

THE LOST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF JAVIER GRILLO-MARXUACH

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At the risk of extreme arrogance, I would put the first season of *Lost* alongside any accomplishment in television drama, including those of the idols who made me want to work in the medium.

Even though I quit the show after its second season - never to watch it again until the series finale - I have never ceased to be fiercely proud, and defensive, of our accomplishments as a writing staff, and those of the show's creators.

If you are reading this, it might be because you asked me how it all began and I sent you here. Or it might be because - as still happens with depressing regularity - one of the show's detractors, be that a critic, or, more vexingly, someone who has just created a show and wants to make sure the media realizes that they are above making the mistakes we made (all the while cribbing our best moves) has come out purporting yet again to have some sort "proof" that "the writers of *Lost* did not know what they were doing."

Eleven years on, even with all the media coverage, pre- and post-mortem interviews, reviews, critiques, tributes, lookbacks, and "oral histories"... even though *Lost* might as well hold a record as the most over-documented series in the history of television, many still feel like a definitive version of how we made the show has yet to be told.

This is not that.

I'm writing down my recollections of the early days of *Lost* for profoundly selfish reasons. After eleven years, the story I am about to tell, hopefully for the last time, continues to hold fascination for many. While I have been happy to tell it, and strive to do so with joy and gratitude for all that *Lost* did for me, there comes a time when the memories fade, and the instinct to embellish - to make oneself the hero of every encounter, and, to borrow a term, to "retcon" - takes over where reasonably factual recollection once stood.

What follows began as an on-the-record response to a journalist who reached out to me for background for a book on the current "Golden Age" of television. My selfish desire is to put this all

down as I remember, then leave it for anyone who is interested to find so that I can stop telling the story... and in doing so, maybe someday revisit the series not through the lens of a participant, but that of a viewer who has never been asked - as I have a million times - "Did you have a plan?" or "Were you lying when you said in an interview that the writers knew what the island was? "What was JJ/Damon/Carlton like?" "Was it purgatory?" - and, of course, my personal favorite, "No, come on, really, was it purgatory?"

This is how it was for me, and - begging your indulgence - please know that we are each the protagonists of our own movie, even if we claim otherwise. If this contradicts the events of anyone else's movie, please take it as read that I have no scores to settle, no record to set straight, and no grudges to feed as far as the people with whom I worked.

This just happens to be the movie I was in, the scenes in which I participated, and the plot in which I happened to be inserted as a featured player. If there were other movies playing at other theaters, movies with the same story but different scenes, then I offer no counter, just the hope that those movies were as good a ride as mine.

I owe the successful second half of my career to *Lost*, and I owe my employment on *Lost* to *America's Next Top Model*. In January of 2004, I was working on the United Paramount Network's low-rated - if much-loved by its writers - series *Jake 2.0*. Although we knew our show was not long for this Earth, we figured we would have a chance to wrap up our season with a proper finale.

That was until the network pre-empted us for a rerun of *America's Next Top Model*: a rerun that doubled the ratings of our previous original airing.

At 11:30 AM the following day, the Executive Producers of *Jake 2.0* received a call from the president of UPN. By 4:00 PM that day, our offices were packed and the writers were sent home.

I was now available to seek other employment.

Meanwhile, across town at ABC, network president Lloyd Braun took the ballsy step of green-lighting a two-hour pilot off an outline.

This part of the story is generally well known: at a corporate retreat in 2003, Braun pitched his development team the idea of doing *Survivor* meets *Cast Away* as a dramatic series. The first script generated for this came from writer Jeffrey Lieber and was called *Nowhere*.

Dissatisfied with Lieber's execution, Braun and company tasked JJ Abrams with working up an alternate take on his one line high concept. Through ABC executive Heather Kadin, Damon Lindelof - then a producer on *Crossing Jordan* - was identified as a potential showrunner. In very short order, Damon and JJ developed an outline which so blew Braun and his team away that they chose to strike while the iron was hot - and greenlight to film a pilot to be written by JJ and Damon based on the outline.

This meant that at a time of the year when most premises for network pilots - the scripts for the shows with which *Lost* would be battling for a spot on the network schedule in five months - had also been mulled over, outlined, considered and reconsidered, and rewritten and rewritten, with copious amount of input from the network and studios. The reason scripts get pored over with such a fine-toothed comb? Before everyone commits to spending millions on filming them, they need to know whether the pilot script described a series that can successfully sustain itself for years.

Damon and JJ now had the nigh-impossible task of not only delivering a great script based on their outline, but to also to film that script, and chart the course of an ensuing series with no road map for its future, and no discernible plot engine for episode after episode other than "survival."

Along with Damon, JJ had also recruited *Alias* producers Jesse Alexander and Jeff Pinkner to help develop many of the elements that made it into that fateful outline. Though they were on *Alias* full time, Jesse and Jeff would occasionally return to *Lost* over the first season to consult on stories and concepts, and help with story breaks - later on, *Alias* would also lend us Drew Goddard to break and write an episode. The conceptual support provided by these two, especially during the early work on the pilot outline, earned Jeff and Jesse the credit of Executive Consultant on both pilot and series. In later seasons, Pinkner would even return to executive produce alongside Damon and Carlton Cuse.

At the time the pilot was being written, however, Jeff and Jesse were also needed on *Alias* - which was in production and on the air - especially with JJ shifting his energies toward co-writing and directing the *Lost* pilot. Though thrilled about taking a wild swing on a new project from the creator of *Alias*, the network was justifiably concerned.

In what was pretty unorthodox move at the time, as JJ and Damon were beavering away on the first draft of the *Lost* pilot at various Starbucks locations around the city (it's hard to believe now, with JJ squiring the Star Wars franchise and Damon doing the same on a number of feature films as well as a prestigious HBO series, that such a scene could even be possible), ABC funded a small "think tank" of writers to work closely with them in narrowing down what the actual series would be...

And when my agent mentioned this to me, I didn't think that A. this crazy idea would ever get off the ground - I mean, greenlighting a pilot this late in the game off an outline? Insanity. - and B. that I would ever get the job anyway.

(I had run into JJ a few times in my career - we were once speakers at a conference for magnet school students, for example - and I never got the sense that he was especially impressed with me, an impression bolstered by my inability to get so much as an interview on any Bad Robot shows in the past.)

That much said, time was of the essence now. *Lost* needed qualified writers with development and genre experience - and, to my very good fortune, I had become friends with Jesse Alexander outside of our work lives. He went to bat for me. After one meeting with a very overwhelmed-looking Damon, and a very - and very typically - cool and enthusiastic JJ, I had a spot in the think tank.

The think tank also included Paul Dini (of *Batman: The Animated Series*), Christian Taylor (who went on to run *Teen Wolf* and *eyeCandy*), and Jennifer Johnson (who went on to run *Cold Case*). Our job was to brainstorm elements that could become the show's mythology as well as the character backstories that would - eventually - become the majority of the flashbacks for the first season.

Basically, a *Lost* writers room existed parallel to the development of the pilot, working closely with the show's

creators. Most days we would sit in conference with Damon for several hours and then work from his instructions as he left the room for rewriting, notes, casting, and so on. While the pilot was being filmed in Hawaii, we would do the same and pitch our ideas to him on the phone in between takes.

During these sessions - which began on February 24th of 2004, exactly one day before Damon and JJ finished writing their very first draft of the pilot - a lot of the ideas that became the show's mythology and format were discussed, pitched, and put into play for what would eventually become the series. Also, to be fair, more often than not, we were paving the way for the good ideas by coming up with a lot of bad ones.

Very bad ones.

On the first day alone, Damon downloaded on us the notion that the island was a nexus of conflict between good and evil: an uncharted and unchartable place with a mysterious force at its core that called humanity to it to play out a primal contest between light and dark.

In that meeting - we had an assistant taking the notes I am consulting as I write this - Damon also pitched out the idea of "The Medusa Corporation" a Rand Corporation-like entity that knew the nature of the island and had thus chosen it as a place in which to perform a series of behavior modification experiments in a series of scientific stations... and who had brought the polar bears in for these experiments.

The reason The Medusa Corporation was performing these experiments was that they had stumbled on an equation - much like the famed Drake equation, popularized by Carl Sagan in Cosmos and used to estimate the number of discoverable worlds holding life in the universe - which predicted the end of the world. By performing experiments in a place they knew as a crucible for extremes of human behavior - some of those experiments involving behavioral modification on polar bears - Medusa hoped to change humanity and avoid an impending armageddon.

Among the other core notions that came up on this very first day were the idea of the hatch (more about that in a moment), and the notion that Locke was a warped, frustrated man whose mystical experience as a result of the plane crash had brought him to see himself as an enlightened figure whose destiny was to

be revealed on the island. The exact nature of his mystical experience, however, would not be decided until much, much later.

