

THE LAUGHING KING

SCREENPLAY
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GOLD
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An orange kite sweeps through a grey sky. In the distance, Blackpool Tower.

Bare feet, trousers rolled up, walking along the shore of a cold, empty sandy beach.

Waves roll in.

It is cold, no one's around. MATT (20's), trainers stuffed in his pockets stands alone in the sea, staring out into the distance. Scruffy, red eyed, he looks as if he may have been sleeping rough.

He lets the tide break over his feet on the shoreline. He closes his eyes.

A piercing scream, as a seagull swoops down over the sea.

From out of nowhere a small rosy faced kid approaches with his tangled orange kite.

BOY

Hey, can you help me with this?

Matt turns to look at the kid and his knotted up kite.

Matt turns back to the sea.

MATT

No use. It's fucked.

Matt picks up his bag and starts walking up the beach towards the promenade.

The discordant SOUNDS of someone telephoning a fax machine.

The sounds blend in with a tinny pop tune playing on a radio.

Matt slowly turns a revolving postcard stand. He examines one card after another. None feel right - they're either too garish, lewd or comic.

Finally he settles on one:- a generic view of Blackpool Tower on a sunny day.

Approaching the till, Matt places a fifty pound note on the counter.

The young cashier serving pushes it back towards him.

SHOPKEEPER

You must be joking mate... haven't you got anything smaller?

3 INT BLACKPOOL PROMENADE ARCADE - DAY

3

The artillery sounds of a game in an Amusement Arcade.

Near the entrance a teenage lad with his hood up, is engrossed in a shooting game.

Matt's bag brushes past him as he enters - the teenager instinctively elbows him back.

LAD

Oi!

Matt seems not to notice - he pushes on through the maze of flashing coloured lights. He stops - every which way he looks is jarring noise and animated neon colour.

For a time he stays lost in the kaleidoscope of flashing lights.

Matt approaches a WOMAN in a tabard leans wearily against a machine with a bum-bag heavy with change for the machines. She obviously works there.

He lays down his fifty pound note.

She peers over the rim of her glasses - glances down at the note and then at Matt.

CASHIER

(without turning away from
Matt)

Barry... Barry!

BARRY (obviously the arcade's security) appears behind Matt. He picks up the money, stuffs it into Matt's coat pocket and without saying a word escorts him to the entrance and out of the door.

The SOUND of phone digits being pressed.

Another number being dialled. This time there's a click...

AUTOMATED PHONE VOICE O/C

The number you have dialled has not
been recognised. Please replace the
handset and try again.

Matt trips over a dog that's been tied up outside and lands on the ground - he stays there, bewildered - unable to move.

The dog starts barking.

People walk past - not wanting to get involved.

Matt stares blankly at the now closed door - inside, the lad from before is still niking and blasting his way through his game.

4 INT CAFE - PROMENADE, BLACKPOOL - DAY

4

Matt stares into an untouched cup of tea sitting on the table in-front of him. The milk has formed a skin on the surface.

Through the cafe's salt stained window, incongruous grey shapes stream by.

A THUD on the glass and the sound of shrieking and laughter. A group of raucous girls (mid twenties) - dressed in skimpy outfits, hold the birthday girl, MADDIE, against the glass.

Matt can't help but stare. She meets his eye for a moment, before her girlfriends drag her away.

Matt watches them go.

A waitress hovers behind him.

WAITRESS
Anything else love?

Matt doesn't answer.

WAITRESS (CONT'D)
(louder)
You alright love?

Matt jumps, now aware of her presence. She presents the bill. There's an awkward silence as she waits for him to pay.

Matt lays his fifty pound note on the table. The waitress tuts, but picks it up to go and get change.

V/O MATT
Dear Emily...

5 EXT - BLACKPOOL PROMENADE - DAY

5

Matt sits on a bench - he is scribbling in tiny writing on the back of the postcard.

He turns it over - it's the picture of Blackpool Tower on a sunny day - he looks at it intently.

V/O MATT
... This card reminds me of the
last time Dad brought us here...

He holds it up - we see that he is trying to match up the postcard view with the actual view - which looks pale in contrast.

Matt carries on writing.

V/O MATT (CONT'D)
 ... It's different from how I
 remember...

6 EXT BLACKPOOL PROMENADE - DAY

6

As Matt walks along the promenade, a group of teenagers on bikes encircle him. He is forced to stop as they repeatedly cycle around him shouting and sniggering at one another -

Matt in the centre is invisible to them.

The SOUND of another phone number being dialled. The phone rings a couple of times before being answered.

MR WILSON (O.C.)
 Yes. Hello?

EMILY (O.C.)
 Mr Wilson?

MR WILSON (O.C.)
 Speaking.

