

The Ping-pong script

FADE IN:

EXT. THE THAMES, LONDON - A CHILL SUNNY NOVEMBER AFTERNOON

Drone camera view, skimming steadily downriver past Hungerford bridge, slowing to hover over a police launch where two specialist divers...

“No! Christ, what am I thinking? It’s crap!” I tear the top sheet off my notepad, screw it into a ball and sling it across the room in exasperation. It bounces softly into the corner by a cardboard box piled with assorted electronics junk.

* * *

If I were a decent screenwriter - which by all accounts I’m not - I wouldn’t be staring at a police launch rocking forlornly on the brown water as a pair of divers prepare to flop in, to search and recover God-only-knows what, wondering if there was still mileage in that hackneyed visual trope. I wouldn’t be shivering in a queue at a South Bank street food stall for a generous-spirited leftovers giveaway. Or putting on a brave face for Mr Tattooed Guy about to dump a spoonful of egg mayonnaise on top of my wrap “because it’s today’s use-it-or-lose-it”, and protesting “Oh, easy on the Mayo!” I wouldn’t be trailing back to my first floor rented apartment in a Waterloo sidestreet, to devour the lukewarm wrap to the drone of nearby traffic, punctuated only by the clicking of my jaw.

If I were a decent screenwriter I wouldn’t be killing time until that 6pm key in the door; for Jonah (my ruffy-tuffy engineer and husband-to-be) to dump his toolbag on the table, creep up behind me at my desk and plant a tender kiss on my bald patch, breathing a soft “Hello Mr. Writer” into my ear, whiffing of sweat and stale morning cologne.

If I’d been a decent screenwriter Jonah wouldn’t have had to calm me down night after night, drip-feed me hope, and give my draft scripts an over-generous hearing. He wouldn’t have suggested I change my name from Wayne to ‘Hugo, from Notting Hill’, as though disguising my roots or changing my postcode would somehow get me more of a toe in the door. Or tried to lift my mood with his hobby projects - poring over intricate circuit boards, stinking the place out with soldering flux to get some infra-red guided gizmo waddling autonomously across the breakfast table - clackety-clackety clackety-clackety. Or going full goofy - inking bloodshot eyes on ping-pong balls, stuffing them in his eye sockets and gurning at me. Or when that didn’t raise a smile, frogmarching me to the sunny window seat of a neighbourhood cafe so that I

had to observe the world go by, and prodding me to spot a real life nugget of inspiration.

He'd not have given up eventually - pacing around the flat that September weekend, swilling can after can of lager; sweeping his half finished robotics project onto the floor in exasperation as I whined in self-pity, pleading for a reset. He wouldn't have omitted to send out the wedding invites, surreptitiously unbooked the wedding breakfast and reclaimed the deposit on the honeymoon flight, before deigning to reveal it was All Off as far as he was concerned. He wouldn't have been mute as he loaded all his stuff into his van that Sunday morning; wouldn't have given me his resigned look, kissing me tearily on the forehead then leaving with the softest click of the Yale latch.

I wouldn't continue sitting at my cluttered little desk with cups of herbal tea gone cold, yawning between numb writer's block and crippling writer's cramp. Wondering how I'm going to make ends meet now; asking myself if the blank longueurs and the fevered spurts of scribbling are signs of late-flowering genius, or a bi-polar spiral which might end in an acute ward in the Maudsley.

And I wouldn't be walking through the atomised cacophony of London-by-night, yearning for connection, for any passably safe human contact, an understanding ear. Or standing by an embankment contemplating the inkiness of the swirling river. I wouldn't have demeaned myself by asking Jonah for some small electronics tokens "to remember him by"; which in an act of gross cowardice he left in a box on the doorstep five days later, with assembly instructions and an unkind personal note: "Really, as if these would help put you out of your misery?! J."

