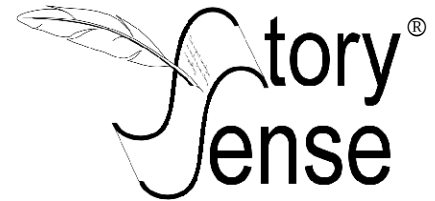


TRIPLE WITCHING HOUR

by Janet Sexton



Development Notes

A terrorist thriller with a large ensemble cast and interwoven plotlines, this screenplay boasts some appealing characters and authentic-sounding cop lingo. The writer has a cinematic eye and a gift for creating sympathetic characters. The plot moves briskly, with a kinetic energy to every scene. While the story contains many elements common to most police procedurals, what sets this script apart is its undercurrent of humor.

The central character, for example, has a habit of getting into trouble with his superior. Icles is one of those long-suffering, crusty-but-benign bosses whose carping is the source of both amusement and complication. Unfortunately, Kevin's boss is ineffectual and virtually expendable, doing little to seriously jeopardize his career. And while Kevin's bad luck helps to make him sympathetic, the comic touches occasionally undermine the story's credibility. It's hard to take it very seriously, especially when the action turns cartoonish, as it often does. The uneven tone, scattered structure and a considerable number of plot holes may confuse readers or, even worse, result in unintentional laughter.

This is a promising first draft. Its structure is fairly solid, but the script could go deeper in the development of its themes, especially the main character's internal struggle. The script's weakest areas are its use of clichés, an excess of verbiage and numerous gaps in credibility. In an effort to address these and other flaws, I submit the following notes:

1. Edit the script ruthlessly, trimming dead weight from the description and from the dialogue.

The script is slightly overwritten, a common fault of new writers. While the old theatre axiom ("If it ain't on the page, it ain't on the stage.") holds true, not everything needs to be spelled out in so much detail. Quite often, less is more. Actors, directors and production designers like to have latitude in their choices. A description of the intended mood created by a particular setting is preferable to a list of the furnishings.

Some writers (Shane Black, for instance) have gained a reputation for painstakingly detailed action sequences, done up in a flashy, wink-wink, nudge-nudge sense of fun. More often, though, such descriptions tend to get in the way. It's not necessary, for instance, to detail each character's every move during a fight sequence. Usually it's more effective to convey a

general impression of each character's style, along with one or two clever moves, and then leave it up to the choreographer.

2. When writing action or description, write only what can be seen.

There are many descriptions in the script of what a character is feeling or remembering or thinking. In the movies, unlike in a novel, we are limited to the physical senses of sight and sound. Refrain from describing what cannot be seen or heard. If it's important for us to know a character's thoughts or feelings, they must be conveyed in actions and/or through dialogue. It's important, however, to avoid having a character state his thoughts or feelings. Which bring us to our next point.

3. Trim the dialogue and allow some hints of subtext.

Much of the dialogue in this script is what development executives term "on the nose." In other words, the characters state what's on their minds or in their hearts. Few persons, whether they be real or fictional, are ever so open. We often disguise our true feelings or state the opposite of what we actually think. What we say depends on our motivations and the individuals we're trying to influence.

An actor can often say more with a raised eyebrow than with an entire speech. The camera reveals an amazing breadth of feelings in a close-up, and the use of montage can create an emotional response. What's left unsaid is often more important than the lines themselves.

When an audience identifies with a movie hero, whatever happens to that hero will resonate, whether the hero mentions it or not. If the hero withholds his true thoughts and feelings, he will develop more charisma in the eyes of the audience. Use dialogue sparingly, and only when actions cannot suffice.

4. Focus more strongly on your central character's journey, and tell the story from his point-of-view.

The number of personae introduced within the first twenty pages is so large, it's difficult to grasp who is supposed to be the main character. We open with Yasmin and the terrorists in Paris, segue to Kevin and Sarah on an off-duty crime-fighting incident in New York, shift to a group of Arabs stealing explosives from a construction site, then descend into the subways for a glimpse into the lives of the homeless, one of whom is killed by a "Transit Worker." This pattern repeats, with Kevin accumulating the most screen time.

Trouble is, much of the story is told, not through Kevin's eyes, but through an omniscient point of view. This weakens the reader's identification with Kevin. One might argue that jumping back and forth between the terrorists and the cops enhances suspense, but that's not necessarily the case. Suspense exists when the protagonist has a clearly defined goal, a goal formed by information that something of dire consequence is about to occur. It's the apparent hopelessness of achieving this goal in relation to a ticking clock that results in suspense.

In suspense, the audience usually knows as much as the protagonist does. Only rarely is the audience privy to information withheld from the hero. It is therefore unnecessary, at least in setting up the story, to show the machinations of the villains. In this script, the scenes involving the villains are often gratuitous. All their scheming, along with Yasmin's efforts to dispatch weaklings within their ranks, does little to advance the plot. Even worse, their dialogue sounds overly arch and cliché-ridden ("Always these American make a fool of us."), as if the terrorists stepped out of a comic book.

