

# *MORE THAN ONE WAY HOME*

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A depressed and overweight high school teacher, haunted by self-doubt and a cruel inner voice, embarks on a transformative journey through therapy, confronting the childhood memories and traumas that shaped him. As he revisits his past – his wise grandmother’s lessons, his father’s teachings on honor, and his own regrets – he discovers that healing begins with self-forgiveness and the courage to move forward.

Written by Jeffrey L. Baxter

Based on the book “More Than One Way Home”

By Jeffrey L. Baxter

Writers Guild of America

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## ***MORE THAN ONE WAY HOME***

Movie treatment for a dramatic feature film

***A Note:** Although this is an autobiographical work, I will refer to myself in the third person.*

**Premise:** A once-passionate high school teacher, Jeff Baxter, finds himself trapped in a cycle of depression, obesity, and self-doubt, haunted by a cruel inner voice that tells him he's unworthy of happiness. When his health reaches a breaking point, his wife urges him to seek therapy, forcing him to confront painful childhood memories and past traumas.

As Jeff revisits the formative moments of his youth – his grandmother's wisdom, his father's lessons on honor, mischievous adventures with childhood friends, and a devastating loss – he begins to understand the root of his suffering. Through therapy, he discovers that his worst critic is not his father or past failures, but his own inability to forgive himself.

By reconnecting with his past, Jeff learns that he still has the power to change his future. But to truly heal, he must accept one simple truth:

There's more than one way home.

**Audience:** Family audiences male and female aged 13 and up with a specific target of adult audiences who understand the themes. This film will appeal to those who enjoy emotional character-driven dramas, such as *The Whale* and *Good Will Hunting*.

**Themes:** The significance of family and intergenerational relationships is a central theme, mainly manifested in Jeff's relationship with Grandma Younkin, who he shares a special bond with. The impact of loss and the complexities of grief is another main theme that is explored in depth. The death of Jeff's infant son Jordan is a pivotal event that triggers his deepest grief. The struggle with mental health is a significant aspect of the film too, manifested through Jeff confronting his own inner self-critic, personified as a character called "Damien." Finally, forgiveness, the restoration of hope and finding meaning in life's journey is an important theme that can apply to us all as it's important to maintain hope in one's life.

**Setting:** This film takes place mainly in Kansas, from the 1950s through late 1990s. We explore Jeff's childhood home in Great Bend, Kansas, as well as other Kansas cities like Kansas City, Lawrence, and Lansing, where the Mount Muncie Cemetery location is where Jeff's infant son Jordan is buried.

### *Main Characters*

1. **Jeffrey Baxter:** The main character, Jeff is a high school English teacher struggling with chronic depression, obesity, and self-worth issues. His journey of self-discovery, therapy, and reconnecting with his childhood memories forms the core of the story. He is introspective, intelligent, and deeply influenced by literature and the lessons he learned from his Grandma Younkin.
2. **Damien:** The main antagonist - Jeff's inner self-critic voice personified in the film as a being that only Jeff can see. Damien is only mentioned in the book, but is a metaphor for Jeff's inner struggle and will be depicted as a character who frequently confronts Jeff, tormenting him.
3. **Mel:** Jeff's Therapist – A kind, perceptive, and slightly frumpy therapist who helps Jeff confront his past and the roots of his depression. Through their sessions, Mel helps Jeff uncover and conquer his inner demons, particularly the oppressive voice of "Damien."
4. **Connie Baxter:** Jeff's wife, a supportive and understanding partner, Connie is the first to recognize Jeff's struggles and encourages him to seek therapy. She stands by him through his darkest times, offering love and stability.
5. **Grandma Younkin:** Jeff's wise and loving grandmother, who raises him during his early years. A retired English teacher, she imparts wisdom through literature and thoughtful discussions on life. Her guidance, patience, and unwavering support provide Jeff with a moral and emotional compass.

### *Supporting & Minor Characters*

1. **Hiram Baxter:** Jeff's father, a hardworking and honorable man. Hiram Baxter is a former Marine medic and postman who instills in Jeff values of integrity, hard work, and responsibility. Though stern, he is deeply loving and devoted to his family. He serves as a moral example for Jeff.
2. **Patricia Baxter:** A reserved and distant woman, Jeff's mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis shortly after his birth.
3. **Bobby Robertson:** A childhood friend of Jeff who at age 8, the two of them steal air caps off tires from cars in the neighborhood. This leads to a life lesson Jeff's father teaches him.