No. Were I a decent screenwriter, this is how it will probably go:

I'm hovering by the intercom at the front door of Masquerade Filmworks, backend of Covent Garden, looking shabby and a bit hungover. They buzz me up to the second floor. A friendly (Prettyboy!) receptionist parks me on a giant beanbag, offers me coffee, tells me Colin won't keep me long. I look around. Lots of glass partitions, primary colours, media posters everywhere - Channel 4, Netflix, Hulu, Disney+. Prattling creatives waft between hot-desked offices and their water cooler.

Colin, Senior Associate arrives, apologetic, non-stop schedule and all that. "Come on into the Focus room. Jackie our Creative director will be joining us shortly". We settle in moulded chairs at opposite ends of a glass coffee table, rather far apart. His

relaxed but down-to-business manner makes plain this is only a preliminary meeting. “Thanks for your query letter and the extended logline, which tickled our interest. You know, we don’t normally respond to cold-queries. So today is simply about getting a mutual feel, if you like”. He gives me a potted history of Masquerade Filmworks - how they broke through in the early Noughties concentrating on quirky documentaries and short film dramas. A drip of industry awards grew beyond a trickle; now they get commissions from eight points of the compass. He’s leafing through my CV just as Jackie arrives. Sharp dresser, not sure which of them will act the boss today. She nods hello, sits, looks me up and down, inscrutable as the Mona Lisa, then raises her eyebrows, which I take as my cue to speak.

I hype my slender portfolio for all it’s worth - I’ve co-written soap episodes and two drama pilots, scripted voiceovers for celebrity travel docs, and storyboards for a well received comedy cartoon. Colin wants to know if I can work to tight deadlines; how I’d avoid getting into destructive spats with co-writers. Then Jackie asks me to expound on the creative process. I begin my usual patter, but she soon cuts in. “So, give me some interesting uses for... ping-pong balls. Chop-chop”. I’m floored. There’s a painful silence, before I venture: “Hi-vis boundary markers? Make a mobile sculpture out of them? Er, drop them in a stream for a Poohsticks competition? Zombies’ eyeballs?” They glance at each other, look down.

I plead my case, that it’s high time for me to move up a gear or three. “I’m finishing up this off-piste thriller now, involving infamous politicians and a couple of weird shady characters. You’d never see the denouement coming, none of the usual clues. It’d work for film or tv, I know it in my bones...” Their verdict is diplomatic. “Er, listen Hugo, in the time available this afternoon we aren’t going to manage to take in a detailed pitch from you, which it clearly deserves. Can I get back to you in the next fortnight maybe, we’ll get the whole crew in, give you 45 minutes?” “Yes,” I reply, “fine, Colin” (of course it’s fine). I root around in my canvas rucksack for my business card because he’s mislaid the original. All rictus grins as I am ushered out. I recognise Skedaddle! in its many variations - I’m an old hand.

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“Easy on the Mayo!” We chime “Ee.Oh.Tee.Em!” in unison, and share a laugh. “Hello again buddy, what’s your fancy today? I’ve got a hot paella leftover, or there’s burritos, or a nice vegan soul bowl...” I’m Tattooed Guy’s most faithful regular. Over the weeks Mokhless (his proper name, I think he’s Moroccan) and I have kind of bonded, insofar as one can during two minute chats over a bustling street food counter. We’ve hatched our mayo catchphrase - “E.O.T.M!” - and he’s even given me his mobile number in case I want to ring or text in my food request ahead of time,

to avoid a long wait. I'm eager to unload my story on Mokhless - what I'm doing here at his stall day after day, how it came to this. I want him to know that over the years I've been cancelled, fobbed off, damned with faint praise, patronised, well nigh accused of plagiarism. But Mokhless is occupied serving up his food and charm. Anyway, what could he do? Nod? Shrug? I swallow my sob story, take his carton home.