These ideas were in the DNA of *Lost* from jump street and were presented to us as take-off points from which to work out our brainstorms. The reason I bring this up is not to argue that we had a plan all along - although I suppose I could wave that notes document around and reasonably say, "See, our mythology was there from ground zero."

No, the reason I mention it is because one of the ongoing themes of this piece is that nothing springs fully formed from anyone's mind... not even something as seemingly magical as *Lost*, and the answer to the question of "Were we making it all up as we went?" is inextricably tied to this truth.

As much as many - fans, critics, and sometimes even those of us who create the stuff - want to believe in the possibility that greatness is *sui generis* (or conversely the cowboy myth that "We didn't know what we were doing - we were just kids with a dream and gosh darnit we pulled it off with spit and baling wire") both of these explanations rob us of the truth: inspiration is always augmented through improvisation, collaboration, serendipity, and plain, old, unglamorous Hard Work.

I will, however, strenuously make the point that the notes from our think tank prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that if we knew anything, we sure as shellac knew what the polar bear was doing on the island.

Also - and I present this as neither apology nor indictment - if the concepts described above seem thin to you, I have (in the time since *Lost* aired and I have found my services in demand by shows that seek to ape its success and methods) gone to work on piloted, ordered, serialized sci-fi shows with far less secure underpinnings than even what I just described. In one case, the creator and executive producers of a series that hoped to hire me answered my question of "So where are you going with this?" with "You worked on *Lost*, you tell us."

So, dear reader, if you have been privy to the widespread impression that we were making it up as we went and merely blundered onto great success - and feel shafted by that - you're not alone.

At this point in the story, I'm often asked the question of Jeffrey Lieber's script, *Nowhere*. Did we read it? Did Damon and JJ read it? Did we use it as a reference? Was it fair for the Writers Guild to grant Lieber a third of the created-by credit on *Lost*?

Having read up to this point, I can safely say that you now know as much about Jeffrey Lieber's script as I do today, and did at the time. Those of us in the think tank were told of its existence, but I truly do not know who else might have read it or when. I am therefore completely agnostic about its merits and have no opinion one way or the other about the WGA's ruling. I never saw the thing and the think tank never used it in its work: it was in the past by the time I got there, and we were moving forward at breakneck speed.

Lost was anything but fully-baked in late February of 2004. As has been reported elsewhere, one of the out-of-the-box ideas featured in both the greenlit outline and the first draft of the pilot was that Jack Shephard - the main character of the series that ultimately aired - was to be killed at the end of the first act by the mysterious smoke monster. At the time, the scuttlebutt around the office was that JJ had reached out to Michael Keaton, who had - at least in principle - agreed to appear in the pilot and even do press pretending that he was going to be a series regular, only to be killed fifteen minutes in.

The film *Executive Decision* - in which Steven Seagal appears to be the film's lead tough hombre until he sacrifices himself at the end of the first act in a "tough hombre handoff" to Kurt Russell - was often mentioned as a template for this kind of surprise, often alongside Samuel L. Jackson's untimely, and perhaps unintentionally hilarious, demise in Renny Harlin's *Deep Blue Sea*.

On our second day at work, JJ and Damon brought in numbered hard copies of the pilot for the think tank to read and on which to give feedback. My most salient note on the pilot was that murdering the one white male character with a discernible skillset that could serve to generate stories - at the very least Jack was a doctor - would not go over well with the network.

In truth, my response was a lot less politically correct, informed as it was by my decade-plus experience as a Puerto Rican working in Hollywood.

What I really said was "You can't kill the white guy."

As cool a piece of showmanship as killing Jack in the first act would have been, I had serious doubts as to whether American network television would welcome a show anchored by a warped, frustrated middle-aged guy with delusions of grandeur, or an overweight Mexican, or a reformed Iraqi torturer, or a southern-fried con artist whose skills would have been essentially useless in the wild, or a non-anglophone Asian couple, or a character who was likely to be played by an actress whose most salient speaking role up until then had been in a commercial for a late-night chat phone line in Vancouver.

But for Jack, *Lost* seemed to be a series populated entirely by supporting characters: at least by the standards of our medium.

One reason I was able to make the argument as phrased above was that, even at this early juncture, a lot of the actors who wound up on the show were already hovering the project - we already had a good idea of the kinds of faces that would go with the names. As Damon and JJ worked on the pilot, pre-production was moving rapidly - even if all they had to go on was an outline and pieces of a work-in-progress script. The assumption had to be that the final script would not diverge tremendously from the greenlit outline so that locations could be scouted, sets built, and the major set pieces, such as the opening sequence depicting the crash of Oceanic 815, could be planned. It also helped that JJ could use the infrastructure Bad Robot had in place for *Alias* to help grease the skids.

So while we brainstormed, line producer Sarah Caplan was busily negotiating the purchase of an L-1011 fuselage and researching how to get it to Hawaii, and April Webster, who also cast *Alias*, was already using scenes from the script to find actors.

In spite of her relative lack of experience, Evangeline Lilly had already been identified as a potential Kate, the latest in a long line of JJ-discovered talent going back to Keri Russell and continuing with Jennifer Garner. Hurley had originally been conceived as a "receding hairline, short sleeves and tie" nebbish until JJ and Damon spotted Jorge Garcia in an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and essentially wrote the role for him

(even if, like Matthew Fox, he originally auditioned reading a monologue written for Sawyer). Terry O'Quinn had appeared in eighteen episodes of *Alias* and, at least by the time I got there, his participation as Locke was assumed to be fait accompli. There was certainly no discussion of any other actor playing the part in our room.

Now these were all great actors who would soon be playing characters that, in great part due to their interpretation, would become iconic... but the sad reality of American network television in 2004 was that shows needed competent, easily identifiable main characters with abilities that undeniably spoke to their leadership and heroism: and that was, most of the time, a handsome white guy with an advanced degree in criminology, law, or medicine... and an absurdly tragic backstory.

So when JJ and Damon returned from their first network notes session with a slightly bemused expression, I asked how the notes session went. I was not shocked when Damon shrugged with a not inconsiderable amount of contempt for his unimaginative corporate overlords and reported that, "We can't kill the white guy."

This is also a long way of saying that multiple tracks of invention were running simultaneously and affecting one another - from production, to casting, to creative, and finally the studio and network's constantly shifting preferences for the series. A lot of different people were working very quickly to make JJ and Damon's vision a reality - some of them weighing in with input designed to make this vision more network friendly, or at least identifiable in their eyes as that rare beast known as "a TV show" - and JJ and Damon were working very quickly on their end to provide a vision which could be made reality.

While a lot of the accounts of *Lost*'s creation hinge on the question of whether we knew what the island was - and a lot of the criticism of the show centers around whether or not we had worked out the mythology in advance and whether or not we accurately represented to the press the extent of our preparation once the show became a success - few people ever ask if we knew the characters or had their stories worked out in advance. I find that curious.

Arguably, the reason audience members fell in love with *Lost* was as much, if not more, that they bonded with our ensemble as they

were tantalized by the mysteries of the island. Much of our work in those early days came in the form of figuring out who those characters were, how they would interact in series, and how their stories could play out in relationship to one another.

Another factor that heavily affected the format and presentation of both the character and mythological elements of *Lost* throughout its prehistory and first season is one the essential truths of broadcast television to this day. Even though this seems incredibly counter-intuitive given what is successful and buzzworthy, network television was, and remains, extremely genre-averse.

Up until very, very recently - and by that I mean well into the early aughts - sci-fi shows were considered something of a ghetto, and the true wellsprings of "quality" writing in television were the ten o'clock police/lawyer/doctor shows. The prejudices of current high-level network execs, most of whom came up in the 90s, continue to reflect that upbringing - as does the lack of Emmy wins and nominations for a genre that represents a huge amount of the drama made for television today.

As a result, even though JJ and Damon had sold a show about a mysterious tropical island full of polar bears and patrolled by a free-roaming cloud of sentient smoke, we had to continually promise during the show's development, the filming of the pilot, and even well into the first and second season, that - at most - our sci-fi would be of a grounded, believable, Michael Crichton-esque stripe that could be proven plausible through extrapolation from hard science.

Of course, that was a blatant and shameless lie told to network and studio executives in the hopes that either blazing success or crashing failure would eventually exonerate us from the responsibility of explaining the scientifically accurate manner in which the man-eating cloud of sentient smoke actually operated. Nevertheless the onus was on us to generate tons of exciting stories that could stand on their own without leaning too hard on genre, and in television there is only one way of doing that: have great characters who are interesting to watch as they solve problems onscreen.

So, while we routinely discussed such genre questions as "what is the island?" We also asked ourselves "Who are these people,

why were they on the plane, and why are they interesting company in a desert island?"

Up until May 2004, when the *Lost* pilot was screened for ABC and picked up to become a series - the writers genuinely believed that the show would be completely self-contained on the island. Based on that, we tried to break A and B stories around the Lord of the Flies/"How do you create a civilization when you are stranded with no hope of escape?" theme.