4. **Officer Krupke:** A police officer who catches Bobby and Jeff stealing air caps from the tires. He brings Jeff home to his father where Hiram comes up with a brilliant plan to teach his son honesty.
5. **Terry Claassen:** Jeff's friend and lab partner in high school. The two of them take some potassium from the chemistry lab to see what happens with water, with explosive results.
6. **Lester Spong:** High school Chemistry teacher. Demonstrates the effect of potassium and H<sub>2</sub>O, which inspires Jeff and Terry in their experiment.
7. **Al Ortulani:** Fellow teacher and colleague at one of the schools Jeff teaches at. He supports his writing.
8. **Dustin Baxter:** Jeff's oldest son. He will be depicted at various ages during flashbacks, and is 18 in the main storyline.
9. **Tara Baxter:** Jeff's oldest daughter. She is age 16 in the main storyline and will also be depicted at various ages during flashbacks.
10. **Olivia Baxter:** Jeff's youngest, age 11 in the main storyline. She too will be depicted at various ages in flashbacks.
11. **Charlie Baxter:** Jeff's younger brother. He appears in some flashbacks and later in the story.
12. **Lori Baxter:** One of Jeff's younger sisters. She appears in some flashbacks and later in the story too.
13. **Nancy Baxter:** Jeff's other younger sister. Appears in some flashbacks to Jeff's childhood, and later.

There are also other minor characters who appear mainly in flashback scenes; they only serve to advance the plot of the story.

### *Style Comment*

This film, like the source book, unfolds in a nonlinear fashion, interspersing flashbacks with modern-day therapy sessions in which Jeff uncovers more of his past and how it's affected him in the present. There is a bit of magical realism in the story by personifying Damien to give Jeff an antagonist; a metaphor of his inner demons. This will bring cinematic elements to the story. As most of the book explores deep subjects like mental health and inner conflict, externalizing the subjects as a villain gives the audience a strong reason to root for Jeff overcoming his obstacles personified.

This is a drama, with light comedic elements that lighten the mood. Many of Jeff's adventures in high school are fun and entertaining and give insight into his friendships and how losing some of his friends affected him.

Jeff finds strength and support from the females closest to him, and his therapist, who is slight, bespectacled and not imposing – different from

stereotypical stoic male role models. This shows how inner strength and courage can come from anyone, if you are open.

It's a very internal story, told simply with little spectacle. The ordinary all-American setting will resonate with most audiences as they will relate to the locations and events as being similar to experiences they've had in their own lives.

### *The Story*

We open on a late 1990s high school classroom. The teacher, Jeff Baxter, 50, Caucasian, overweight, is lecturing the class on *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck's novel. The students are a mix of those paying attention, some who are bored, others who are passing notes – your typical adolescent classroom.

In the back of the class, Jeff sees a grown man sitting at one of the desks. This man is white with dark features, a brooding, sinister look. He glares at Jeff with malice. Jeff is taken aback. He can't tell if it's an administrator auditing his class, or not. He chooses not to acknowledge the man as none of the other students notice his presence. Perhaps he's a hallucination? If so, Jeff doesn't want his students to think he's losing his mind.

Jeff continues his lecture, a bit unsure of himself. He walks over to his desk to gather his notes, then brings them over to the podium. He looks up to see that the man has gone, leaving an empty seat.

The bell rings. Class is dismissed, and Jeff heads over to the teachers' lounge. He meets up with fellow English teacher Al Ortulani, 40s, Italian-American. He's at the break room table, writing his poetry. Jeff asks Al if he's seen any strange adults on campus. Al replies that he hadn't. Jeff mentions the strange man in his classroom, and Al proposes that it might be someone from the school board. Al asks Jeff if he's done any creative writing lately. Jeff replies that he's been meaning to, but never gets around to it. Al tells him that he needs to take time for himself; it's very therapeutic.

