

# THE IF OF IT: LUNATIC INDEPENDENCE IN NINE EASY STEPS

Laura Goode

## STEP 1: ARROGANCE

Any working artist knows that believing you can make a living through art requires a hubristic, narcissistic, delusional faith that the rules don't apply to you. Steady, reliable monthly income? That shit is for suckers. IRA, W-2, 401(k)? What the fuck do those acronyms even mean?! Your plan is to make art so beautiful that someone will inevitably want to buy it. You can't be bothered with basic logic. The world awaits your dream.

No, but really: It does take a certain kind of arrogance to put art at the forefront of your life. To say, *This is what I do. This is my priority. Everything else is adjacent, in service to this.* This also takes a certain denial of adult realities, as well as the humility to, say, bartend in shitholes, as I did throughout my early twenties. The tension between such arrogance and such humility is why most people who are artists at twenty-two aren't at forty-two.

## STEP 2: ACCOMPLICES

One afternoon sometime in 2009, Meera, my college friend and frequent collaborator in lunatic art-making, and I were sitting on her patio, drinking beers, talking about movies.

*The If of It: Lunatic Independence in Nine Easy Steps*

*I've always kind of wanted to write a story about a girl trying to lose her virginity, but in her twenties, Meera said. There are no movies about girls losing their virginity. Would you ever want to do that?*

*Um, we should definitely do that, I said. Like, right now.*

A year and many conversations later, Meera and I found ourselves on Venice Beach, scribbling an outline of a screenplay in my notebook. Probably everyone around us was doing the same thing, but this did not compromise the wonder of the moment.

STEP 3: LONG, PAINFUL ADJUSTMENT OF EXPECTATIONS

During most of the two years that Meera and I spent writing *Farah Goes Bang*, I was making money from freelance work, Craigslisted household items, and unemployment checks, and she was in film school. This fact—that neither of us had full-time job commitments—allowed us to write. We were broke but not destitute.

We wrote the first draft, just over a hundred pages, in three weeks. Writing had never felt like this, as dialogic, as combustive. We holed up in coffee shops, in her sister's house, in my house, writing all the time: *You take the scene where she sees the hot guy and the squirt gun in the convenience store. I'll take the scene where she shoots the gun.*

Preliminary research revealed no studio would acquire or produce a screenplay about three diverse women trying to discover America and themselves through politics and sex. And no one was going to just cough up a million dollars so two girls who had never written or made a feature film could play around with learning how to make one themselves. Private investors tend to balk, with good reason, at the film industry, and with less good reason, at filmmakers with breasts.

If we wanted our screenplay to become an actual movie, it became clear that we were going to have to grovel for every dollar

Laura Goode

ourselves. So we started thinking about how our script could be produced cheaply. We mined our creativity for a story that could be shot for \$100,000 or less. We cut the priciest elements—an elaborate wedding, a motorized gazebo, a Bollywood dance sequence—and, eventually, we had the story we had always meant to tell: a travelogue of one’s twenties, composed of authentic relationships, wild idealism, and purposeful poverty. Those, after all, were our only assets.

#### STEP 4: BUSKING ON THE INTERNET

We launched a Kickstarter campaign for \$75,000. We’re members of the Facebook generation. Other people had done this. Why couldn’t we?

I obsessed together a thirty-day strategy for the campaign. We collected six thousand e-mail addresses. I sent so many Facebook messages that Facebook thought I was a spambot and threatened to shut down my account. “I want this more than I’ve ever wanted anything,” I wrote to people over and over again.

During the campaign’s last two weeks, I was e-mailing/Facebook-messaging/tweeting upward of five hundred times a day. I refreshed our Kickstarter page every minute. And all the while, we were planning a production: auditioning actors, negotiating with agents, hiring our crew, organizing our equipment. I began to lose my mind a little bit.

I was driving across the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge when I refreshed the Kickstarter page (PSA: Don’t crowdfund and drive) and saw that we were about to hit our \$75,000 goal. People had started to donate more and more rapidly, hoping that theirs would be the donation that put us over the top. I pounded the steering wheel, grinning. We were making a motherfucking movie.

We’d raised \$81,160 in total. I turned off my phone, crawled into bed, and slept peacefully for four hours.