To make this premise work, we created extensively detailed character backstories which we hoped we could use as reference for why the castaways did what they did in the island. For weeks, each member of the think tank would be assigned one character, and in our time outside the room, we would come up with incidents in the characters' lives to pitch to one another. In the room, the think tank would then work with Damon, who would cherry-pick the events he found interesting, and we would round up the characters from there. More often than not, these would be the stories that the think tank writers wound up writing when they were assigned episodes come the series... which is how I wound up writing the Jack backstory episode "All the Best Cowboys have Daddy Issues."

By the time the pilot was finished, we knew that Jack would be the overachieving son of a patrician, alcoholic doctor - haunted by having to betray his father... that Charlie's drug issues were fueled by the breakup of his band... that Locke would be played as a shaman on the island but a sad, frustrated drone in his real life... that Sayid's dark romantic demeanor was the result of being separated from the love of his life... that Jin had made a Faustian bargain with Sun's billionaire father in order to marry her, but that the bargain had twisted his soul and forced her to secretly learn English as an exit strategy... that Boone and Shannon were on the plane as a result of Boone's having to rescue her from a rich, abusive lover... that Sawyer's entire life had been destroyed by a con artist, and that the act had driven him to become a con artist himself. The backstories flowed with surprising ease from the hints and actions of the characters in the pilot - JJ and Damon's writing gave us a fertile field in which to play, and the possibilities for our castaways' histories outside the island seemed endless. Too bad they were never going to be seen on the screen - only spoken of.

So, while this approach yielded some very interesting character possibilities, it still didn't solve one major problem... most

of the "island stories" we came up with were pretty lame. The scintillating B. and C. stories we came up with during this period included "Shannon trades sexual favors for sunscreen, which has rapidly become the most prized commodity on the island," "Sawyer builds a still," "Vincent (Walt's dog) becomes Cujo," and, my personal favorite, "Hurley eats a bad coconut" (which, weirdly, was the only one of these three to ever see the light of day as a runner in a season one episode in which he approaches Jack with complaints of gastrointestinal distress). You sow the field of good ideas with the dead bodies of bad ideas.

It was also during these sessions that we came up with many other notions which would eventually come to fruition in series: Charlie's drug withdrawal, Shannon's insulin dependency and how it leads to Sawyer's torture by Sayid, the struggle to save a man whose seat was lodged in a high tree after the crash (an idea that did not emerge until season 2), the concept that the island could summon the presence of figures from the castaways' past (like Hurley's friend from the psych ward and Jack's father), the possibility of introducing the tail section survivors as a way to add conflict to the series, and the "jungle creeps," mysterious inhabitants of the island who put a ringer in the corps of survivors after the crash in order to find out our secrets.

The "jungle creeps," who eventually became "The Others," are a good example of our struggle to find viable stories when the network continually pushed us to deliver a "grounded" and "believable" show that went to sci-fi as little as possible. When we first ran the idea of the "jungle creeps" by ABC, they balked, feeling that it was too early to introduce other participants to the drama of survival when we already had fifteen ensemble mouths to feed.

Additionally, they felt that explaining a mysterious presence on the island - of people who could pass for modern-day castaways - was a bridge too far. The compromise struck in series was that The Others would not be introduced until about halfway into the first season.

The problem of the network's belief that we were going to deliver a show whose science fiction was "completely grounded in reality" was a constant issue in these sessions, as was the question of whether the episodes would be serialized or stand alone. The final result of all of this was a now widely-

circulated - and widely used as proof of our incompetence/malfeasance/deception about our intentions - format document, dated May 5, 2004.

In this document Damon and JJ pitch the notion of *Lost* as a mystery/genre series in which every episode would feature personal stories of survival (sunscreen as currency, the dying marshal, a sickness that threatens to wipe out the survivors, a cache of firearms is discovered in the island, Michael and Sun develop a relationship that ignites Jin's jealousy, an inability to find potable water, an exodus to an inland camp of caves which winds up dividing the castaways) as well as much wilder science-fictional ideas which we hoped we could use to sell the premise of the island's preternatural abilities (intelligent dolphins appear in the bay and attack our castaways, a solar eclipse that lasts for forty-eight hours, ravenous soldier ants destroy our food supply, Sayid fights a giant snake, a submarine runs aground on the barrier reef).

Needless to say, even at this late time and with all this lead time and story development, the show came across as more than a little bit schizophrenic... rich characters struggling for survival... and the occasional science fictional lark. In spite of that, JJ and Damon, along with the rest of the crew, had delivered a pilot so spectacular that the show's chances were undeniable. A viable series format had to be developed.

As we waited to find out our fate, we began to fully beat out what would eventually become episode 2 of the series, "Tabula Rasa." This early attempt at a full story break was an interesting test of our premises of what the show was and could be. While we knew that we would have eventually unpack such series-wide elements as the provenance of the polar bear and the French Woman's broadcast, the true meaning of the "Black Rock" (that one we would not figure out until well into season one) and the Medusa Corporation and The Others (as of the May 5th document, they had officially been renamed from the, admittedly, Sid and Marty Krofftian "jungle creeps"), we were under strict orders to deliver a solid island A. story that had nothing to do with the science-fictional elements of the show so as to prove to the network that it was possible to be *Lost* without being all about the smoke monster.

The truly gripping notion of having to euthanize a dying castaway became the center of this episode break - and made for an outstanding A story with a lot of self-evident scene

possibilities. As we tried to graft to that a spine-tingling runner about digging latrines, and a destined-for-must-see-TV discussion about the funeral procedure for those who died in the plane crash, one undeniable truth kept coming up, a truth that we kept skirting for three months of brainstorming but had never embraced...

If the pilot featured flashbacks to the plane before the crash - and the context they provided for the island story was such a great source of contrast and revelation - and if we spent so much time developing the backstories of these characters - why not make that a part of the series?

Wouldn't it be great if we could see Kate's arrest by the marshal, and maybe their previous Kimble/Gerard relationship as a contrast to her trying to pretend that she didn't know him?

It is difficult to imagine that for so long - when they were part of the pilot, and frequently discussed in the think tank, and when they were so clearly the pivotal thematic lever of the series - the flashbacks were not considered as being of the essence to the show. Instead, the device was sort of tacitly agreed to have been a thematic grace note that would remain unique to the pilot and not be used in series.

Now, however, as we truly tried to put our ideas into practice, the episodic format finally took shape around the notion that "flashbacks are there to demonstrate what you are in the island is a contrast to what you were in your other life." This conceit became the theme of *Lost*, our central concern in the development of the stories, and the glue that held seasons of the show together.

We had been so concerned about how much sci-fi we could or couldn't get into the stories, and about whether or not the series could be serialized or not, that we didn't stop to consider that the stories we had created for our characters could not only carry the freight of our narrative, but also create a crucial thematic counterpoint. Equally importantly we didn't realize until very late that the flashbacks would provide visual opportunities different from the dust and grime of a survival existence. And, yes, by that, I mean "flashbacks allowed us to put the characters in clean, fashionable clothes and spectacular hair."

It's shocking, in hindsight, that it took so long for us to get there, but thank YHWH that we did.

Obviously, the idea of flash-forwards - and the "flash-sideways" I often heard about from fans of the show in subsequent seasons - were much, much later ones that were developed as a way to generate further story as the show progressed into maturity.

I can't opine too much about these ideas, as I was not present when it was decided to put them into play, but can say with absolute certainty that they were not part of our discussion either in the think tank or the writers room in seasons one and two. As with the flashbacks, they most likely became very good ways of continuing to explore character outside of the confining paradigm of island survival.

Long before the flashbacks were finally set as a keystone of the format of the show, the idea had been conceived and settled on that each episode should represent a single day on the island. Indeed. This shows up at the top of the first page of our 2/24/04 writers meeting notes.

To some degree, the one-day-per-episode structure combined with the flashbacks provided the best of all worlds: of course the show would be serialized, the time frame of one episode per day demanded it, but this also allowed us to appease the desire for self-contained stories with beginnings, middles, and ends... every next day in series time, someone new would pick up the narrative freight in a flashback-driven tale showcasing the dichotomy between who they were in real life and who they were on the island.

With this construction, we could continue to address holdover threads from the previous episodes (in episode two, this became the question of whether the survivors who heard the French Woman's message would share that information with the other survivors and risk crushing their hopes for a rescue) while still claiming we were not wholly serialized.

Even as we came to these breakthroughs, ABC continued to vacillate about what they wanted *Lost* to be. The biggest reason for this was a change at the top ranks of the network. Sometime during all of this, Lloyd Braun - who had been willing to take a wild and woolly swing on the insanity that was *Lost* and its accelerated development process - was replaced as president of ABC by Stephen McPherson.

Previously, McPherson held the post of president of ABC Studios. This meant that mere months ago, when the president of the network shocked the studio by saying "I've just greenlit a pilot based on an outline, and you are going to produce it, and no one's sure what the series is, and it's going to cost ten million dollars," it was McPherson who got the call. As head of the network's primary corporate sibling, McPherson had to accept the gamble even though he felt it foolhardy.