We see Jeff coaching the basketball team after school. The glaring man shows up again, watching from the bleachers. His presence intimidates Jeff as he tries to maintain his composure while coaching. He mentors the boys on his team, giving them tips and drills to practice for an upcoming game. He looks back to the bleachers and again, the man has disappeared. Jeff is very uneasy as he can't see any evidence of where this strange man might have gone.

Later that evening, we meet Jeff's family: Connie, his wife in her late 40s, and their children Dustin (18), Tara (16), and Olivia (11). They eat dinner together. We learn that Connie teaches choral music at the junior high school. The kids talk about their day at school. Jeff and Connie are very loving parents and they have a great rapport with their kids.

After dinner, Jeff goes to take out the trash. He's startled as he's confronted face to face with the strange man. The man speaks to him – "You're a loser, and everyone knows it." Jeff is paralyzed with fear. The man approaches him, then vanishes. Jeff is freaked out.

When Jeff and Connie are alone, Jeff mentions the strange man. They are both concerned. Jeff is worried that he might be losing his mind. She mentions a friend of hers who has been seeing a therapist and offers to reach out and set something up.

Late that night, Jeff can't sleep. He gets out of bed and heads downstairs to the den where he sees old photographs on the wall – a younger, slimmer Jeff receiving a "Teacher of the Year" award; another family photo when Jeff was a boy, sitting next to his mother, father and his grandmother Grandma Younkin on her front porch. She's sitting in a rocking chair. Jeff remembers the sound of the rocking: *Creak-uch... Creak-uch... Creak-uch...*

We enter a flashback. Young Jeff, age 8, sitting on Grandma Younkin's porch, the two of them in faded green paint-chipped rocking chairs. She's imparting some of her wisdom. They speak about Shakespeare and other literature. She reveals that she is an English teacher and tells him that she enjoys mentoring her students. She tells him that he has a lot of potential for great things.

Back to the present. Jeff is alone in the den. He looks over to see the strange man sitting in a chair across the room, staring at him. Jeff confronts him. The man says his name is Damien, and he lives inside of Jeff. He mocks Jeff's relationship with his Grandma Younkin – comments on how much weight he's gained, and that he's just going to keep getting fatter. He smugly tells Jeff that it doesn't matter how much he tries to ignore him; he's going to keep tormenting him. Jeff's about to answer him, but Damien disappears.

## *Act Two*

We break into Act Two with Jeff meeting his new therapist, Mel. Mel is a slight man, short of stature, balding, with thick glasses. He's a complete contrast

from Jeff's hefty physique. Mel is soft-spoken, yet confident and wise. He eases Jeff into their session. Jeff's a bit resistant, sharing that it was his wife that set up the sessions for him. Jeff doesn't want Mel to think that he's crazy for seeing Damien. Mel reassures Jeff that there's nothing to feel ashamed about; sometimes things can be buried in our past and manifest themselves in strange ways.

Mel asks Jeff to remember a time which he felt safe and secure. Jeff thinks long and hard, and then goes into another flashback with Grandma Younkin. It's similar to the first flashback; both of them on the porch rocking in the rocking chairs. Grandma Younkin is crocheting and Jeff is much younger. She shows him how she knits. She tells young Jeff to listen with all his senses to the world -- feel the breeze, hear the wind chimes across the street, smell the fresh cut grass on the lawns.

Back in Mel's office, he acknowledges Jeff's Grandma as his main mentor. He asks Jeff if she's still alive. Jeff replies yes, and that they are still close. Mel tells Jeff that he wants to explore more about Jeff's past with him; he has an intuition that there are issues and past events in Jeff's life that he is afraid to confront. The session ends with Jeff feeling a little better having gone, but still skeptical.

Jeff's teaching continues, though he seems to have trouble motivating his students. At home, things are routine. Though Jeff is depressed about his weight gain. Connie tries to be encouraging and tells him that he can work on losing it if he wants.

More sessions with Mel have Jeff opening up about his past. They explore Jeff's childhood. Mel asks Jeff to remember a time where he learned a great lesson. We flash back to 1956, where eight-year-old Jeff and his best friend Bobby Robertson steal the air caps off of tires from cars parked in their neighborhood as a way to make money selling them. Thinking they have a smart business plan; they proudly present their collection to Jeff's dad Hiram. He immediately knows how they got them and orders them to put them back.

