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IT REALLY IS ALL A JOKE

It makes complete sense to me that the neatest, simplest
explanation of narrative storytelling I have encountered came
from a film adaptation of a novel about stage magicians:

> "Every great magic trick consists of three parts or acts. The
> first part is called "The Pledge". The magician shows you
> something ordinary: a deck of cards, a bird or a man. He shows
> you this object. Perhaps he asks you to inspect it to see if it
> is indeed real, unaltered, normal. But of course... it probably
> isn't. The second act is called "The Turn". The magician takes
> the ordinary something and makes it do something extraordinary.
> Now you're looking for the secret... but you won't find it,
> because of course you're not really looking. You don't really
> want to know. You want to be fooled. But you wouldn't clap yet.
> Because making something disappear isn't enough; you have to
> bring it back. That's why every magic trick has a third act, the
> hardest part, the part we call "The Prestige"."
>
> - dialogue from *The Prestige*, screenplay by Christopher
> Nolan, based on the novel by Christopher Priest

Among the reasons I like this speech is that, in describing the
specifics of a great magic trick, it also shows that what we
writers know as "three-act structure," or the "well made play" -
or even "the hero's journey" - is a construct that extends

beyond our own field into a much greater world. Many, many things, from industrial design to the rituals of faith traditions, and organized sports depend on this three-part construct to convey meaning.

One of the defining moments of my career as a writer, and my ability to pitch my stories effectively, came during my stint on *Medium;* a mystery procedural about a psychic soccer mom. The show's creator and showrunner was Glenn Gordon Caron, a legendary writer/producer also known for creating *Moonlighting*, one of the defining moments of 1980s popular culture (and a major inspiration in my own personal journey). Caron was also a very hard grader. Getting a pitch right was crucial to a writer's success in his room.

During one of my pitches, as I struggled to convey a bunch of details and moves, Caron stopped me. I expected this to be the death of my idea, but instead, he said "tell it to me as if it were a joke." My mind reeled. How could I tell a story about murderous ambulance hijackers like a joke?

What he really meant then hit me with zen-monk-walking-stick-to-head-clarity. Like the description of the parts of magic trick in the quote above, every joke has a set up, a complication of the set up – usually a misdirect – and a punch line. So does every other single scene and sequence one finds in a successful script.

I then pitched the teaser pretty much exactly as it was later filmed and aired:

The set up: an ambulance arrives at a suburban house and paramedics attend to a man who seems passed out on the floor.

The complication: while still on his back and seemingly unconscious, the man on the floor sneaks out a gun and holds it to the head of the paramedic bending over him.

The punch-line: the ambulance drives down a mountain road, the rear gates open while the vehicle is still in motion, and the paramedics fly out into a ravine, tied to their stretchers.

What I got from the exercise was not just a lesson in concision, but also a much-needed reminder of the basic structure of all narrative. The simple truth of everything you are about to read

is that it will all seem very basic, and you may even find me
condescending for spending so much time explaining it...
But it is also shocking how frequently even the most masterful
of writers can lose sight of even the most essential truths.

Thought it may appear facile to say "every story has to have a
beginning a middle and an end" and call it a tutorial in
writing, there is a deeper dynamic at work. It's not just
stories that break down into three acts, it's every part of a
story from the gross anatomy of the narrative to the structures
of scenes, speeches, and individual lines of dialogue.

In short: it really is all a joke.

The simplest joke I know takes up one sentence: a man walks into
a bar and says "ouch." The joke follows the structure detailed
above: set up, "a man walks into a bar." Complication: "and
says." How is this a "complication"? Well, it doesn't have to be
complicated to be a complication. All it is here is that
something is happening that is not all the other things you'd
expect from hearing jokes like this one told over and over
again: the man is not having a drink, he's not meeting friends,
he's not lighting a cigarette. Him saying something is a
specific change in his circumstance. The punch line: "ouch."

Funny or not, it's an elegant little sentence in that it assumes
you know the very, very old "a guy walks into a bar" context.
The joke then twists with your expectation of the punch line by
revealing that this actually was never that kind of joke, but
rather a description of a man literally injuring himself by
crashing into some sort of rebar or girder.