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Would you believe? Masquerade texted me Tuesday midday. They actually want to hear my pitch after all. Surely, someone's playing tricks? Since Sunday I haven't bothered to crawl out of bed except for the loo and bowls of cereal. I decide they'll probably snaffle the concept and pass it to some in-house ghostwriter, the bastards. I'm not going to put myself through another ritual humiliation for their amusement. Am I? I go brush my teeth, rinse and spit, regard myself in the bathroom mirror. I am a decent screenwriter. So this is how it's going to go:

FADE IN:

EXT. MASQUERADE FILMWORKS, SOMEWHERE IN COVENT GARDEN - MORNING

Camera pans in on a heavily bearded balding guy in his late thirties, smart hipster dress code, hovering next to the intercom by the front door. HUGO (let's call him that for the sake of argument) is waiting to be buzzed up. He's carrying a hardshell alloy case, like all the best creatives do. He's buzzed in.

FADE TO:

INT. RECEPTION, MASQUERADE FILMWORKS - ONE MINUTE LATER

HUGO greeted by a PRETTY GIRL. He thinks, What, no Prettyboy? His day off - shame! Shown into the Focus room, to find COLIN and JACKIE, plus MARCIA, PAUL, JEZ. HUGO puts his case down by the coffee table, settles in a bucket seat.

COLIN: You know Jackie, don't you? Marcia, Executive producer. Paul, Production coordinator. JEZ, Head of development. This is Hugo.

Hugo smiles, takes an instant dislike to JEZ, the weasel-like one slouched on a big bean bag, looking down his nose

COLIN: OK, without more ado then. So, give us your film treatment for openers. Shoot, Hugo!

The Focus room is all ears, but quizzical

HUGO: Well, in the opening panel of the storyboard...

JEZ: Oh, start with the final panel, would you, cherub. We'll wind back if we like the ending.

HUGO gives JEZ a glare, then leafs to the back of his folder, clears his throat

HUGO: OK. So, scene 37, finale. An across-street camera pans in on a Westminster sandwich bar and cafe. All manner of choices, brisk butter-spreading, hissy coffee machine, a takeaway queue spilling out the door. Two slightly scruffy guys sit at a table in the front window, not your usual patrons, sipping flat whites, leaning in and whispering to each other, but we can't hear through the glass. Camera zooms through the glass to the cafe's interior - now we can hear. Camera pans along the queue browsing the sandwich fillers under the display counter.

Camera swivels back to the window table. The dominant looking guy with the scowl has an aluminium case tucked under his legs. His more goofy companion produces a plastic lunchbox - doesn't know he's supposed to buy a sandwich. Scowler tuts and reprimands. We've already learned that Scowler has been sizing up the clientele - including a smattering of MPs, their phones mainly clamped to their ears, enjoying a supposed lunchtime anonymity among the hoi polloi. No-one is uncool enough to ask for autographs.

Scowler reaches into his jacket, slides a list discreetly across the table. "What's this?" asks Goofy. "Read it", says Scowler. Goofy scans, but doesn't recognise any names. "Been collecting the 'suits' for weeks", says Scowler. Two names have been circled in red biro. The pair pass time, sip more coffees, Goofy fidgets incessantly. Eventually he pulls out two playthings, sticks the ping-pong balls in his eye sockets, presses his face against the window and gurns at passers-by. Then starts bouncing them on the tabletop, ticka tacka ticka tacka tic... Scowler snatches them away, glares, puts them in his case. "Juvenile."

Two greying males, in contrasting parliamentary pinstripes, arrive. Goofy steals a glance over his shoulder at them, then looks to Scowler with eyebrows raised. Scowler nods, gets to his feet. Gets out his phone, taps out a text. Checks it for spelling, then passes it to Goofy. "Just popping out for a mo. Well, go on. Check it like I said, and Send!". Scowler turns away and barges his way out of the

cafe. Goofy sits there, studies the text for twenty seconds, looks blank. Shrugs, why not?... BANG!! The screen goes blank, silence. Camera withdraws across the street as the smoke slowly clears. A few weak groans. Shopfront completely blown out. A burst water pipe sprays over whatever's scattered over the road. Puddles collect, varieties of sandwich fillers bubble along the gutter...