To say that McPherson did not share Braun's "seat of your pants" spirit of adventure vis-a-vis *Lost* would be an understatement, at least based on what JJ and Damon shared with us in the think tank. To us it seemed like the new management at ABC was actively trying to hedge their bet and mitigate the huge investment they made in the *Lost* pilot if either it didn't go to series or if it went to series and flopped (though I would go on to be a Supervising Producer on the series, no one ever gave me an exact figure of the final cost of the pilot episode - estimates vary between ten and thirteen million dollars).

At one point between the delivery of our format document and the decision to pick up the show, the network floated several ideas including that we reshoot a more conclusive end to the pilot film and air it as a "backdoor pilot" - which would only go to series if airing it as a TV movie yielded spectacular ratings.

Another option presented was that we could do *Lost* as a six episode miniseries. Bad Robot balked at all of these.

By the time the show was picked up, we knew - at least in theory - that we had an episodic structure that could sustain at least dozens of stories without giving up the secrets of the island - such as we had developed them. The idea of dedicating one of each of our first set of episodes to a major character, focusing on their backstory and some struggle on the island made us see the longevity of the series beyond a "case of the week" (or rather an "island problem of the week"). The serialized format, then, was ultimately something that we simultaneously insisted on but also sort of snuck past the goalie by finding a middle ground where stories could also be self-contained.

This is how the battle of twenty-two episode a year network television is fought and won. Not by relying on lone geniuses to come up with everything (though they sometimes do), but by relying on the geniuses to inspire their staffs (which hopefully

comprise a few geniuses) with great ideas that generate tons of further ideas - some good, some bad, and some downright insane - and then cherry-pick the best of the best and integrate them into the show.

On my first meeting at *Lost*, Damon Lindelof was introduced to me as THE showrunner of the project. It was in this capacity that Damon functioned even as he collaborated with JJ in co-writing the script - and even though JJ directed the pilot and his production company produced the series.

Thus, on Damon fell the monolithic task to set the tone for not only how we would explain the mysteries of the island, but also of how we would negotiate all the creative forces tugging at the series. Even in our autocratic system in which the showrunner is believed to be the ultimate authority, it's still a collaborative process in which a lot of people - many of them having greater power, especially in the case of a first timer like Damon - generate, challenge, and refine ideas until the showrunner, often with studio and network holding veto power, decides which are worthy and which are not.

The creative rhythm of *Lost* through these gestational phases, as well as the bulk of the first season, then, was dictated almost exclusively by Damon's personal tastes and sensibilities. Damon's oft-stated-in-the-writers-room belief, for example, that dysfunctional relationships between parents and children are the core of all good drama is clearly evident throughout the series.

In this capacity, Damon also faced the daunting task of setting the pace at which we were to reveal the mysteries of the island. This was made all the more difficult for him in the first season - and then for years to come in showrunning collaboration with Carlton Cuse - not only by the number of other influencers in the kitchen (Bad Robot and JJ, ABC Studios, and ABC Network) but also by not knowing just how long the show would last.

This speaks directly to the notion of "Did we know what we were doing or did we just make it up as we went along?"

There's two answers to that...

Answer number one is - REALLY? Chill the fuck out already.

Seriously, time is linear and even God - who took seven days from when he invented light to when he decided that there could be people in there once he had separated the seas from the lands so that there was a dry spot to stand on - appears to have been making it up as he went along.

I mean honestly, why would an omniscient deity not realize until well after completing the act of creation that Adam might get lonely and need a mate? And why did he make Eve from Adam's rib? That seems like ret-conning of the most egregious order. This God guy seems like a worse improviser than the writers of *Lost*!

Here's answer number two...

As questions of mythology and backstory came up during the development of *Lost*, Damon and the staff - first in the think tank and later in the writers' room for the series - would come up with explanations. The ones Damon liked just enough to not dismiss outright would be discussed at greater length and eventually, something would become a kind of operating theory. Damon would eventually declare "it's going to be that unless someone can beat it." When we finally refined these ideas to the point where Damon was OK putting them on screen - committing to them as canon - then we would incorporate them into the show.

For example - even though we assumed from jump street that the polar bears had been brought to the island as part of the Medusa Corporation's work - there was also a very strong drive from Damon and JJ to advance the story that Walt was a powerful psychic. This explained, for example, the bird hitting the window in the episode "Special." Walt-as-psychic would also help us explain why The Others had such an interest in Walt and would ultimately kidnap him.

Although the genre-averse Powers That Be at network and studio were resolutely opposed to the science-fictional idea of a psychic boy who could manifest polar bears on a tropical island through the strength of will alone, Damon and JJ nevertheless gave themselves a backdoor into this area by putting the bear in a comic book that appeared both in the pilot and thereafter in series.

Frankly, it's hard for me to look at an episode like "Special" and not completely take from it that Walt is a powerful psychic who manifested the polar bear in order to test his father's love once and for all... but the execution of the episode apparently

left plenty of wiggle room to give us plausible deniability - even as Damon would regularly come into the writers' room, throw up his arms and declare "Of course Walt's psychic."

In other cases, these things would come in through backdoors and leave the same way very quickly. There was a time when - in order to appease the network's fear of sci-fi - the polar bear would simply be explained away as having been on the plane as freight. Needless to say, this idea came... and then went.

A good example of something that was never explained but for which there existed an internal explanation was the smoke monster. In think tank, we imagined it as a "security system" (which eventually became Rousseau's line) and a sort of mechanism of judgment that policed the island on behalf of the strange powers that ran the place and called out the good and evil in humanity to come. As the smoke monster would come and go through the first season - and, for example, have a face-off with Locke but "decide" to not kill him - we would say that the smoke monster possessed an intuitive psychic ability, like the sentient ocean in Solaris, and would be able to look into the souls of its prey in order to determine further action.

Up until the time when I left the show, this idea - and variations on it - were the common language of the writers when discussing the monster, but as far as I know, this explanation was never expressed in series because Damon never became fully comfortable with it. Again, this was partially because in the early days, any explanation that felt too fanciful would be kiboshed by the network. Since ABC seemed comfortable in having the monster without us actually explaining it, leaving well enough alone seemed a better course of action than to risk the network pulling at strands that would take apart even larger swaths of our story sweater.

We worked under this construct - "this is the explanation until someone beats it" - during most of the first season, being careful to dollop the mythology very sparingly while trying to keep the show grounded in the rich characters we had created. When the show became an undeniable hit and moved into its second season - and we had to show what was in the hatch once and for all - it became necessary to take all of those ideas out into the sun. With success, we were freer to explore a lot of the sci-fi we had thus far kept beneath the surface... but not as free as one might imagine.

Much of the fun camaraderie of the writers' room involved trying to "beat it" - spending our time straining to come up with increasingly byzantine ways in which we could dethrone the accepted wisdom with an idea that was not only great but also tied together all the extant plot and character strands. It was rare to succeed, but occasionally during the run of the first two seasons, someone would, in fact, come in with something so undeniable that it would supersede whatever was already in the show's zeitgeist as *The Truth*.

The strange case of the hatch may be the best example during the prehistory and first season of *Lost* of how the exchange of ideas between Damon, JJ, the writing staff, and the rest of our production and broadcast partners truly functioned. Because JJ's calling card back then was the whole concept of the "mystery box" - I won't bother to explain, he guest-curated an entire issue of *Wired Magazine* on the topic, the *Bad Robot* website sells limited edition "Mystery Boxes" based on the one from JJ's childhood, and frankly, if you have cared about this topic enough to read this far, you most likely already know the theory - he wanted the hatch in the pilot, even though no one knew what would be in it.

JJ was more than happy to punt the decision as to what would actually be inside the hatch to the writers' room because of his deeply felt conviction that the mystery was as good a journey as the reveal and would be so tantalizing it would keep the audience clamoring - even if the subject to be eventually revealed was not forethought. It was at that point that I first heard Damon articulate - wisely, and for reasons of self-preservation and sanity - the one hard and fast rule that he lived by for the entire first season. He would not put anything on screen that he didn't feel confident he could explain beforehand.

So the reason the hatch doesn't come up until the end of the tenth episode of the series ("*All the Best Cowboys Have Daddy Issues*") - even though JJ was stumping for it since before the pilot was written - was because Damon didn't fully believe in any of the ideas presented to him for what was there.

As a writers' room, and a think tank before that, we kept pitching possibilities, but nothing we threw out ever overrode Damon's concern that if we shat the bed on that reveal, the audience would depart in droves. The hatch was pitched as a gateway to a frozen polar bear habitat, the mouth of a cave full

of treasure that would so entrance the castaways with dreams of avarice that Jack would ultimately be forced to seal it shut with dynamite, the door to a bio-dome whose inhabitants could only breathe carbon dioxide, and even a threshold to an Atlantis-style lost civilization.

