

## A MINUTE TO PITCH

By

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O.K. see that guy over by the cheese table? He's a producer; a big one; a guy who produces exactly the kind of movies that YOU write. Imagine you strike up a conversation with him and in passing you mention that you're a screenwriter. He looks over at you, puts on his "I'm interested" face and says, "Oh really? What's it about?"

In short, he wants you to pitch it. You don't have twenty minutes as you might have in an executive's office. You have one. Maybe three, but that's pushing it. Consider this a MINI PITCH.

You're ready for this, right? Sure you are. You know this story like the back of your hand. You take a deep breath and say "There's this single guy and he secretly hates his mother, O.K? And she, well she's a piece of work let me tell you. He's got father issues too, but we find that out later in the movie. Anyway, one day he's waking up like it's just any other day, ya know, shaving and stuff like that, when he looks in the mirror, no, no, no he sees his own reflection in the toaster – and he's turned into his mother! Not, like, wearing her dress or anything like that. He actually is his mother! And it's weird 'cause he secretly hates her, you know? So he has to, like BE her and, and ... he hates it!"

See that look on the producer's face? It doesn't say, "I'm interested" anymore. It just turns away from you, muttering, "Sorry, we don't do body-switching movies anymore."

You want to call him back and let him know that yours is a different kind of body-switching movie. There's a love story that's really cool. It has an amazing scene that only you can write! But, it's too late. He's become distracted by the Gouda.

Let's look at what just happened. Buried in that rambling monologue about your character's past with mom and dad is a fairly decent, high concept idea. But you felt the need to frontload your mini-pitch with back-story. Of course, all of that stuff is important, but you didn't have to ramble like that! One descriptive phrase could have been uttered that would have implied everything you felt compelled to explain. Try "A single man with mother issues." This suggests a problem in real life (single man) and a problem he may himself have created (mother issues). A flawed character if ever we've met one.

You finally hit the CONCEPT, the story idea, but you insisted on giving us extraneous detail that we'd assume anyway. Shaving? Yeah, men do this when they "wake up." Mirror versus toaster? Who cares? The point is that he wakes up having turned into his mother. That's all you have to say about that. It's high concept. Good.

But, not perfect. Because any producer worth his inflated paycheck is going to give you the same blow-off answer about body-switching movies. Remember "Big?" Remember "Switched?" For God's sake, remember "Freaky Friday?"

So you need a HOOK to your story; something special that brings a new twist to an old premise. You mentioned the love interest as having a cool tie-in. What if, by becoming his mother, he resolves to apply her busy-body ways toward setting himself up with the prettiest woman in town? To justify this, let's add a description to the "single man" that might imply that this is exactly what he needs. Let's mention that he's lonely.

Your story idea will now look like this: "A lonely single man with mother issues, wakes up in the body of his mother and uses her busy-body ways to set himself up with the prettiest woman in town."

Now your story has possibilities. We've nailed this guy's flaw, his situation, his first act problem and a hint about where the second act might take us ... all in one sentence.

This sentence is commonly referred to as the LOG LINE. So, the next time a bored agent tells you "just log line it" you'll know what the heck he's talking about. In fact, it's great to have a log line in your pocket for all of your projects. And the quickest way to get there is to find the WHAT IF of your idea. "What if a lawyer who lied for a living couldn't lie for one day?" (Liar/Liar). "What if a notorious mathematician's top-secret government project was really just a schizophrenic delusion?" (A Beautiful Mind.)

"What if a lonely single man with mother issues, wakes up in the body of his mother and uses her busy-body ways to set himself up with the prettiest woman in town?" (Your Movie).

Take off the "what if" and, ta da, you've got a log line.

So that's a great start. But, you have a little more time with this producer than just log line time, so you also have the opportunity to paint a tonal and genre picture: Try describing it right away as being "in the vein of Big." With this, plus your logline, the producer's eyebrows go up just a little and he reaches for a second brie puff.

Perfect. You now have time to elaborate on the SECOND ACT ACTIVITY, meaning what actually happens in the middle of the story. How your character actually acts as his own matchmaker could be hilarious and just the thing to grab the listener.

To get yourself started, try beginning with "It follows the journey of ..."

O.K. "It follows the journey of a lonely single man who ..." Wait a minute, we already said that in our log line. Plus, our main character isn't on his journey alone. Not a lot of interesting heroes are. After all, they need someone to INTERACT with to keep the movie from being about one person talking to himself. In this case, our guy is engaging in a dance of unrequited love with the prettiest woman in town. So let's describe him slightly differently and bring her into it as well.

