have a very sympathetic and concerned look on his face. This proved to be more difficult than I would have thought because many times, while he did look concerned, his face could also be read as being angry or annoyed. I did many takes of this just to make sure I was getting the right facial expressions and the proper emotion would be coming across. As a result of these multiple takes, what should have been the quickest scene to film, ended up taking until around 11pm. I felt good about the footage we had gotten, but I already knew that I wasn't managing my shooting time properly.

We still had one more scene to film that night at the entrance of the Clinical Health Sciences Center on RIT campus. It turned out to be a complete mess for many reasons. We were already starting so late and I could see that the actors were tired from their travel earlier that day. The scene was supposed to start with Farida and Furqan entering through the double automatic doors, and Akthar would call to them from the waiting area off screen. We already started to lose time just from waiting for the automatic doors to close every time we accidentally opened them. Either they would open too early because of the crew, or just a moment too late, or sometimes the actors wouldn't even be able to hear me call action. On top of that, my uncle kept either forgetting his lines or saying them at the wrong moment, which would mess up my mom's timing, and the dialogue would end up getting overlapped and scrambled. There was a bit of blocking involved as well in coordination with some camera movement, which I realized very quickly we were



not prepared for. I wanted the camera to be handheld, and moving backwards with Farida and Furqan as they enter, then pan over to Akthar in the waiting area when he calls over to them. Farida would then walk over to Akthar in the distance, leaving Furqan in the foreground with the camera. He and the camera would then slowly walk up to both of them. I thought that this would continue to see things from Furqan's point of view, since he is seeing his uncle for the first time in a while, and seeing how his mom and uncle are interacting. We were never able to make this work. Despite these problems, I kept trying to simplify the dialogue and blocking on the spot, but it never felt natural, and it just kept getting later into the night. We eventually wrapped around 4am. I already felt that this scene either needed to be reshot or cut out of the film. We ended up shooting it again in the hospital hallway location on the final day.

The next morning was the scene in the hospital room. My mom's coworker drove from Buffalo with her husband and mother Naeema Rahman, who was playing the grandmother. I was worried at first, knowing that she would have to lie on the bed for many hours while we filmed the scene. It was difficult for her to move around too much so I wasn't sure how often I should have a break for her to sit up or get out of the bed. Fortunately, she was very comfortable during the filming of the entire scene and actually fell asleep frequently, which was perfect for the character. We only had to occasionally wake her up when she would start snoring and the microphone would pick it up.

For the main part of the scene, the method I had planned for working with

my mom and uncle had both positive and negative effects. I had an outline of the scene, and certain keywords or phrases said by either person would allow it to escalate. I wanted my mom and uncle to use their own frustration to fill in the rest. The good thing that came from this was that there is a clear contrast between them as people. My uncle is always very reserved and soft-spoken, while my mom is usually more outspoken. Since they weren't trying to act as other people, the performances felt natural for the most part. My mom would occasionally feel too dramatic and emotional to feel realistic, but I was able to have her tone it down eventually. The problem with this method was that the dialogue wasn't always that interesting and the rhythm was always off. For a while, they were constantly talking over each other and many times it would sound and look like they were trying to think of what to say. I decided to break up the argument and shoot it in sections, depending on what emotional level it had reached. This would allow me to realign where the dialogue was headed by reminding them how one specific line would lead to another.

One the key things I made sure to get were singles of Furqan observing what is happening. This would either be when he is just at entrance of the room, or right at the bed by his mother's side. We also got an actual point-of-view shot as he is approaching his mother when she first collapses by the bed. This was the only direct point-of-view shot in the film, in a more hand-held style, to emphasize how this was an image that would stay with him for a long time.

The last scene of the day was the beginning scene with the grandmother in her apartment. For the most part, Naeema understood exactly what I needed from her for the scene. For the first couple shots when we see her hands eject the tape from the radio, without me even having to ask, she would slightly shake her hands, making them seem even more fragile. Another great addition to her performance was how in one take, she started quietly singing an old Pakistani song to herself, as she was winding up the tape. I wasn't sure if the words of the song had some correlation to the scene, but the tone and texture of her voice while she was singing it felt perfect. The only part of the scene that I could never quite get how I wanted, was when the grandmother drops the tape to the ground, signifying her death. I needed to see the grandmother's hands slowly stop winding the tape, then have it gently slip out and fall to the ground, as if the character has lost consciousness. For some reason, Naeema would always end up throwing the tape to the ground and then continue shaking her hands in the frame. We tried many different takes, but could never get it right. Eventually, since it was getting late, I decided that we could use what we had.