I believe that my idea was that it led into the conning tower of a nuclear submarine that had run aground and been buried in an epic mudslide (I thought this could be a rich area for stories about salvaging equipment, and loose nukes, and such things).

As we trudged through the first half of season one, Damon rushed into the writers room one day with an uncharacteristic bounce in his step and declared that, "Inside the hatch there's a room with a guy in it and if he doesn't press a button every 108 minutes, the world will end."

It was a brilliant idea that he felt had legs and could be exploited for story mileage... of course, when we asked why this byzantine mechanism was necessary, the explanation was a lot more diffuse: it had to do with the exotic source of energy at the core of the island that caused all the other trouble faced by the castaways... at least until someone else figured out how to beat it. Thus armed with an operating theory with which Damon was comfortable, we soldiered on, put the discovery of the hatch into episode ten... and JJ finally got his mystery box.

This was Damon's response to - and ultimate compromise with - the whole construct of the mystery box. Damon didn't want to risk letting the audience down by promising something he couldn't deliver, so rather than fight the mysteries, he would merely defer them until an explanation could be added to the nimbus of ideas that already existed around the show. It's a good example of the collaborative relationship that developed between him and JJ both in the pre-history of the project and through the first part of the first season.

To many, all that I have already written may still not answer the question of "Did we know what we were doing, or were we just making it up as we went along?"

The truth is complicated, isn't it, dear reader? And it's only going to get more so...

The idea that there is a simple truth about the creation of *Lost* also begs two additional questions... did we ever know what the island was? And was it purgatory?

If that's what you are here to find out, let me dispense with those quickly, as you probably feel like I have already wasted enough of your time.

As I described before, there was definitely a sort of "operational theory" for what the island would be - it was liked by some and loathed by others - and since Damon and Carlton chose not to say it out loud in the series finale, I won't presume to do it for them. Suffice it to say there was a concrete reason that we openly discussed on several occasions about why the island had an exotic source of power in its core that was able to wreak such miracles as time travel, the motion of the island, and somehow connect with selected people on a psychic level.

On question number two. It is not purgatory. It was never purgatory. It will never be purgatory.

Even after watching the series finale following a four-year absence from any exposure to the show, it was pretty clear to me that only after clearing up whatever insanity was happening on the island did Jack die... and then found himself in a pan-denominational spiritual halfway house where his father's spirit explained that - because the events of the island were so significant to the ensemble of *Lost* - they had all been brought here to wait for one another so that they would all ascend together. Frankly, I found it to be a nice spiritual grace note, but it most certainly was not a confirmation that the island was purgatory.

There, now you know. Go with God.

Of course, all these answers just keep causing that one question to rear its ugly head once more: "Did we really know what we were doing, or were we just making it up as we went?"

As with all other shows, the influx of talent into the writers room during the transition from pilot to series caused a lot of change, and questioning of the ideas with which the show came into being. On most shows, this process usually happens in apropos of a series bible written by the show's creator in close conjunction with their production company, studio, and network.

In our case, it was an extraordinary pilot film, a profoundly weird series format document/sales pitch that was obsolete before it left the offices of Bad Robot, a lot of disparate ideas that had been pitched at different times to network and studio over the course of five months of rolling series development, a sheaf of story and character pitches, and assorted notes from the think tank sessions... not to mention the contents of Damon Lindelof's brain: where many of these ideas had already coalesced as canon, many were in the process of being evaluated for their worth, and many were to die on the vine.

The writers room with which *Lost* would begin its first season was a wonderful collection of massively talented writers. It was also a very different room from that with which we would end the season - and I would describe that subsequent room in the same glowing terms.

That none of the inaugural staff - aside from me - survived the inevitable, and oftentimes unfair, adjustments that shows have to make in their personnel in order to find the right creative mix doesn't diminish their accomplishments. It was this writers room that, under Damon's leadership, crafted the first ten episodes of *Lost*. This first batch of episodes arguably cemented from the success of the pilot an enduring base of both audience support and critical approval that would set the tone for the show's enduring appeal.

These writers - the aforementioned Paul Dini, Jennifer Johnson, and Christian Taylor, now joined by co-Executive Producer David Fury, writer/producers Lynne Litt, and Kim Clements, and staff writer Monica Macer, assisted by future episode writers Matt Ragghianti and Dawn Lambertsen Kelly, and script coordinator Brent Fletcher - began on *Lost* the arduous process that all shows have to endure throughout their existence: turning mere ideas into drama.

Again, the answer to the question "Did we know what we were doing, or were we just making it up as we went along?" hits a logical snag here. *Lost* was not the first - nor the second or third - television series in existence to strand a cast of beautiful people, some with professional skills and some with shady pasts, on a deserted island. Sherwood Schwartz did it for laughs in the sixties with *Gilligan's Island*. Rod Serling did it for polemic, socially relevant drama in the early seventies with

The New People. Hell, there was a show on German television in 2004 called *Verschollen* ("Forgotten") that dealt with survivors of a plane crash trying to live together on an island without hope of rescue - and even a YA series called *Flight 29 Down*, developed around the same time as *Lost* that explored the premise, only with much younger characters.

All of these shows had ideas and notions, and characters, and maybe even a "plan" that described seasons worth of story: but the relative quality of all these projects did not hinge on the quality of their long-term strategy, but rather the quality of the translation of whatever thoughts the writers had from concept, to script, and to film.

That's what writers' rooms do: they take something like "Fifteen people with reams of variably canonical backstory that has been discussed over a period of months are stranded on a desert island where a mysterious organization conducted exotic experiments and will face a number of episodic challenges even as they are threatened by a violent group of inhabitants who are clearly not natives, but rather a coordinated and technologically advanced group of people with a habit of kidnapping gifted children" and turn it into an hour's worth of drama about people with rich inner lives and divergent opinions about how to live them figuring it out both against and alongside one another.

As a result, one could easily make the argument that we were, in fact, making it up as we went. "One" could also present the amount of change, refinement, and expansion that our core ideas underwent once the colloquium of writers went to work on them as proof.

In fact, let me present one case study that illustrates just that with one of the most shocking revelations of the series...

The idea that Locke was in a wheelchair was so late an addition to his episode that the entire story once existed without it. Even though we knew from the very first day that Locke's arc would be that of a warped, frustrated middle-aged man who, feeling that his survival was a mystical revelation, would recast himself as a sort of shamanistic badass on the island, the wheelchair was almost an afterthought.

The original story break for that episode focused on Locke being a meek, if physically able, office drone whose hopes and dreams

had all fizzled out and he was trapped in a loser job where he was mercilessly abused and passed over by entitled, supercilious, younger co-workers. The original story break ended with Locke - who had bragged to his office rivals about embarking on the adventure of a lifetime - alone and miserable in a bus heading away from an outback tourist trap... realizing that his dreams of being a great adventurer were just that.

It was not until the episode had been plotted that Damon rushed into the writers room and pitched his overnight brainstorm that there should be a Sixth Sense-like twist... that Locke should be sitting in all of his scenes... and it's not until the end that we realize he was in a wheelchair all along, adding a layer of cruelty and poignancy to the abuse and skepticism he suffered from his co-workers...

And creating the shocking, series-defining reveal that the island had healed Locke and his transcendence may have been the product of a higher cosmic force at work on the island!

Overnight brainstorms were not unusual for Damon, who tended to come up with his best ideas when given a creative foundation, and then some time outside of the intellectual blood sport/competitive group therapy of the writers room to cogitate. It was in much the same way that he came up with the idea that Jack's father's casket would be on the plane, but his body would not be found - leading to occasional appearances on the island by his ghost.

The episode's writer, David Fury, initially argued against the Locke-in-a-Wheelchair twist. He held fast to the contention that he had already rendered a very Willy Loman-esque version of the story where Locke was a truly tragic figure. In David's arguments, the wheelchair twist was a kind of supernatural crutch that robbed the character of a pathos that felt lived-in and real.

Being showrunner, Damon eventually prevailed. Being a consummate professional and an exceptional artist, Fury rendered the story so well that he was not only able to deliver the twist, but also overcome his objections to bring to Locke all the Willy Loman-esque tragedy he saw in the story before it went supernatural. As I said before, Locke-in-a-Wheelchair was widely seen as the turning point when *Lost* went from being a "hit pilot premiere" to being a "hit show." That episode - "Walkabout" - made our

buzz go critical, and was also the source of an Emmy nomination for David.

What I just described was only one of a continuum of very interesting, ongoing, moments in which improvisation - coupled with a strong conceptual foundation of previously generated ideas - provided crucial watershed events for the series. Making these brainstorming happen was our job as a writers room, after all.

The shortest version of this type of event? One afternoon, Damon rushed into the writers room and asked to no one in particular "So what is 'The Black Rock'?"