As the boys return the pilfered air caps, Police Officer Krupke catches them and returns the boys home to their fathers. Hiram thanks the officer and then the next day brings Jeff in front of a judge in a courtroom to teach Jeff the importance of following the law and listening to his father.

Back in Mel's office, Jeff finishes his story by telling Mel that the judge was a friend of his father's and his dad arranged that meeting as a way to teach him a lesson that he wouldn't forget. Mel agrees that it was a brilliant plan and

stresses to him that life long memories like that can be a way to reflect and realize the blessings you've were given as a child.

In another session, Mel asks Jeff about anything that might have made him feel inadequate or "less than." Jeff recalls a flashback from ten years prior, 1988. The flashback is at a youth soccer game where Jeff is with Connie and they are cheering on his oldest son Dustin who's playing. Dustin gets knocked down to the ground in a tackle and Jeff stands to shout "Foul!" when a burly bully redneck type in overalls and a NASCAR baseball hat yells "Why don't you sit down, Fatty?" Jeff is taken aback; the man is quite rude and threatening. The irony is that the bully himself is rather hefty. Jeff can feel the crowd staring at him. Connie confronts the bully, putting him in his place. Jeff feels her love and smiles.

Back in the office, Jeff shares with Mel that though he was happy for Connie's defending him, he felt inadequate about not having the courage to stand up to the bully himself. Mel reassures him that there's nothing to be ashamed of – his self-control kept the incident from escalating. Connie's reaction and sticking up for Jeff was low risk, as it was less likely the man would have escalated with her in public.

We intercut scenes with Mel along with Jeff's teaching his classes. Damien seems to have disappeared, so Jeff resumes his normal routine. Mel asks Jeff about his high school years, and Jeff shares a story that took place in high school with his friend Terry Claasen in Mr. Lester Spong's chemistry class.

We flash back to Mr. Spong demonstrating the chemical reaction of potassium with water, which causes an explosive result. This inspires the teenaged Terry and Jeff to steal a big chunk of potassium. They take a large trash can to the football field and fill it with water, throwing the chunk of potassium in. This causes a huge explosion and they get in trouble with the principal. Jeff tells Mel that it's one of those memories that still makes him laugh at the audacity he had back then.

In a scene in the evening at Jeff's house, the phone rings, and it's Jeff's father Hiram. He mentions Jeff's maternal Grandma Younkin is having health issues. Jeff's mother has gone to take care of her. Jeff decides to go visit his Grandma Younkin, while Connie "holds down the fort" with the kids.

Once Jeff gets there, he finds Grandma Younkin in good spirits. They recall their many porch side talks in the past. She asks him about how his teaching is coming along and he shares how things are going. She reminds him about when he started his teaching career at Immaculata High School back in

1971 and his insecurities regarding how to relate to his students. She reminds him that answers can be found in great Literature of the past. Calling his attention specifically to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, she tells him to "remember who you are."

Jeff has a moment with his father. He's a man of few words. The emotionality of knowing that Grandma Younkin is slowly passing away is awkward for the two of them. Jeff returns home to Connie and his children keeping his feelings hidden. In his sessions with Mel, he speaks about his closeness to his Grandma and his sense of dread for her imminent passing. Mel presses him to ask himself *why*? But Jeff is guarded. He says he doesn't know why, even though Grandma Younkin is 95 and her death should be expected.

Once Jeff gets home that evening, he acts distant from Connie and the kids. It's obvious to Connie that he's hiding something, but she doesn't press him. She does mention to him that she hopes things are going good with Mel and the therapy sessions.

That night, Jeff can't sleep. Once again, he goes to the den as a place where he can ponder things. This time Damien has returned. He accuses him of "being responsible" and "letting him die." Jeff tries to resist him, but Damien is more confrontational. This scene ends with Damien telling Jeff that he'll never forgive him and that he deserves to be miserable. Jeff protests and asks Damien why he's tormenting him. Damien laughs and says that if he can't figure it out on his own, then he's already lost.

The next session, Jeff mentions that Damien is back. Jeff wonders aloud if Damien represents his father. But Mel helps him understand that Damien is unlike his father Hiram, who embodies "excellence with honor." Through their discussions, they realize that Damien is Jeff's inner critic manifesting itself as a hallucination. Mel suggests they explore what might be causing Damien to show himself. There is something Jeff has buried within himself that he must confront.