*The If of It: Lunatic Independence in Nine Easy Steps*

My rest period was short-lived. I said good-bye to my husband for two months and got on the 5 South: just another blonde with a carful of dreams, heading for Los Angeles to make a movie.

STEP 5: MANIPULATING OTHERS

It's best to know supremely talented people before you embark on a flight of fancy like this, and if you're prepared to exploit every talent and connection they have, well, then you might just have the balls it takes to write and produce your own independent film.

Meera and I assembled a five-spoked producer/director wheel we later came to call the Charm Squad: myself, Meera, and our other producers, Danielle, Liz, and Fish. Here, assembled, was a crew of competent, confident young women who didn't look bad either, and short of actual handjobbing, we worked this advantage to the hilt. We were endearing, we had next to no money, and if we could use our likeability to get a cheaper rate on the next day's location, who were we not to take it?

The best and definitely most fun route to thrifty art-making lies in talented, persuasive people. Fish and Danielle sweet-talked a gas station in Oxnard into letting us change their sign to 2004 gas prices, and its lovely owner, Moe, threw in free beef jerky and played a bit role for us to boot. Liz temporarily evicted her three roommates so we could shoot at her apartment. I offered cold sodas and friendly small talk to passing cops in the hopes of distracting them from our unpermitted shooting location. Danielle, Fish, Meera, and I all nobly drank at a dive bar until we convinced its owner to let us shoot there.

In the spirit of the story, we built a mobile and modular production, inexperienced but committed, young but gutsy. Though the FGB road trip spanned eight script states, we shot seven in LA and the eighth on my family's property in Wisconsin. Though

Laura Goode

a road-trip movie about canvassing door-to-door for a candidate necessitates a cast of dozens, we signed a SAG ultra-low-budget contract, structured almost all the supporting roles into one-day shoots, and persuaded our incredible cast members to work for \$100 a day. We found other young, hungry, and impatient filmmakers to collaborate on the production, supplementing their meager salaries with the promise of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. See Step 1.

#### STEP 6: SURMOUNTING BASIC NEEDS

Film production runs on two primary resources: human and material. I was tasked with overextending both. Under the extreme conditions of production—eighteen-hour days, extended sleep deprivation, punishing LA summer heat, intravenous Diet Coke use, chain-smoking—you see a lot of quirks, talents, and Achilles' heels come out in people. For example, Fish's standard Starbucks order is seven espresso shots over ice topped off with soy milk in a venti cup; bringing her one is like throwing bacon to a dog. Danielle goes weak in the presence of cupcakes; our director of photography, Paul, existed solely on gummy bears for five weeks straight. For me, being a producer was all about learning how to throw people just enough bacon bits of affection, indulgence, and encouragement that I could keep asking them to do the unthinkable.

Then there are the material resources. Here is a list of ridiculous things that happened on our set because we had no money:

- The whole company having to vacate a parking lot and find a replacement parking lot because (a) there was a kid smoking crack ten feet away from us, (b) we needed to call the cops because he was acting threatening toward

*The If of It: Lunatic Independence in Nine Easy Steps*

us and our camera equipment, and (c) we needed to leave before the cops arrived because we had no permit to be shooting there.

- My stealing a FIREWORKS FOR SALE sign from the side of a country highway in Wisconsin so we wouldn't have to schlep everyone thirty miles away to shoot at the fireworks store.
- All of us calling in every single fucking favor we could pull out of our hats: Can you be an extra at 6:00 A.M. on Friday morning? Can we shoot at your parents' house? Can you donate your pre-2004 cell phone?
- Meera and I not getting paid anything, ever, up to the date of this publication, for writing, directing, producing, editing, or promoting the film.

I feel compelled here to state the obvious: There is nothing about making an independent film that is sustainable financially or physically. Anyone possessed of logic or reason would wisely run in the opposite direction. See Step 1.

STEP 7: SITTING ALONE IN A DARK ROOM  
WITH YOUR BRILLIANCE

About an hour after giving birth to my eight-pound, fourteen-ounce son without the aid of an epidural, the hospital heroin they'd hooked up to my arm after he was out had kicked in, the doctor had finished stitching me up, and she told me I could take my legs out of the stirrups they'd been straining in for the last three hours of pushing. Finishing production felt like finally taking my legs out of those motherfucking stirrups.