“It follows the journey of a live-at-home nebbish and the beautiful woman he pursues as he, trapped in the body of his pushy mother, pretends to be an innocent match-maker, wooing her with homemade chicken soup while secretly lusting after her every move.”

Pick just the right words, and you'll start getting that “I'm interested” look again which will allow you time to fit in another sentence that suggests a big COMPLICATION. This is usually the biggest thing that stands in the character's way of getting what he or she wants. And usually, that thing is another person. You mentioned that our hero has issues with his dad as well. He just might be the perfect ANTAGONIST to mess things up. Maybe he catches on to our hero. Good God, maybe he doesn't and starts getting interested in his wife again! Maybe the reason that he wasn't interested in his wife to begin with was because HE was interested in the pretty woman. “Problems occur when the man's dad becomes both aroused by the changes in his ‘wife,’ but is rejected by her when she discovers that he too has been lusting after the pretty woman.”

O.K. this is getting a little crazy, but why not? We need to show that we can mix things up a little; that we can keep the producer from guessing what's going to happen next. The more inventive you can be with the complication, the better.

Having sucked the producer in, you now speak to audience appeal. And producers love this, because you're talking about the potential for box-office receipts. Try, “Audiences will enjoy this movie because ...” Then explain how your overall approach to the movie is special. It could be particularly cinematic: “It mixes live action and animation.” It could have a great pace: “Its action scenes are relentless.” Or, it could have a particularly strong theme: “It dares to ask hard questions about growing up homeless.”

In our case, let's try exploiting the hook some more. “Audiences will love this movie because it speaks to our greatest fear; literally turning into our parents.”

And you'd think you'd be done by now. But your one minute of time has stretched a little bit because you're doing so darn well, so let's give this mini-pitch a closer. Let's end it with a visual, active moment so specific to your film that the producer knows that you, and only you, must write this film.

In the movie world, this big, active moment, the one that uses the cool setting or scenario of the movie, is often referred to as a SET PIECE. Remember “Big” and the piano scene in FAO Schwartz? That's a cool set piece. Remember the train sequence in “The Fugitive?” Even driving on a beach in a convertible in the movie “Term of Endearment” can be considered a strong set piece because it illustrates everything in that one moment of action – our heroine's need to take the wheel; her love interest's need to fly, their love for each other and their need to simply let loose and drive madly on the beach.

Back to your movie. Let's see, you've got switched bodies, pushy mothers, pretty women, horny dads, chicken soup ... Let's keep milking the comedy of this premise. Maybe there's a scene in which your lonely guy-turned pushy mom is forced to do an ancient Macarena on a tour bus filled with gray-haired girlfriends. O.K. I know you can

write something better than this. But that's why you're the screenwriter and I'm just writing a book about it.

Finally, let's put all of these elements together and actually create our mini-pitch. Here goes:

#### MINI PITCH for "MOTHER MAY I"

*"Mother May I" is a script in the vein of "Big" which asks the question, "What if a lonely single man with mother issues, wakes up in the body of his mother and uses her busy-body ways to set himself up with the prettiest woman in town?" It follows the journey of a live-at-home nebbish and the beautiful woman he pursues as he, trapped in the body of his pushy mother, pretends to be an innocent matchmaker, wooing her with homemade chicken soup while secretly lusting after her every move. Problems occur when the man's dad becomes both aroused by the changes in his 'wife,' but is rejected by her when she discovers that he too has been lusting after the pretty woman. Audiences will enjoy this movie because it speaks to our greatest fear: literally turning into our parents. And they'll be particularly entertained when the lonely guy-turned pushy mom is forced to do an ancient Macarena on a tour bus filled with gray-haired girlfriends.*

Not bad. A little wacky, but not bad. You nailed your character, the hook of your movie, suggested complication possibilities and left the listener with a specific image.

Best, the producer has taken his eyes completely off of the food and is now looking intently at you. Wait! He's taking out his card. He's smiling and telling you to send him the script. "It's got real possibilities," he tells you.

That's producer speak for "the best thing I've heard in a long time."

Congratulations. You've opened a new door with your entertaining and concise mini-pitch. Now go to the bar, grab a drink and corner the next producer you see. With a pitch like that, she'll be glad you did.

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