The first two acts would be more effective if the story were told more from Kevin's viewpoint. If we learned about the terrorists at the same time Kevin learned about them, we would identify more strongly with him and be drawn into the story more deeply. In such a scenario, the first two acts would unfold as a mystery, with the story shifting to suspense when Bev is taken captive and the cops close in on the terrorists.

5. Reserve any flashbacks for the central hero, not for the villains.

We flash back to Libya, 1986, in an effort to establish Yasmin's personal motive for becoming a terrorist. In voice-over, she describes to her fellow terrorists how her parents died in an American air raid. Again, this causes the point-of-view to shift toward Yasmin. While it's certainly important to flesh out the villains and give them an emotional connection with their scheme, the shift of perspective entailed in Yasmin's flashbacks tends to make her empathetic, a quality that would more appropriately be reserved for the hero or heroes.

An exception may be made when a villain or peripheral character relates the flashback to the hero or main character. For example, if Yasmin needs to explain her motives, she might do so in a telephone call or in a video delivered to the authorities. This call or video might come after the terrorists stage a minor incident as proof of their capabilities.

Presenting Yasmin's motivation in this manner would bring the perspective back to our main characters, the police investigators. In revealing the information through the eyes of Kevin, the reader would

empathize with him, not with the villain. The video or call could also contain a set of demands, which leads us to our next point.

6. Clarify and focus the terrorists' objective to lend the story a stronger sense of direction.

While everything appears to be leading up to the “Triple Witching Hour,” there is little sense of urgency in the investigation. Instead of pursuing leads, Kevin and Sarah often seem to be just going about their routine daily work. It would help if we had a stronger awareness that there is a “ticking clock.” We need to know the potential consequences if the terrorists succeed. Are they planning to take down the entire Stock Exchange building, or merely blow a hole in the foundation? How do they know that just a few well-placed sticks of dynamite will accomplish the task?

7. Redefine Yasmin's character to shore up the story's credibility.

Among all the credibility gaps, perhaps the most egregious one is Yasmin's role. First off, it's difficult to believe that any right-wing, Islamic terrorist group would allow themselves to be led by a woman. This is a culture that subjugates women. No self-respecting Muslim would ever follow a woman's orders.

Secondly, Yasmin's use of brute strength, as opposed to cleverness and trickery, goes beyond the boundaries of what is believable. She's able to break the necks of men much bigger than she is, and do so with her bare hands. Physically, though, she's no Hulk Hogan. It would be more credible if she were skilled in an esoteric, Middle Eastern form of martial arts. Rather than snapping spines with a twist of the wrist, she might instead use her opponent's size against them. Once they are down, for example, she might use leverage (by stepping on their neck and wrenching an arm?) to disarm, disable or dispatch them.

8. Invent a less coincidental way for Kevin and Bev to meet, and enhance their chemistry by reducing Kevin's apologies.

One of the most appealing and well-executed aspects of this script is the romance between Kevin and Bev. Sparks fly the moment they set eyes on each other. Their teasing banter is cute and sexy. The obstacle to their relationship, though, is the fact that Kevin is a cop. The tragedy in Bev's backstory causes her to be reluctant to get involved with another officer. This lends texture and a believable arc to the budding love story. The fact that Bev is Polish helps to flesh out her character, although more could be

done to play up her heritage. For instance, they might go to a Polish restaurant or visit a Polish neighborhood or meet her Polish parents.

It is, however, something of a coincidence for Kevin to run into Bev during the course of his investigation *after* he meets her in a bar. It might seem more natural if he were to first meet her at her office. However, if Bev knew from the start that Kevin was a cop, she might not even allow herself to flirt with him. Perhaps this stumbling block can be overcome by having them ‘meet cute’ while he’s on his way to her office, unaware she’s the person he’s come to see about obtaining the “Mole People” records.

Bev also has a tendency to spoil the mood by comparing Kevin to “Tommy.” It’s admirable that she remembers her dead fiancé so fondly, but it does a disservice to Kevin for him to always be in Tommy’s shadow. All Bev’s sighing about the demise of her ideal man must eventually grate on Kevin’s nerves, and yet he never addresses it. It’s as if he really *does* feel inadequate on some level. In both Kevin’s personal and professional lives, he constantly has to keep proving himself. Because he is always on the defensive, he looks weak. Which leads us to the next point.

9. **Redefine and strengthen Kevin’s character to fit his role.**

Kevin comes off as too soft, too sensitive for a cop, much less a detective. While sensitivity and pathos can effectively counterpoint the gritty world that our characters inhabit, realism suffers when it’s such an obvious part of Kevin’s character. He doesn’t shield his pride enough. He doesn’t hide his emotions enough. He doesn’t put up enough of a macho front. Not only does Kevin seem unsuited to the profession of a cop, he comes off acting more like a woman.