Thankfully, my son arrived in one piece. A film does not. Our

Laura Goode

task was far from finished: We had something like eighty hours of footage to sift into a ninety-minute movie, and we had to come up with more money to do it. The good news was that it wasn't my job to edit the film.

The bad news was that we needed another \$75,000 to fund post-production.

So while Meera slashed together rough cuts for the major festival deadlines (Sundance, September; SXSW, October; Tribeca, November) in a dark, hot editing bay, I e-mailed everyone I could think of in our personal and professional networks, looking for money. I went to lame networking events. I worked every impressive person I knew for introductions to other impressive people. I hustled about \$30,000 from investors, and we parceled out the rest of our post-production costs (color correction, musical scoring, sound editing, licensing) as slowly as possible on yet more wings and promises, buying me a few more months to raise the remaining \$45,000.

By the New Year things were getting scary. I'd ginned up another \$15,000, but we wouldn't be able to finish the film if I couldn't find anyone to invest the last \$30,000.

Then, one otherwise ordinary day in late February, we got into the Tribeca Film Festival. Finally, a lifeline. An affirmation. We joy-cried.

Suddenly, our phones were ringing off the hook. Sales agents and investors we'd been trying to reach for months were calling us. I raised the \$30,000 I'd been chasing for six months in three weeks. I remember very little about this period, so filled was it with meetings and calls and errands, but I do remember lolling in and out of consciousness while watching *Extreme Couponing* on Netflix during a forty-eight-hour marathon sound-editing session. How apropos: We were the extreme couponers of independent film.

*The If of It: Lunatic Independence in Nine Easy Steps*

STEP 8: MADDENING LACK OF RESOLUTION

We premiered at Tribeca to a sold-out audience and respectable reviews. We had a raging after-party where my dad held court in the VIP lounge of a Chelsea club until 1:00 A.M. At a Tribeca brunch for women in film, where we met Mira Sorvino, Glenn Close, Anna Wintour, Sandra Bernhard, and various other lady luminaries, Meera was awarded the first Nora Ephron Prize for excellence in writing and directing by a woman. The \$25,000 that came with the Nora allowed us, blessedly, to retire all the remaining debt we had from making the film: credit cards, outstanding payments, a replacement for Meera's ailing computer. We left Tribeca with a suitcase full of great press, connections, and hope of finding distribution for the film.

And then.

The deafening silence. The phone, not ringing. That ghostly echo you hear the moment after the phone stops ringing, your ears remembering how, once, it rang.

We rode out the not-ringing for a year after Tribeca, realizing, again, that no one was going to deliver us from our own independence: that just as we had risen to the task of writing, producing, editing, and premiering the film ourselves, so were we now tasked with distributing it through our own clout and resources. We pulled up our big-girl pants and partnered with Seed&Spark, the first 360-degree independent crowdfunding and distribution company for microbudget filmmakers, to release the film on iTunes, Amazon, Google Play, Vimeo, and S&S in April 2015. And then, one day, there it was: our film in the permanent imprint of the Internet, five years of dreaming in one discrete link. It didn't make us famous. It didn't make us rich. But it was ours. No one would deliver us from our own independence, so instead we stood up and claimed it.



Laura Goode

I'm still the cocky, hubristic dreamer I was when Meera and I sat on Venice Beach and outlined the story we most needed to tell. But I'm still far from living comfortably on the fruits of my labor. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little more world-weary now. There isn't always—almost ever—a million dollars waiting at the end of the very best thing you ever did.

STEP 9: THE IF OF IT

I like to read poetry to my son. I'm particularly fond of "If—" by Rudyard Kipling. Jed's still just a baby and doesn't understand why I always break down crying in the middle of this poem:

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
And never breathe a word about your loss;  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"*

If I choke up a little reading these lines to my sweet, bewildered baby, it's not because they make me bitter, or sad, or regretful. It's because they fill me with such joy and gratitude that Meera and I dug up the grit to live them; it's because we'll never have to wonder what might have happened if we had risked everything to tell the story we most needed to tell.

The if of it is beautiful. All the gravitas, the risk's reward, the odyssey lies in the if. Answering the if is where the work gets done. I lived the if, and I live it still, continuing the hustle, dreaming the next dream, passing it on to my son. I'll never be sorry.

278