Paul Dini lifted his head from his sketch pad (he was and is an accomplished doodler) and plainly stated "It's an eighteenth-century sailing ship that got beached on the island."

Damon exclaimed something to the effect of "Sold!" and quickly left the room: a new piece of canon born from raw improvisation colliding with something that had been planted in the pilot script months before.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention David Fury - Emmy nomination notwithstanding - as one of the unsung MVPs of the first season. The episode explaining Hurley's backstory, for example, did not come until late in the season, when David cracked it and provided the series with one of its most enduring motifs.

For most of season one, none of us could create a past that fit the tremendous charm that Jorge Garcia brought to the role of Hurley. Everything we came up with seemed to diminish the character that was actively evolving out of the lovely alchemy between the writers inspiration and the actor's interpretation of our work. For a long time, we had the idea that Hurley's real secret was that - because he was such an amiable sort - he was the world's most successful repo man and had been in Australia to repo a wayward tech millionaire's yacht. Hurley's "mutant ability" in this version of his story was that through his unassuming, best-friend-to-the-world demeanor, he could talk anyone out of anything.

Needless to say, no one could make that story work - and we REALLY tried. Damon eventually came up with the idea of Hurley winning the lottery, and the importance of the numbers became

part of the story during a separate lunchtime conversation between him, Fury and JJ (whose visits to the show grew fewer and farther between). Believe it or not, the numbers were not part of the series mythology until well into the first season, although Damon was obsessed with the number 23 and the way it keeps popping up in the world.

So in this episode, we not only nailed down a backstory for Hurley that yielded episodic story fodder for years to come, but also, once the idea of the numbers manifested (and received its maiden voyage in a script once again written by David Fury, this time in collaboration with Brent Fletcher) the staff took the idea and ran with it. We not only presented the numbers everywhere we could, but also retrofitted them into what eventually became known as "The Valenzetti Equation" - the Drake-like construct that predicted the end of the world.

Again, this is a good example of how through improvisation a new idea fits perfectly with existing concepts and melds seamlessly into the texture of the series.

Another great idea that developed on the fly during the sweep of the first season was the notion that all our characters had met or somehow crossed paths during their flashbacks. This eventually became a crucial part of the series - that the world of *Lost* was one of ongoing connections between disparate people whose lives were on a path that would eventually reveal a common destiny - but it was certainly not in the original designs.

That literally came out of us thinking during the earliest episode breaks that, "Wouldn't it be neat if, when we flash back to someone at the airport, you can see someone else from the cast in the background doing something interesting?"

That notion eventually landed as one of the thematic pillars of the series. During the first season, it was a fun challenge to see just how creatively we could get the stories to merge... and because of that, eventually, Anthony Cooper became Sawyer's "Sawyer" and, later, Claire became Jack's half sister.

Once one great idea takes root, it leads to many others, and the job of the room is to follow the options and see where they take you.

There are also lot of things that developed long after I left the show, things that - when mentioned to me by friends still on

the series, or fans whom I befriended during my time there - often made me go "huh?"

For example, while the idea was that the island called out to people and brought them in as part of a greater Manichean conflict, I didn't once in two years and change hear the name "Jacob" or "the man in black." The idea that people were being recruited to come to the island as part of this greater agenda was never brought up during my time on the show, even though by all accounts it eventually became the crux of the series' final arc.

Presumably, as the length of the series increased, the writers needed to find ways to turn mere concepts into dramatic constructs... preferably with the ability to say dialogue.

Also, when I finally revisited the show after for years away, my initial response to the plot of the series finale was "why's Henry Gale still on this show and how did he become the most important man in the universe?"

So, just as most characters don't take on a life of their own until after the actors have brought their skills and interpretation to the table, there are few drawn-in-advance-plans for series television - well or poorly sketched out - that survive the crucible of the writers room intact. Why hire a group of geniuses at great expense, to brainstorm and execute ideas, if you already know exactly what everything is and where it's supposed to go?

The *Lost* writers room, especially at this early stage, was a churlish and unwieldy beast. Big personalities, big ideas, and even bigger opinions. Not everybody played well together, not everybody took disagreement in stride, and it was often very difficult to get the ducks to quack in unison - or to agree that the word "quack" was a good representation of the vernacular - much less swim in a row.

Wresting consensus from this hydra would have been a job of work for the most hardened of showrunners. For a first timer such as Damon, the room's natural tendency to argue everything until sternly being told otherwise - and then continue until threatened with outright extinction - was a source of much stress and anxiety.

As the series went into the day-to-day, week-to-week, grind of producing scripts and episodes with air date deadlines looming, the rigors of leading the production in Hawaii all the way from the writers office in Burbank - even with a magnificent producing director like Jack Bender at the helm along with producer Jean Higgins in Hawaii, the showrunner is expected to be the lead creative voice in the series - as well as JJ's mounting absence (it was always understood that he would not be a day-to-day presence in the series, but his quick acquisition of the directing assignment on *Mission: Impossible 3* made for a much faster departure than any of us expected - the *Lost* pilot, it seems, was a cracking directing sample, perfect to land the job on a Hollywood franchise tentpole) the strain on Damon was rapidly becoming a problem that would have to be addressed.

As early as the production of our sixth or seventh episode - shortly before *Lost* premiered - a search seemed to be going on for a showrunner who could come in and lighten some of Damon's load to allow him to do what he did best: be the lead creative voice of *Lost*.

For a few weeks, the names of potential candidates would come and go. Jeff Pinkner - who, as I mentioned before, would eventually sign up to executive produce later in the show's run - was one of these names. He was already in the Bad Robot family, was already a consultant on *Lost*, and worked on *Alias* just across the way from the offices of *Lost*. This arrangement, however, would not be feasible - in the best of times, neither *Alias* nor *Lost* were the sort of productions that could be executive-produced on a part-time basis, and we were in crisis.

Around the same time, John Eisendrath (a successful and well-regarded showrunner who had also worked on *Alias*, was then working on pilots with Bad Robot, and today runs *The Blacklist*) came in to watch the inner workings of *Lost*. All I know is that after a morning watching our writers room work the massive patchwork of fifteen series leads, flashbacks, and a not-entirely developed, and potentially science-fictional continuity, Eisendrath stood up from the couch, made a funny remark about the enormity of the task ahead, bid us farewell, and was never heard from again.

At the same time, Damon was in conversations with Carlton Cuse, who had hired him for his first network writing job on *Nash Bridges*, which Carlton had created, and whom he viewed as a mentor.

By the time Carlton came to work full-time on *Lost* - late September of '04, as I was outlining "All the Best Cowboys Have Daddy Issues" and as the room was about to launch the story break for "Whatever the Case May Be" - ABC had spent millions advertising the show, the critics had weighed in and anointed us one of the chosen, and sustained, pop culture-defining success seemed imminent... but all of this early promise could have just as easily turned to failure had the show imploded creatively.

Damon has been very frank in interviews about his state of mind during this time in the history of *Lost*, and I do not feel comfortable speaking for him. Here's what I witnessed and was told by him at the time: he paid a steep price to bring about the chemical reaction that resulted in the show's amazing premiere and first run of episodes.

To this day, I have great sympathy for Damon's plight: he had thrust upon him the stewardship of what became a highly profitable, network-defining franchise, with a billion moving parts and stratospheric stakes at a very early moment in his career. At the time, all I wanted was for him to stop wrestling the pack of black dogs running around his brain - especially the anxiety over not having the goods to back up the dramatic promises we had made - and relish the scope of his considerable accomplishment.

Through the first season of *Lost*, I was never anything less than confident that - with Damon's lead and the creative team we had in place - it was more than possible to present the audience with answers derived from our work and satisfy their hunger for the mysteries we had established. Perhaps that Damon couldn't share that confidence - and that it seemed to torture him on both an emotional and physical level - is the ultimate answer to those who believe that we never had a plan and were just making it up as we went.

Let me be absolutely clear on this, because Lindelof and *Lost* bashing remain to this day something akin to an Olympic sport. The man is every bit the genius he has been hyped to be. If you feel that not all of his work reflects this truth, I would ask, "Whose does who works at the pace of production - and with the levels of interference foisted on - film and television writers?"

Take this to the bank: in my years in television, I have rarely, if perhaps ever, met as uncannily gifted a spinner of yarns and creator of intrigue as Damon Lindelof.

Also, while I suppose that Damon and I remain reasonably cordial - I mean, it's been years since we last crossed paths, but that last time he didn't take a swing at me or anything - he remains first and foremost my former employer. I am certain that the email and phone number I have for him have been changed in the wake of his massive successes in the years since, and, even if they hadn't, I would not give them to anyone whose only recourse is to ask me for them.

Also, I can't get your spec script to Damon... or your story idea for *The Leftovers*... or your Dharma Initiative logo-shaped artisanal lolly-pops. I can't get him to donate a piece of *Lost* memorabilia to your favorite charity, and I sure as Shekels can't get him to go on your podcast...