COLIN: OK Hugo, pause there will you, please? I think we've probably had...

HUGO: Ah, but then the...

MARCIA: I can't unsee that.

PAUL: We.. er, weren't really expecting...

JEZ: A splatterfest. Oh, but I think we were. Been there once or twice before, have we not? Don't you know, the viewing public's decided it's probably been exposed to more than enough of this in everyday life. They're screaming for a break. And so am I.

Pregnant pause in the room...

MARCIA: (mollifying) You see, in a good screenplay I always think a big bang is better at the start of a plot, but not at the end of it. I mean, threaten to blow up MPs by all means, but don't actually do it.

PAUL: Face it, Hugo, there are quite enough acts of self-immolation in today's politics, without you adding to the toll.

JACKIE: Anyway it seems you've killed off at least one of your protagonists - almost nobody survives a confined space explosion like that. But good riddance. It's a terrorist suicide atrocity, pure and simple - with innocent collateral victims. Hardly any moral nuances to riff on there. So I just don't catch your drift, Hugo.

HUGO: Well, if we wound back a scene or two, you'd see that Goofy never realised...

COLIN: And I confess, I did spot the denouement coming.

JEZ: Let's cut to the chase, petal. Stuff happens, but not like this, it's implausible. For starters there's no sandwich bar/cafes like that around Westminster that I know of. And cabinet ministers or whoever don't mingle like that in public without security, who are you kidding? Then, of course, how do those two goons get hold of high explosives? And why blow themselves to kingdom come? So, there's an elephant in the room, and it's this..

COLIN: Tone it down a bit, Jez. Remember, Hugo has taken a lot of trouble to..

JEZ: Oh please Colin, this is already an hour I won't be getting back. Hugo deary, it's dross. Frankly you've strayed clean off the reservation, and in my humble opinion you're a rank amateur who can't even be bothered to do your basic research. Look, even your script formatting isn't to the industry standard. Well, Masquerade Filmworks has got standards. So, come back when you've got more of your ducks in a row. On second thoughts, probably don't bother..

HUGO says nothing. He lifts his case onto his lap, opens it, gets out a small cardboard carton, some disposable wooden cutlery and two white balls. They all look bemused as he drops the balls onto the coffee table - ticka tacka ticka tacka tic tic tictictic... JACKIE'S eyes widen. He opens the carton and starts forking it.

COLIN: Excuse me, Hugo, what are you doing?

HUGO: Mm, it's chicken tikka massala. Tasty! I'm eating my lunch on the go, as all the best creatives do. Oh, and I've thought of another use for ping pong balls, Jackie - detonators.

PAUL picks up the balls to examine them

PAUL: What do you mean? These aren't detonators.

Returns them to the table, scoffs.

HUGO: Well no. But the other two inside my case are. They needed a bit of modification from the original, mind. Courtesy of my Ex.

COLIN stands up slowly

PAUL: Er look..I think we've all got a bit carried away, as it were. And Hugo, we were planning to take you out to lunch after your pitch, I assure you. We're not that discourteous. So I'm sorry if..

MARCIA: I'm not sure what point you're trying to make, Hugo. Put your food away, do.

HUGO: Well as it happens I've ordered lunch for you all, from a great street food stall I know. It's probably on its way over now, by Deliveroo.

JEZ: Well cancel it, I don't want your bloody curried wraps or whatever they are.

JEZ makes to get up off his beanbag. HUGO produces his mobile phone

HUGO: No, you cancel it. Like you just cancelled me.

JEZ sinks down again

JACKIE: Oh come on, that's a bit steep, Hugo, we've just had a frank exchange of views, that's how this industry works isn't it?

HUGO: Just text "EOTM - cancel lunch, thanks" to this number...

HUGO waves his mobile at PAUL, who raises his hands

PAUL: It's alright Hugo, quite happy for you to do it. What's 'E.O.T.M', anyway?