EMILY (O.C.)
 My name's Emily Thorne. My brother
 Matt was in university with your
 son, Jim. I'm trying to get hold of
 him, could you possibly give me his
 number?

Silence on the line.

MR WILSON (O.C.)
 Let me take your number and then
 pass it on to Jim.

EMILY (O.C.)
 (Panicking)
 Its just ...it's an emergency. I
 can't get hold of Matt and ...

MR WILSON (O.C.)
 Just give me your number and I'll
 make sure Jim gets it.

Emily sighs in frustration.

The teenagers cycle off leaving Matt standing alone.

7 EXT BLACKPOOL ARCADES - DAY

7

Weird laughter as a painted face lurches forwards.

The Laughing Clown's life-size head awkwardly shifts back into its static starting position. His frozen face now reflected over Matt's in the glass case that's enclosing him.

Matt feeds a pound coin into the slot.

The Laughing Clown once again comes to life. His relentless laughter draws a small crowd.

On the other side of the case, through the glass, Matt sees the party of girls from before. The girls are making Maddie pose for a photo beside the clown. She seems embarrassed as her friends pose suggestively.

Maddie notices Matt - she recognises him from the cafe. She watches him as he turns and walks away.

The Clown's laughter gradually slows down and he rests back in his chair silent, until the next pound coin activates him.

8

EXT BLACKPOOL PROMENADE - DAY

8

Matt slowly walks the length of the promenade. A lone figure amongst the loud families with buggies & scooters and groups of friends who jostle past him.

The SOUND of a ringing phone quickly being answered.

EMILY (O.C.)

Hello?

JIM (O.C.)

Hey Emily! It's Jim.

EMILY (O.C.)

Jim! I'm after Matt. Have you seen him?

JIM

No. Not for a good while. To be honest, I've had my head down since I've got this new job.

Emily sighs with worry.

EMILY (O.C.)

(agitated)

Oh God. Who else can I try?

JIM (O.C.)

Don't know. Was out with the old gang last night. Someone would have said if they'd seen him.

EMILY (O.C.)

(scared now)

I'm really worried about him. He's been down. Just sitting in. It's the anniversary of the... thing with dad... I don't know... I've just got a bad feeling.

JIM (O.C.)

Shit Em. Maybe you should think about calling the police. Listen, got to go... Boss is back. Look. Matt'll be fine. Tell him to call me yeah?

SOUND of phone clicking off.

9 EXT PROMENADE - EARLY EVENING

9

The heavy grey sky is darkening. Street lights are beginning to come on. Matt is still sitting on the bench.

Two policemen approach, they are staring directly at Matt. We think that perhaps they're coming for him, but they just continue past.

Matt unzips his bag and reaches amongst his clothes to take out a photograph:- a man, his father; posing with a teenage Matt and younger sister Emily - they are beside the Laughing Clown figure. The kids are pulling faces. Matt looks closely at his dad. He resembles Matt, disconnected, out of place.

He puts it back and takes out his postcard and pen - he is struggling to find the right words. He writes slowly, crossing out the odd thought.

V/O MATT

(squinting as he writes)

...I'm going round and round but I can't make it stop. I'm tired of pretending - I smile and laugh but it's all for show. I feel like an anchor dragging us both down. This way, we can both be free. I love you. Matt.

10 EXT BLACKPOOL BEACH - NIGHT, LATER.

10

The sky is now black. Blackpool Tower's lights reflect off the water. The cold dark beach is completely deserted.

Matt is a lone figure on the seafront.

He heads off down the beach stopping in the shadows beneath a wooden boardwalk.

He is holding a half empty bottle of vodka and a vial of pills.

Matt approaches the waters edge. The water is calling him.

This is it. Journeys end.

The faint beat of dance music can be heard coming from a club on the pier.

Matt wades out into the sea and stands in the waves up to his knees. His teeth begin to chatter. It's freezing. He swigs from the vodka bottle and ventures in a little further.

The sound of two girls arguing up on the nearby promenade - but Matt isn't listening. He is focused on the black horizon.

Wedging the vodka bottle under his arm he opens the pills and tips them into his mouth, downing them with a swig of vodka.

There is a THUD from somewhere behind him...

GIRL

O God O God O God O God!

Squinting, he can just make out the shape of a girl dressed in gold who's on the sand - retching. He recognises her as the birthday girl from earlier. She looks the worse for wear with mascara running down her cheeks...

He finishes the rest of the pills with a swig of vodka and turns back to his bleak view.

The SOUND of bicycles circling the slatted deck above him. The bicycles brake suddenly.

LAD

Whoa... Look down here - there's a bird being sick!

Disgust and laughter. It's the gang from earlier.

Matt twists round to look. Three of them are now clambering noisily down onto the beach, heading towards Maddie.

An incoming wave knocks him off balance.