On the final day of filming, we were back in the hospital hallway location. For a long time, I had a specific shot planned for the ending of the film. It would occur right after the grandmother had finally been taken off life support. The shot would start with a nurse pushing the grandmother on a gurney away from us down the hallway, the camera would then track backwards and slowly turn completely around to reveal Farida, Akthar and Furqan standing together and watching her

drift away from them. The camera would continue to push in as Furqan looks over to his mother. It would then cut to black and go to the credits.



I had imagined this shot much earlier in the scriptwriting process when I still thought I would have a larger cast to play the family members, which would have made it a more effective and emotional shot. I even had it completely timed out in my head to match the song *Song for Zula* by Phosphorescent. I was so sure that I

wanted to end the film this way, that I emailed the record label for the band very early on just to find out the process of getting permission to use the song and how much it would cost. Other than the song rights, the other difficulty with this shot was actually getting a gurney. I checked many places online, but it was too expensive to buy and not available to rent in the area. Eventually, I found a place right down the street from RIT called RMT-Rochester Medical Transportation. After talking with one of the managers, they agreed to let me use one of their gurneys on the day of the shoot. Unfortunately, when that day finally came, nobody from RMT showed up with the gurney as previously agreed upon, and I couldn't reach anyone on the phone either. Instead, we found a long table with wheels that just happened to be in one of the side hallways. We then put a mattress on top and stuffed some pillows under the blanket, and suddenly we had our makeshift gurney. There was another problem though. Once we set up the dolly tracks for the camera move, we realized that the tripod that we had gotten had a very rigid head and couldn't rotate smoothly at all. We still attempted to do the shot many times. I even had to wear scrubs and play the nurse, since I ran out of time to have the other actress there. Unfortunately, we ultimately couldn't get the shot to work.

## **POST-PRODUCTION**

Throughout the editing process, I always made sure to stick to the same principle that I had during the scriptwriting process: everything is seen from Furqan's point of view. After the opening scene, we fade into Furqan's eyes looking at someone off screen, and then slowly cut back and forth between him and his

mom. The hospital room scene starts with an overview of the room as Farida walks in, and then Furqan's shoulder comes into frame. It then cuts to a close-up of his face. This especially works well after the nurse leaves and Farida is left crying quietly by the bed. There is a close up of Furqan starting to move that cuts with a point-of-view shot, slowly moving towards her. His close-up was also very handy in covering up certain mistakes in the framing or awkward gaps in time. For example, after Furqan walks over to the bed, Akthar is supposed to walk into the room. I realized that we only had that moment in one wide shot from the opposite side of the room. It looked awkward to cut to that angle right after Furqan's close-up. However, there was a point in the close-up shot where Furqan just happens to look over to where Akthar supposedly walks in from. I added in a curtain pulling sound and some footsteps timed at the right moment, and suddenly the cut to the same angle was so awkward anymore. The next time we see Furqan's close-up doesn't come until the very end of the scene after Farida and Akthar have had their whole argument. It seemed to work as a good way to bookend each scene, since he is experiencing everything and learning from it. By the end of the film, after Akthar gives him a lesson about taking care of his parents, we end on a close-up of him simply nodding.

The editing and sound work was especially difficult during the argument back and forth between Farida and Akthar. Each take and shot of the actors had a similar outline, but the dialogue was never very consistent. Also, the actors would often overlap each other since they wouldn't ever know when the other person was

going to speak next. If I liked a particular line of dialogue from one actor, that would often be my only choice for that line. If their voice was too soft, or the other actors was starting to speak over them by the end of the line, I had to make a decision on whether or not it was worth it to keep the line. Often times, I ended up fading out just the last couple frames of the dialogue when the other person would start talking. I would then overlap the audio for the next shot I selected so it would help cover the audio mistake, and keep the argument moving along at a good pace.

I also decided early on after watching the footage, that my mom sometimes got too dramatic too quickly in the scene. I knew I had to tone that down. I ended up getting rid of any dialogue regarding Farida's husband or anything else that shifted away from the focus of their mother. This is not only where the acting became too dramatic and over the top, but also where I felt that the story was losing focus.