The joke structure here also describes what is probably the most
common sentence structure in our language: subject/object/
predicate. "See Dick run." Subject: You, seeing. Object: Dick,
being seen. Predicate: Dick is running. If a sentence is the
most basic unit of narrative in the language, even that carries
the tripartite structure of a joke, a magic trick, or a Russian
novel.

Many great lines of dialogue are three act plays in their own
right. Consider Rhett Butler's classic rejoinder "frankly, my
dear, I don't give a damn." It is an assertion of honesty,
followed by an escalation through an assertion of love, followed
by a course-reversing assertion of fuck you. It is the entire

arc of a romantic relationship in one line, and the beauty stab at the end makes for a terrific punchline.

Of course not every line you write is going to follow this paradigm. It does bear asking, however, even on the level of a line "do I have a Three/do I need a Three?"

That question – and that use of the word "Three" – has become a the benchmark by which I measure the success or failure of a line or scene.

Scaling up, then, every successful scene follows a similar trajectory. One of my favorite expository scenes – and yes, there can be such a thing as a great expository scene – is in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The purpose of the scene is to show that Indiana Jones is a callow and somewhat mercenary individual with no faith in what is beyond the reach of science, and to lay in the idea that the first step in his quest will include a difficult personal reunion.

The scene opens with Indiana Jones's colleague (and Dean of the archaeology department) Marcus Brody coming to his home some time after the two have met with State Department agents regarding Hitler's attempts at finding the Lost Ark of the Covenant:

NOTE: I have transcribed the scene rather than reprinted the original script – the action descriptions are mine not Lawrence Kasdan's.

    Indy ushers Marcus Brody from the front door and into his home:

                    INDY
      You did it, didn't you?

                    BRODY
      They want you to go for it.

                    INDY
      Oh, Marcus!

                    BRODY
      They want you to get a hold of the Ark before
      the Nazis do and they're prepared to pay
      handsomely for it.

INDY
          And the museum? The museum gets the Ark when
          we're finished?

                    BRODY
          Oh, yes.

Indy reaches for a bottle of champagne and pours a glass for Brody:

                    INDY
          Oh... The Ark of the Covenant. Nothing else has
          come close. That thing represents everything we
          got into archaeology for in the first place.

They clink glasses and drink.

                    BRODY
          Mmm! You know, five years ago, I would've gone
          after it myself. I'm really rather envious.

Indy puts his glass down, rushes to a closet and pulls out a suitcase,
then throws in clothes as they speak:

                    INDY
          I've got to locate Abner. I think I know where
          to start. Suppose she'll still be with him?

                    BRODY
          Possibly, but... Marion's the least of your
          worries right now, believe me, Indy.

                    INDY
          What do you mean?

Brody's affect darkens as the implications dawn upon him:

                    BRODY
          Well, I mean that for nearly 3,000 years, man
          has been searching for the Lost Ark. Not
          something to be taken lightly. No one knows its
          secrets. It's like nothing you've ever gone
          after before.

                    INDY
          Oh, Marcus. What are you trying to do, scare
          me? You sound like my mother. We've known each
          other for a long time.

Indy crosses the room and takes a wrapped package from a drawer.

                    INDY
          I don't believe in magic, a lot of
          superstitious hocus-pocus. I'm going after a

find of incredible historical significance.
                    You're talking about the bogeyman.

          Indy unwraps the package to reveal a <u>gun</u>.

                              INDY
                    Besides, you know what a cautious fellow I am.

          Indy very carelessly TOSSES the gun into the suitcase.

This scene is great not because it renders a great dramatic
moment of personal change (it does not) but because it turns
what should be a pretty prosaic bit of business - sending the
hero hurtling into the film's plot - into a revelation of
character through drama. The scene accomplishes this by being a
great example of the set up/complication/punch-line structure.

The first part of the scene, from Brody's entrance to his
clinking glasses with Indy serves as the set-up. Indy got the
gig, and every one of the deal terms lines up with his and
Brody's expectations.