Later, Jeff receives a call from his father. Grandma Younkin has passed away. Jeff responds to the news stoically. At the funeral, he's keeping it together just as his father. He's there with his siblings Charlie, Lori and Nancy. Then at the wake, Charlie comes up to Jeff, his older brother. He says he admires Jeff's strength. Jeff asks why and he says his reaction to Grandma Younkin's death. He noticed that Jeff hasn't cried, even though he knows they had a very close bond.

### *Act Three*

We break into the third act with Jeff confronted again in a dream by Damien. This dream takes place at Grandma Younkin's funeral, and at first, we think it's really happening. Damien is very smug about Grandma Younkin's death, mocking her and the family. We realize that this might not be real when the other family members react to Damien's crashing the funeral. They urge Jeff to stand up to Damien as Damien accuses Jeff of "letting him die" and "being responsible." Jeff feels more emboldened, inclined to stand up to his tormentor, but Damien verbally counters so strong that Jeff suddenly awakens in his bed next to Connie. It was only a dream.

Later, at his therapist's office, Jeff is recounting Grandma Younkin's funeral to Mel. Mel asks why Jeff thinks he hasn't let himself grieve. Jeff doesn't know. Mel says that he's tried to help Jeff as much as he can, but he must open himself up more and dig deeper. Jeff seems resistant. Mel challenges him, but Jeff won't budge. Mel tells Jeff there's nothing more he can do. If Jeff won't try harder, then their sessions must end. Jeff is taken aback – he thought his therapist was going to help him sort through things, but he's abandoning him too. Mel tells Jeff to think deeply – he's willing to help him, but only if Jeff will do the work Mel asks. They end their session with Mel saying that they need to take a break so Jeff can take the time to reflect on himself.

Jeff isn't happy. He complains to Connie that Mel seems useless – Jeff wanted answers and all Mel had were questions. "Aren't therapists supposed to tell you what's wrong with you?" Jeff laments. Connie tries to be supportive. She tells Jeff that he's had a lot of traumas in his life, and with Grandma Younkin gone, he needs to let himself grieve. He's never let himself grieve about anything. She mentions to him that there's always been a part of him that seems distant, hidden. Ever since early on in their marriage. She asks him why. Jeff resists. He doesn't want to answer her. He's angry. But before he can snap, he exits, telling Connie that he needs to go for a drive and collect himself.

Jeff drives for a long time, out into a rural area. He parks on the side of the road. Damien appears sitting next to him in the passenger seat. Damien tells him there's no escape now – they're both alone. Damien says he can't hide anymore – the weight he's put on can't protect him. Damien yells at him, calls him names, screams at him to think and remember what he did. It looks like he's going to get violent with Jeff when suddenly –

The scene changes. Jeff and Connie are younger, driving in a car. Jeff is much thinner. It is 1978. Connie is pregnant and going into contractions. Jeff tells her to hang on, they'll be at the hospital soon.

They get to the hospital. Connie is wheeled in to give birth while Jeff is in the waiting room. A quick montage of Jeff waiting and the clock moving hours ahead as he waits. Finally, the doctor comes out and tells Jeff that Connie gave birth to a baby boy. He's a bit premature, but seems okay. Jeff's elated and calls his parents and sisters and brother to tell them the news.

A moment where Jeff and Connie are in her recovery room. The nursing staff wheels baby Jordan in so they can see him. He's in an incubator. The two young parents look with joy at their new baby. The doctor says that he wants to keep Connie overnight so she can rest up. Connie tells Jeff he should get home and get some sleep himself. Jeff kisses her and leaves.

Later, at home, Jeff receives a call from the hospital. The doctor urges him to get there as soon as possible.

We are now in a neo-natal hospital room. Baby Jordan is in an incubator hooked up to a ventilator. A doctor is speaking to Jeff. He mentions that Jeff's newborn son Jordan has Hyaline Membrane Syndrome, and that he's suffered brain damage and organ failure. Right now, the machine is keeping Jordan alive. Jeff asks the doctor about Connie. The doctor tells him that she doesn't know. The doctor says that Jeff needs to decide on what to do. Jeff asks if Jordan is in pain. "Yes," the doctor says.