In an interesting role-reversal, it’s his female partner, Sarah, who espouses the more macho attitude. However, Kevin’s responses are so much like those of a rookie that it calls into question whether his superiors would even trust him to investigate such an important case. He’s such a bumbler, one begins to wonder whether the script is meant to be a comedy. Because all the other characters are treated much more seriously, Kevin appears out-of-place.

Near the end, when Kevin starts exchanging gunfire with the terrorists in the subway, he seems unaware that Bev is anywhere nearby. If he does know she’s there, he appears unconcerned about it. Kevin seems to be wandering around in a blue funk. For that matter, Bev does an amazing number of things while she’s tied up. And the climax degenerates into absurdity. One solution is to give Kevin more information and let him be the one to take action.

10. Diversify and smarten-up the characters of the terrorists, giving each of them a unique trait.

Aside from Yasmin, the terrorists are somewhat faceless. Physically, intellectually or in terms of their personality, there is nothing distinctive about them. While some of them may be more prone to failure than others (and end up paying the penalty for it), there is little to distinguish one from the other. What's more, there is surprisingly little dissention within the group. They all follow Yasmin's orders without question. The terrorists would be more interesting if they were actually a team, each with a unique skill. We might learn who assembled the group and why they chose these particular individuals.

The terrorists do not display much cleverness or finesse. For example, Yasmin instructs Omar to kill Kevin and make it look like an accident. But what does Omar do? He tries to choke the cop to death (page 79). It seems unlikely, however, that your average police detective would accidentally choke in the line of duty. For that matter, it's unclear what the terrorists might achieve by taking Kevin out of the picture. His investigation is so haphazard and unproductive; he appears to pose little threat to their scheme.

The terrorists appear to have no clear motive for kidnapping Bev and holding her hostage. It's done on impulse. Even if they planned to use her as a bargaining chip, it's not clear what, if anything, they might be bargaining for. And if they do have some sort of extortion in mind, then it's odd that they fail to follow through with it. Instead, they simply tie Bev up next to the bomb, perhaps as a way of getting revenge on Kevin (revenge for what is anyone's guess). If that's their intention, then it's a stupid move, for it's Bev who ends up disarming the bomb.

11. Patch up the numerous plot holes and inconsistencies.

The same lack of intelligence and restraint that afflicts the terrorists also seems to plague the cops. For example, Hunsaker orders his men to unleash a barrage of gunfire on a residence, even though the police have not been fired upon, and they have no clear picture of who may be inside the place. It looks brutal and sloppy in the extreme.

It's amusing for Kevin to have such a poor arrest record that his friends, Saul and Debby, help him by faking a crime (page 39). It is, however, also somewhat farfetched. Saul is an ex-con. Becoming involved in a crime, even a faked one, would put him in considerable jeopardy with the law. The potential benefits simply do not outweigh the risks.

Why doesn't Big Eddy take Kevin to Benny? Instead, he sends Kevin on his way and arranges a meeting with Benny, saying, "We'll bring him to you." It doesn't make sense. And the resultant race through the streets of Manhattan, as Kevin and Benny each try to make their rendezvous in time, looks contrived.

If these notes were to address each and every lapse in believability, they might run three times their present length. In an effort to detail these smaller points as efficiently as possible, page notes have been written on the script itself.

12. Develop even further the conflict between the cops and the "Mole People."

One of the most unique aspects of this story is the uneasy alliance between cops and street people, two groups that normally would be at odds with each other. As the street people live on the fringes of the law, they may well fear any police presence. This is compounded by Benny's mistaken notion that he killed an officer by mistake. More could be done, however, to complicate this subplot and explore the theme of trust.

The script moves in this direction at the beginning, when Kevin finds fault with McNamara for giving money to the homeless. However, his prejudice is never exposed to him as a fault. The script could use a moment of self-recognition, when Kevin realizes that his attitudes about the homeless were wrong. This would be followed by a reversal in which he puts aside his prejudice and thereby finds a solution to the crisis.

In the end, many issues relating to the synergy between the cops and the street people remain unresolved. In particular, Charlie's future seems shaky. Saul and Debby's offer to adopt her comes off as a pat, Hollywood ending. She's a runaway, and the issues that led to her being on the street are scarcely addressed.

In summary, the script showcases the writer's skill at hardboiled police dialogue, with wisecracks that typify their New York brand of cynicism. The alliance between police and street people, along with the central character's humorous bumbling, separate it from the pack. Unfortunately, the credibility is undermined by farfetched plot turns and characters who come off as if they're playing at being cops. Close up the gaps, and this script could become a contender.

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