HUGO: No. I want one of you to do it.

HUGO thumbs in a text then proffers the phone to PAUL

HUGO (CONT'D): Go on, there it is. Press 'Send'. Call off lunch.

PAUL reads the text, hesitates

PAUL: This has got to be a joke, in rather bad taste actually.

JEZ snatches the phone off PAUL and posts the text with a flourish

JEZ: Actually Paul, it's all a pile of shite. See?..

CUT TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

EXT. SOUTH BANK, POP-UP STREET FOOD STALLS - AFTERNOON

MOKHLESS: E.O.T.M! Hey Wayne, what's this, then? Just look at that outfit - my denim man! Those Flyknits on your feet?

WAYNE: Uh huh.

MOKHLESS: So what's with the sprucing up? I hardly recognised you.

WAYNE: I think I caught a break - just got a film script accepted.

WAYNE taps his case

MOKHLESS: Well congratulations! Not before time, no wonder the sun's come out. And look at you, you're smiling! I'm genuinely pleased for you.

WAYNE: Thanks. I guess you could say it's the start of something. And the income will be very welcome. So, how's trade?

MOKHLESS: A bit down today, to be honest. And I wasn't expecting you either.

WAYNE: What do you mean?

MOKHLESS: Well, your text earlier..

WAYNE: I didn't send you a text.

MOKHLESS: Yes, an hour or so ago.

MOKHLESS stops stirring a paella pan, pulls out his mobile, shows it to WAYNE

MOKHLESS: There. 'EOTM - cancel lunch, thanks'. That's you, isn't it?

WAYNE puffs out his cheeks, shakes his head, frowns

WAYNE: Nope. I mean really! For one thing, I'd have put an exclamation mark after "EOTM". Not my number either. Someone's playing tricks.

MOKHLESS: Well, I assumed.. so I didn't make up your box. What's it to be then?

WAYNE: How about a kebab with chilli sauce and all the trimmings?

MOKHLESS: Sure, it'll take a minute, though.

MOKHLESS turns up the flame on the meat spindle

WAYNE: And for the first time in a long time I'm paying, Mokhless!

MOKHLESS: Oh, you don't need..

WAYNE: Insist. It's payback time.

WAYNE Smooths a twenty pound note on the counter. MOKHLESS starts to carve kebab meat

MOKHLESS: So, what's your plan for the rest of the day? Out celebrating?

WAYNE: Mm, not really. Reckon I'll take it easy. Maybe stroll across the River. Might try for a last minute ticket at the Royal Opera House? I think there's a modern dance company on.

MOKHLESS: Oh, I'd avoid Covent Garden if I were you. Some sort of nasty explosion over that way earlier, streets cordoned off apparently. All over the newsfeeds...

WAYNE: Oh. Ok. That's a bummer.

MOKHLESS: We all heard a loud crump an hour or so ago. I reckoned it came from Big Ben's direction, but it echoes around off the water so you can never quite tell...

MOKHLESS wraps kebab, hands it to WAYNE

MOKHLESS: Anyway. Enjoy, my friend, and mind how you go.

WAYNE moves off. MOKHLESS calls after him

MOKHLESS: You won't abandon your humble eating spot when you get famous, will you?

WAYNE: You mean infamous, don't you? Ha! No. I never forget people who have been kind to me. 'Specially you. E.O.T.M!

MOKHLESS: E.O.T.M! Be good!

Camera slowly zooms out and goes aerial as WAYNE begins sauntering in the direction of the Tate Modern. He pauses by a litter bin, crouches down to open his case, retrieves two small white balls. Then stands, discards them in the litter bin. Moves off, gradually merges into the afternoon crowd.

MUSIC CUE: Simon & Garfunkel's El Cóndor Pasa (I'd rather be a hammer than a nail)

FADE OUT:
ROLL CREDITS.

* * *

Yes. If I were a decent screenwriter, that's exactly how it would go.