In fact, if you want to invite me to go on your podcast, I'd better not find out after I have been on the podcast, and given you a piece of my soul, that the only reason you wanted me to be on your podcast was to see if you could become good enough podcast buddies with me to do you the favor of either calling Damon to be on your podcast, or giving you his digits so that you could call him and ask him to be on your podcast.

If it seems petty for me to bring this up, trust me, you have no idea the punishing frequency with which it happens.

Anyway, suffice it to say that around when Carlton joined us - Damon's mood was pitch black and exhausted. There was a very real possibility that *Lost* might have had to soldier on without its defining creative voice.

One afternoon, I was sitting in a colleague's office - we were working out some piece of scenework - when Damon entered to tell us that he was leaving, but that we should be fine in Carlton's capable hands. After much conversation, we said some confused and emotional good-byes and he left... and not just from that office... he quite literally walked out of the building and wasn't seen for the rest of the day... or the following day... or the day after!

As you might imagine, we were all pretty freaked out by this. I mean, we work in the rather sedate and corporate world of

television for the luvva Jehovah: this was more like the music industry.

Another sign that made us wonder whether we would ever see Damon again, was, quite literally, a sign. While the placard in front of Damon's parking spot always read "EXECUTIVE PRODUCER DAMON LINDELOF," when the Disney facilities workers came in to attach a nameplate to Carlton Cuse's new parking spot, the sign read - I would later be told, at Damon's insistence - "SHOWRUNNER CARLTON CUSE."

What we soon learned was that Carlton had - very wisely, given Damon's level of fatigue - agreed to let him go for an unspecified amount of time to see if he would be able to relax and then return with a clearer head.

A week later, Damon came back from a retreat to the palm desert. No, people, he wasn't out wandering the wastes in sackcloth and confronting the devil, he had been at Two Bunch Palms - which you might remember as that nice spa featured in the Robert Altman film *The Player*. If he didn't look tanned, rested, and ready, Damon at least appeared willing to climb back into the ring with the now-confirmed-as-pop-culture-defining, massive-audience-gathering, monster hit that was *Lost*.

If anything seemed to convince Damon of how badly *Lost* needed him, it was probably hearing the story break developing on the white-board in his absence. Now, there had been times - and, again, I have heard him say as much in interviews -- when Damon expressed to us that he felt the show was literally sucking away his soul and that he wished he could jump. Sometimes he would even threaten to do it off a cliff...

However, when Damon Lindelof heard the beats to a story in which Hurley was revealed to be an amateur hypnotist who would use his abilities to pry to the location of the kidnapped Claire from the now-amnesiac Charlie, his pride of ownership came roaring back with bull force.

If ever there was a moment when I knew that there was no way Damon Lindelof would ever leave *Lost* again it was when he told us what he thought of that idea.

(Eventually, hypnosis found its way into the show, in a second season episode in which tail section survivor Libby used it on

Claire - I suppose that much of Damon's strenuous objections came from us giving that skill to Hurley.)

Over the years, Damon and Carlton came to be collectively known as "Darlton" by fans and chroniclers of the show. They were publicly acknowledged as the collective creative force behind *Lost* and were essentially inseparable, even going as far as to appear in bed together - like Bob Newhart and Suzanne Pleshette on the Newhart series finale - in a comedy sketch spoofing the *Lost* series finale on the Jimmy Kimmel Show.

The accomplishments of "Darlton" would be extraordinary. From our early success, "Darlton" created a way to sustain the show's pace of invention and novelty for years to come. They also became - among the likes of Shonda Rhimes, Joss Whedon, Matthew Weiner, and Kurt Sutter - the standard bearers of a new breed of rockstar showrunner whose celebrity is inextricable from the fame of their shows.

Most importantly, "Darlton" eventually negotiated the end date for the series: a move that relieved a great deal of tension from the creative process. Thanks to them, the writers of *Lost* - myself not included, as I was long gone by then - were able to set a creative goal and truly steer the ship there without the need for the sort of dramatic stalling of which we were so frequently, and occasionally accurately, accused.

Like everything else having to do with *Lost* - and, if you take nothing else from this lengthy read, life itself - "Darlton" did not appear *ex nihilo*. Even though Carlton had previously employed Damon, and Damon continued to consider him an Obi-Wan-like figure, this was a very different playing field: one in which Carlton's former mentee had an extraordinary amount of personal and emotional authorship and creative authority.

Carlton's immediate mandate would be to stabilize the creative matrix of the show, bring a stronger voice of command to the writers room, give Damon freedom from the managerial responsibilities of the series to focus on nailing down the show's creative concerns, provide collaborative support in making decisions about the direction of the series (a place where Damon often found himself pummeled by the massive amount of choices and conflicting opinions), and to insure the smooth, continuous delivery of material of equal quality to the first half of the season to our production in Hawaii.

Eventually "Darlton" would handle all of these duties collectively, and take together the bows for both the creative glory and the organizational efficiency of *Lost*. At the inception of this partnership, however, Carlton was first and foremost a seasoned manager who was there to support a less experienced one.

I was very flattered to be asked by Carlton to co-author his first script for the show, "Hearts and Minds." Carlton felt that I had a good bead on the voice of the series and that working with me would be helpful. Carlton must have been pleased with the result, because as new writers entered the show - first Leonard Dick, and then Eddy Kitsis and Adam Horowitz - Carlton would ask them to work with me, which is how I got to co-write "...In Translation" and "Born to Run."

Sadly, when I talk about "new writers entering the series," it is because some were asked to leave the series. As I said before, the *Lost* writers room was a contentious place and - while, in many shows, that spirit of debate is what makes the best ideas float to the surface - when that makes the show's creator feel like he has a parliament of adversaries waiting to undermine his vision, then changes have to be made.

The first thirteen episodes of a twenty-two-episode series are, essentially, a show's "shakedown" cruise. It is when the network orders a show's "back nine" that the first changes in the show's creative staff are made. Most contract for writers and other creatives are split at the thirteenth episode, with an option to continue. The departures usually happen for the same reasons they do on any other job site: the personalities, styles, or vision of staff members don't jibe with those of the boss, or bosses in this case.

There's very little shame in being let go from a television show. It's an extremely common occurrence because the business is so nomadic and subjective, like "the show got cancelled" nomadic, and "you just don't get it" subjective. None of that makes firings any less traumatic, especially when the show on which you will no longer be working happens to be the biggest and most talked-about hit of the season.

As I said before, by the time the first season ended, every writer who began the season, other than me, was gone. When something like this happens, you are naturally beset by conflicting emotions.

You feel grateful to be asked back. You also feel shitty for being the only one. You also feel bad because you spent more time in the past few months with these people than you did your own family and you have become very fond of them - not to mention that you feel that you built something truly special that would not be here without them. You also feel like you "get" why some of them didn't work out on the show.

Also, you get on with the show and keep earning your pay, you thank Jah these difficult decisions weren't yours to make, you hope that if you are next, your agent is busy leveraging the show's fame into a rich deal elsewhere... and after all the rupture, trauma, good-byes, and recriminations are done (one departing writer took me aside and accused me of "running a masterful political game" on our employers in order to secure my survival on the series), you mostly feel like that lyric from the Geto Boys...

"When the fry dies down, what the fuck ya gonna do?"

As *Lost* entered its second season, we had run through a great deal of the backstory material we created in the think tank and through the first season. As a result of this expenditure, we had also established a world full of amazing characters who were ripe for further exploration. We had also agreed that in season two, we would mix things up by bringing in some new blood in the form of the tail section survivors... a plan we began to enact in season one through the radio transmission received by Boone, the ongoing mentions of Rose's husband Bernard, and, most saliently, the reveal of Ana-Lucia Cortez in the season finale.

More importantly, the success of the show made it possible to truly dig into our stash of ideas for revelations about the island. Because the think tank had been such a help in developing the show, it was decided that before we began to work on episodic ideas, the show's writing staff - which now comprised "Darlton," co-executive producers Steven Maeda, and Craig Wright, writer/producers Leonard Dick, Eddy Kitsis and Adam Horowitz working as a team, Elizabeth Sarnoff, and staff writer Christina Kim (assisted once again by Dawn and Matt, now joined by Gregg Nations, who would also go on to script coordinate for the remainder of the series as well as write) - would convene in a "minicamp" to decide which secrets would be revealed and when, and to chart the tentpoles for the season.

This would become the pattern for the rest of the seasons of *Lost*, the writers would meet to decide where the show was going that year, and then dig into weekly story, working from the broad strokes down to the individual episodes.

It was also during this minicamp that Craig Wright made his mark early by re-christening the Medusa Corporation as "The Dharma Initiative" and giving a name to its creator, Scandinavian billionaire and reformed weapons magnate Alvar Hanso. As things finally received the names they would have for years to come, they rose to the level of canon and prepared to take their place in the spotlight.