He stumbles, splashing, wetting the seat of his jeans. He maintains his balance at the expense of the vodka bottle which immediately fills with sea water and sinks without trace.

The three teenagers are down on the beach. They have surrounded the girl. It's Maddie.

LAD (CONT'D)

You OK love?

Matt tries to ignore the fracas behind him and instead concentrate on his decision. The tension is palpable and as the scene behind him unfolds we register Matt's hesitation.

The main lad sits down right next to her. The other two smirk behind her back. Maddie looks scared.

LAD (CONT'D)
What's your name?

MADDIE
Mates'll be here any minute.

LAD
That's a funny name.

A dark figure is approaching unsteadily from the direction of the sea. It's Matt - wet and woozy.

MATT
(Slurring)
Hey! Jus... Leave her alone

The teenagers slowly turn to him, getting the measure of him.

LAD
(Offended)
Leave her alone? We're looking
after her!
(To Maddie)
Aren't we?

Maddie looks up at Matt, her eyes imploring him to help.

Matt steadies himself and swings a punch at the lad nearest him, but succeeds only in knocking himself off balance.

Matt falls in a heap. The lads laugh as he struggles to get back onto his feet.

LAD 2
(Mocking)
He's gonna get us!

He approaches Matt and winds him. Matt sinks back to the sand, curls up in a foetal position and then violently starts to throw up. It's all the pills and vodka.

The teenagers are shocked, suddenly it feels serious - they were just messing. They run off back to their bikes.

Matt continues to heave.

MADDIE
Oh my God! Are you alright?

Maddie crawls over to him.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

My God... was so scared. Then you came out of nowhere - you were like an angel. Like a guardian angel.

Matt is slowly recovering.

She rummages in her bag for a tissue. Hands it to Matt. He takes it and wipes his mouth.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Bastards. I know... Shouldn't have been out here on my own. Had a fall out with my mates - didn't even want to come here. Wanted to go camping.

Matt is holding his head in his hands.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

Wanted to sit round a campfire not be chatted up by fellas in a nightclub, shouting down your ear 'cos the music's too loud... and everyone's just hammered and just pretending... pretending to enjoy themselves.

Matt's listening now.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

It makes you wonder. I mean... What's the point?

Maddie and Matt sit side by side on the beach - staring out into the darkness of the sea.

She smooths down her dress.

The SOUND of the sea.

Maddie looks up at him with wide incredulous eyes.

Matt stares back into them.

They are both shivering.

And then Matt's on his feet - he disappears up the beach.

Maddie can see the shape of Matt's faint silhouette moving about in the darkness.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

(calling over to him)

Hey. Are you OK?

Clutching her knees up tightly to her Maddie tries to get warm. She notices the area where Matt has puked up - it's just a damp patch on the sand with loads of white pills.

Matt emerges, armed with a collection of driftwood and debris from the beach - he drops everything down in a pile in front of Maddie.

11 EXT BLACKPOOL BEACH - NIGHT, LATER.

11

The moon is bright now.

Maddie & Matt sit in silence, watching the makeshift fire that Matt's built. It's crackling and spitting trying to catch.

A flame starts to dance - tentatively at first, but eventually it takes and before not too long the campfire is burning.

Maddie looks into the fire, revived. She smiles at Matt.

Matt smiles back, he is warming up.

MADDIE

I dunno. Maybe this is the point.

Maddie turns to look out to sea. She turns back to Matt.

MADDIE (CONT'D)

What were you doing out there anyway?

Matt thinks.

MATT

Hmmm - getting cold feet I guess.

In the warm glow of the fire she looks so pretty in her gold dress. Matt sighs.

He stands up and offers her his hand to help her up.

MATT (CONT'D)

...You should get back to your mates. They'll be worried.

MADDIE

Come with if you like.

Matt shakes his head.

Maddie takes his hand. He helps her to her feet.

She closes her eyes and breathes in the cold sea air deeply.

And then, she kisses him lightly on the cheek and runs back in the direction of the club.

Matt watches her run along the beach - Maddie's dress catching the vivid neon of the arcades and clubs on the promenade.

He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone and switches it on. The screen illuminates his face as he scrolls down the missed calls and clicks EMILY.

12

EXT BLACKPOOL BEACH - DAY

12

An orange kite sweeps through an early morning sky - in the distance is Blackpool Tower.

Bare feet, trousers rolled up walking along the shore of a sandy beach...

Waves roll in.

Matt takes his trainers out of his pockets and puts them on. He stands alone at the sea edge staring out into the distance. Red eyed, it's obvious he's been on the beach all night. He closes his eyes and listens to the sound of the waves

A piercing scream as a seagull swoops down over the sea.

He watches the orange kite dancing in the wind in the grey sky.

THE END.