I was mostly happy with how the opening scene turned out. For the song at the beginning, I found a vintage Indian song from the archives online, but I was having trouble finding a way to manipulate it enough to represent a tape that is deteriorating as it is playing. I ended using a distortion filter that slowly fades in after a few seconds, along with a low rumbling and the sound of magnetic tape wrapping up. Another issue that I ran into during the scene, was that Naeema had been singing during one of the takes, and I realized that I really wanted to have her singing while the scene plays out. Unfortunately, I didn't think to record separate audio of just her singing. It is only in that one take. That would be fine, except she

doesn't sing for very long, and eventually drops the tape in that recording as well. This meant that the whole pacing of each of the shots in her apartment had to be much quicker than what I would have initially preferred, since I needed to actually see the tape drop at the same time as the audio in that take. Ultimately, I wanted to have her singing in the scene, so I kept it as it was.

## **RIT SCREENING & CRITIQUES**

The initial screening of my film at RIT resulted in mixed reactions. I was already very worried that the whole film was ruined because I apparently didn't properly export the subtitles. Right when the film got to the scene in the hospital room and there weren't any subtitles showing up, I felt terrible. After the screening, I apologized and said that I would explain any story details after my artist statement. Surprisingly, the lack of subtitles became an interesting back and forth discussion of whether or not they were even needed. Most people said that they didn't mind not having subtitles and even suggested that I keep them out because they could still connect with the characters emotionally and easily follow along with the story. Meanwhile, others pointed out that this in itself showed how the story was too simple and the dialogue that was in English was very bland and uninteresting. To this, some people said that the simplicity of the dialogue and story allowed the film to focus more on the emotions of the characters, making it a more universal story that anyone could understand. One faculty member Atia Newman, who speaks Urdu, gave an interesting counterpoint, saying that even while understanding everything that the characters were saying, she still didn't



find what they were saying or how they were acting – especially in the hospital room scene - to be very authentic or personal to a Desi family or culture. It just felt very clichéd and general.

Besides the subtitle discussion, some people complemented the way the first scene was put together and said it was “haunting”. They also complemented the performances of the actors, specifically my mom and uncle, and jokingly asked if they had any plans to start up a second career in acting. Another frequent comment was that they wished the characters spoke more of a mix of English and Urdu, since most of the dialogue was in English.

I, myself, have to agree with most of the negative critiques of the film, especially with what the faculty member Atia Newman said. I set out to tell a very personal story, set within a specific family and culture, but I failed to follow through with that initial idea. The dialogue and the characters were supposed to give a new outlook to a common storyline but just ended up telling a story that has been told before. I also couldn't help but wonder that if the dialogue was completely in English, if people would still have complemented the performances. Often when I am watching a foreign film, I'm so taken by the different language and culture, and even just the face of the actor, that I wonder how good the actor's performance really is. Would someone who actually speaks the language feel differently about the performance? That's not to say that I didn't like the performances in my film, I just probably could've gotten more out of them with more authentic dialogue. Overall, I felt that the one thing I did achieve, mostly through the editing, was

being able to see the film from Furqan's point of view and give a sense of what he has learned by seeing his mother in this situation.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

There's a specific moment on the production of *Loop* – my first film at RIT – that I often think about. For whatever reason, I was in the basement of my apartment, trying to stick five red clocks, all set to the same time, onto the wall with some cheap kind of adhesive. It was past midnight, and my cinematographer and actor were slumped over on the ground, waiting for me to finish. We still had two more scenes to film after this. As I started to put up the fifth clock, the first clock suddenly dropped to the ground and banged onto the edge of the wall. I finished sticking on the fifth clock and quickly went over to pick up the first one. I fixed the time and stuck it on, just in time for the fourth clock to fall to the ground. I picked it up, fixed the time, and stuck it on. Suddenly, the second and fifth clocks fell to the ground and banged against the wall. The paint kept scratching off the bottom of the clocks with each drop. I was sweating and exhausted at this point, but kept trying to stick them all on and get the next shot before they fell again. I shouted for my actor and cinematographer to run over quickly. I pushed extra hard to stick on the fifth clock as my actor got into position, and then yelled "Action!". As soon as he started moving, the second clock fell with a bang. "Back to one!". I quickly fixed the time and stuck it back on. "Action!". My actor acted, the camera moved as it was supposed to, and we got the shot! Suddenly, three of the clocks

banged to the ground. We laughed hard, took a breath, then moved on with the rest of the shots. We finished later that morning.

I've always thought of this as a perfect visual metaphor for what I have experienced filmmaking to be. As soon as you finish dealing with one problem in the process or at least have temporarily dealt with it, a different problem comes up, and then after that, a previous problem comes up again. All of this keeps happening, as the time keeps ticking away. In the midst of juggling of all of these issues, trying to keep the red clocks from falling, you need to stay clear-headed and focus on what you're trying to capture for the story. Once you reach the other side of the chaos, it's a very satisfying feeling.