"Can he get better?" Jeff asks. "Doubtful," is the doctor's somber reply. Jeff stares at Jordan struggling with each breath.

We bounce back to older Jeff in the car with Damien. "What did you do?!!" Damien yells at Jeff. "Admit it!" The weight of the moment is heavy. Jeff doesn't want to revisit the past. Damien forces him to confront it.

We flash back again to the hospital room. Younger Jeff turns to the doctor and tells him to take Jordan off life support. Jeff watches with tears welling in his eyes as the machine is shut off and Jordan's breaths grow shallower until he stops breathing.

We snap back to the car. Damien glares at Jeff in cold rage. "You let your wife think he died on his own. But we both know the truth. You murderer." Damien disappears, leaving Jeff alone to sob.

We dissolve to Jeff sitting in the car still, but the sun is lower in the sky, revealing that time has passed. Jeff has a numb expression on his face. Quietly, he starts the car back up and he turns around, driving back home.

Jeff pulls into his driveway. Connie rushes out to meet him, worried that he was gone for so long. Jeff tells her that they need to talk. They go inside.

Jeff tells Connie the secret that he had been keeping for twenty years. He was the one who turned off Jordan's life support. He couldn't bring himself to tell Connie; he felt like a coward all these years. Seeing Jordan's suffering, he had made his decision then. He tells Connie that he's so sorry he let Jordan die, breaking down and crying in her arms. But she's forgiving and with tears of her own, she tells him how hard it must've been seeing Jordan struggling to live, and how what he did was the most compassionate thing he could have done as there was nothing the doctors could do for him. She tells Jeff that he must forgive himself.

Later, that night, Jeff is awake in bed while Connie sleeps. He looks toward their bedroom door and sees that there is a light on in the hall. Jeff gets up and goes out into the hall, but the light is actually coming from the den. Jeff steadies himself, knowing what is probably waiting for him. Jeff enters the den to see Damien sitting there glaring back at him. Damien bitterly tells Jeff that it doesn't matter if Connie forgives him; Jeff is still guilty. But Jeff finally confronts Damien, telling him who he is – his own guilt manifesting itself. Damien resists, snapping back at Jeff with anger.

Instead of getting into a fight with Damien, Jeff uses a different tactic. Jeff thanks Damien. "Thank you for helping me to face my demons. I know why you've come here now. But I don't need you anymore," Jeff tells Damien. "Go away. You're done." Damien's expression changes -- instead of rage, he seems to acknowledge Jeff's transformation. He nods, then disappears.

Jeff breathes a sigh of relief. He then catches sight of a vision of Grandma Younkin with another figure in the hall, a nice-looking young man wearing white who smiles at him. "Jordan?" Jeff asks. Grandma Younkin replies, "We'll be waiting for you." The man winks and they both disappear.

Dissolve to Mel's office. Jeff has recounted these events with him. Mel responds positively -- this was a major breakthrough. He helps Jeff realize that this guilt was bearing down on him for many years, and that now he can move forward. Jeff tells Mel that Damien hasn't come back. Mel says that there's still work they can do together, but he is confident that Jeff will be successful.

Flash forward to 2014. Jeff's children are grown up, and Jeff has lost the extra weight. His hair and beard are gray. He and Connie are attending a banquet ceremony in Washington D.C. They receive awards for "Teachers of the Year" as we hear Jeff's voice over:

"Though I'm still haunted by the tube coming from Jordan's newborn mouth, the rasping breath finally quieted by my decision – the older brother my kids Dustin, Tara, and Olivia would never know... I'm confident that Jordan is watching and waiting for the day when he and Grandma Younkin will embrace each of us. "

### **"More Than One Way Home"**

**END**

### ***Conclusion***

The inner journey that Jeff takes in this film brings him full circle. He is able to overcome his weight gain which was a manifestation of his feelings of guilt. By forgiving himself, he can see the positive life he's built with his family. Jeff thinks he's a broken man, but learns that he just forgot the person who he was...the man that his Grandma Younkin affirmed.

We learn through Jeff's story, the importance of forgiving oneself. In many ways, we can be the cruelest to ourselves. By letting go of our past and being compassionate and forgiving to ourself, we can realize the gifts and special things in our life more clearly.