Another pattern that expressed itself during this first minicamp would become the *modus operandus* for the remainder of *Lost*. As Damon and Carlton solidified their preferred workflow and morphed into "Darlton" it quickly became clear that they would also take a heavier hand in the authorship of scripts. Rather than have individual writers shepherd their stories from the white-board through scripting, and then pre-production and on-set rewrites, "Darlton" would now have the room break stories and then team up writers to complete the scripts quickly, allowing them to more thoroughly re-evaluate the material on their own time.

From halfway through the first season, the practice of sending writer/producers to Hawaii to oversee production on their episodes was suspended to allow us to catch up on script and story generation and allow "Darlton" to make a stronger mark as the show's final word. With a show as complicated as *Lost*, this now became standard operating procedure: the writers were more needed in Burbank, plotting out the show's long arcs than on the set.

It also became standard practice for "Darlton" to peel away from the hubbub of the writers room to "work the show" on their own and then return to the room with fully-baked ideas for us to incorporate into arcs and stories.

Generally, I wouldn't find any of the above particularly disagreeable. Television is a collaborative medium, after all, and working at the pleasure of your showrunner - and in their preferred method, whatever that may be - is what we are paid to do. It is not the lot of me and my fellow hired guns to insist that the work tailor itself to us: it's the showrunner's world and you're just visiting, and we know that.

However, I something about the application of these new workflows in the context of *Lost* changed my relationship with the show irrevocably.

Maybe I had too close an attachment to the romantic spirit of "brilliance from chaos" that characterized our first season, but I found all of this to be a comedown - and my relationship with both *Lost* and "Darlton" suffered. As season two progressed, I found myself more and more cut off from *Lost*'s creative mainstream, and it was hard to disguise my disaffection.

(That much said, I've been told I suffer from "resting bitch face" so maybe that had something to do with it too.)

Even though I continued to play a key role in the development of series concepts such as the history of the Dharma Initiative (the first Dharma training film was part of "Orientation" which I co-wrote with Craig Wright), and much of my work during the second season involved fleshing out the Dharma Initiative's origins, discerning the meaning of the numbers, planting the Valenzetti Equation firmly in series canon, and create a narrative for the work of the Hanso Foundation - both for the series and for a massive transmedia project called "The *Lost* Experience" - I was repeatedly told that my individual voice as a creator of story, character, and dialogue was becoming too idiosyncratic for the current direction of the show.

On February of 2006, I resigned.

It wasn't a huge dramatic moment, but rather an inevitable conclusion. We were still in the thick of our "first season victory lap," having already won the Emmy, TCA, and Golden Globe - and twenty-four hours after I resigned, I would be sharing the stage not just with "Darlton" but also all of the writers from the first season as well as all the current writers on the show.

Anyway, Damon and I chatted after work on a Friday night and agreed my time had come. I pitched the idea that I run my contract to the end of the season, continue to render services, work in the writers room, and shepherd "The *Lost* Experience" to completion. Frankly, I think we were all relieved to just have out in the open what everyone already knew: this founding member had become a square peg.

All that said, I loved *Lost* and never stopped fighting for it.

"The *Lost* Experience" is a good example. Jordan Rosenberg - then a Disney Writing Fellow, now an accomplished writer whose credits include *Medium* and *Falling Skies* (not to mention my show *The Middleman*) as well as the *Lost* third season episode "*Par Avion*" - and I wrote every last word of that transmedia project, not only creating concepts that endured in the show's canon, but also taking on the task of making sure that everything we did passed muster with "Darlton" and ABC's promotion department.

At the same time we coordinated the production of the thing with our broadcast and online media partners in England and Australia - and managed such weird, out-of-the-box tasks as sourcing the production of candy bars, meeting with ad agencies to discuss such esoteric issues as whether or not we could integrate the creation of "lymon" into the work of the Hanso Foundation in order to forge a strategic partnership with Sprite, working with the editorial department of a major publishing house to put hints about the show in an otherwise unrelated novel, coordinating a global scavenger hunt, acting in (and improvising most of the content of) a series of fake radio broadcasts - and casting and producing dozens of web videos elaborating the story of the Dharma Initiative and its founders.

I participated in all of this through the summer of 2006, even though I was by then co-executive producer of the CBS/Paramount hit show *Medium*, and, most likely, rendering services to ABC in promotion of a show that aired on the same time slot was a flagrant breach of contract. Please tell no one.

On the day I cleaned out my office, the *Lost* writers suite was deserted. The third season writers, including my replacement, had already been hired and the minicamp relocated to a resort in Hawaii.

I must admit that was a bitter pill... a resort in Hawaii sounded like a much better place to brainstorm than our offices in Burbank... and I did have some involvement in the success that paid for that trip. But, as I said before, the show must go on, and again, in the immortal words of the Geto Boys...

"When the shit jumps off, what the fuck ya gonna do."

As I packed up two years worth of stuff, a warm and welcome thought danced around my brain: an idea for *Lost*. As I had to

write an email telling Damon that I would not be able to attend the screening he had planned for the season two finale (I only had one free week before starting on *Medium* and had planned a trip out of town), I added my idea to my regrets on the invitation and pledged that this would be the last thing I ever pitched him for *Lost*.

Hell, I was still on the payroll, so why not?

Damon responded warmly, and I went on my way... later, when the idea showed up in season three, I was ultimately gratified. Even on the last minute of the last day, I had been able to make a positive contribution to the future of something that had absolutely changed my life.

What was the idea?

Oh come on. Do you think I learned nothing from JJ? I may be saying now that this is the last time I will speak publicly about *Lost*, but I would be a fool if I left nothing in the mystery box!

There are two stories that best reflect the joyous, life-changing side of having worked on something that, at least for a little while, changed the face of popular culture and influenced a worldwide audience...

While waiting to return home from a trip to France, I stood at a newsstand at Charles De Gaulle Airport. Turning to my wife, I said "I bet I can pick out two magazines from this rack that have my picture in them." She took the dare.

I turned and plucked out a copy of the Official *Lost* Magazine, which was published worldwide, and one of the British Sci-Fi publication SFX, where I had been interviewed that month because of my work on *Lost*. I was pictured in both.

If ever there was a more textbook case of having JUST the right amount of fame, that was it. Imagine being able to pull off that stunt, but not having so much fame that it decimates your privacy, inverts your moral priorities, causes you to lose all empathy for the rest of the world, and eventually drives you to a Britney Spearsian public downward spiral of substance abuse and head-shaving.

The second story takes place in my neighborhood dog park in the summer between seasons one and two.

This one man, a very soft-spoken and kind sort, would bring his sick dog - a once beautiful, now emaciated chocolate-colored pit bull terrier - to the park every morning. The dog was dying of canine leukemia, but the owner wanted him to spend his last days in the company of other dogs, and would let him play for as long as his frail body would allow.

One morning, we sat together on a bench, petting the bag of fur and protruding bones that had once been his strong and loyal companion. Tuckered out after just a little bit of light play, the dog slept fitfully at our feet, his visible ribs trembling with each passing breath.

With tears in his eyes, the man told me that his dog would probably be dead by the week's end.

"He's a great dog," he said.

"He's not just a great dog," I replied, "he has a great owner."

We wept together for a moment.

And then it got awkward.

I mean, aside from knowing each other's dogs, and a few cursory conversations - and this strange moment of shared emotional intimacy - we were kinda, sorta, well... total strangers.

So the man wiped his tears and asked me what I did for a living. I told him I was one of the writers of *Lost*.

His eyes saucered like a Tex Avery cartoon character. His voice went up a dozen decibels and at least one octave. Waving his hands into the air he exclaimed:

"OH MY GAWD! CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON IN THAT ISLAND?!?"

Ladies and gentlemen, the power of *Lost*.

Of course, none of this answers the one question, only question that matters - the question that brought you here, Neo: "Did we know what we were doing, or were we just making it all up as we went?"

If you feel that I have not yet adequately addressed that... if you now consider yourself so strung along for so long that you are positively entitled to something brief and concise - something you can tell your friends at cocktail parties, something that accounts for the rigor of not just being entertained by six seasons of *Lost*, but also trudging through countless articles, and magazines, and documentaries, and clip shows, and making-of books, and "oral histories," and this rambling screed - OK, dear reader, here it is...

First we built a world. Then we filled it with an ensemble of flawed but interesting characters - people who were real to us, people with enough depth in their respective psyches to withstand years of careful dramatic analysis. Then we created a thrilling and undeniable set of circumstances in which these characters had to bond together and solve problems in interesting ways.

Soon thereafter, we created a way for you to witness their pasts and compare the people they once were with the people they were in the process of becoming. While that was going on, we also created an entire 747s worth of ideas, notions, fragments, complications, and concepts that would - if properly and thoughtfully mined - yield enough narrative fiction to last as long as our corporate overlords would demand to feed their need for profit and prestige, and then, just to be sure, teams of exceptionally talented people worked nonstop to make sure the 747 never emptied out.

And then we made it all up as we went.