As Indy goes for his suitcase, eager to start his mission, the
complications stack up: he has to locate his old mentor Abner
Ravenwood and isn't entirely sure where he may be. Now,
Ravenwood was set up in the previous scene as having had a
falling-out with Indy, so this is not the main complication.
That comes next with the brief discussion of "she," whom Brody
names as "Marion."

Now we know a woman was involved, that she is related in some
way to Indy's mentor, and it didn't go well... so Marion is one
of his worries. This is not, however, the final complication,
the final complication is that Brody - seemingly
uncharacteristically, as he has thus far been portrayed as one
with Indy's academic temperament - has an episode of foreboding
contemplation in which he appears to be beguiled by the Ark's
mystical reputation.

This speech is delivered with such darkening portent in the film
that the camera pushes in on Brody, excluding Indy from the
frame momentarily, and the score turns to the film's "Ark Theme"
- a spooky leitmotif carried by wafting and ethereals flutes and
oboes.

It also bears mentioning that this middle portion of the scene has a Three of its own. Indy is presented with three issues at the kick-off for his mission, the last of which is a wild twist on the first two. Set up: it's going to be hard to find his old mentor. Complication: a woman who clearly has serious history with both men may be with him. Punchline: Yeah, that, and also, that their prize has the WRATH OF FUCKING GOD inside of it.

The scene then escalates to its own punch line: Indiana Jones reasserting that he is strictly a man of science – setting up the film's entire conflict of faith against reason, and his arc from unbelieving scientific mercenary to respecting the force of the divine at the film's end – before also showing that he might not be the most rigorous man of science by blithely tossing a loaded firearm across the room!

You have seen scenes like this one a million times. You have also forgotten this scene a million times. It is a staple of every James Bond movie: Bond goes to M's office, M presents him with a mission, and, to varying degrees of amusement, Bond takes the mission and goes off to flirt with Moneypenny on his way to be given that year's latest gadgets at Q-branch. What elevates the scene in *Raiders* above most other scenes of this nature is that it not only has a tight Three, and a tight Three within the Three, but that it uses the structure to reveal more than plot: it uses the Three structure to turn plot information into character revelation.

Raiders of the Lost Ark also shows how much better an action sequence can be when it is plotted with the same structure as a dialogue scene. I have been told by many a writing teacher that love scenes, fight scenes, and musical numbers all serve the same function: they are what happens when dialogue will no longer suffice. That doesn't mean that a mere explosion of any of these types of action is enough to satisfy the requirement of extending the dramatic exigencies of a situation beyond dialogue.

The second act climax of *Raiders* is a truck chase that is as satisfying a piece of writing as any dialogue scene in the movie. The set up is simple: the Nazis have taken the Lost Ark and are transporting it via truck to Cairo from their dig in the deep desert. Declaring that he's "making this up as I go" Indy commandeers a horse and goes after the truck.

In the complication, Indy fights his way to the truck and into the cab, but not before being shot, and then being thrown out of the truck by a Nazi Commander - who is portrayed as a character in full, given dialogue-free personality-building beats, and his own *leitmotif* in the score, and shown to be Indy's equal. The Commander beats Indy to a pulp and throws him out through the windshield and under the truck.

The punch-line is that Indy has ways of using his signature bullwhip that we haven't even imagined. He secures the whip to the truck's undercarriage, drags himself back in and gives as good as he got before tossing the commander out over the hood.

In an amusing coda, the Commander is run over by the truck. He should have had a bullwhip.

In a lot of action movies, the mayhem feels predicated not by the dramatic needs of the film and the arcs of its characters but by what someone thought would be "cool." Now, there's nothing wrong with that on principle - but, the most successful fight/musical/sex scenes are the ones that successfully mix that with character and drama. One scene that sticks out in my memory as a good example of a beautifully rendered but dramatically inert action sequence is a single-take stairway fight between Charlize Theron and a bunch of faceless baddies in the film *Atomic Blonde*.

The fight choreography and cinematography in this scene are exquisite, but the result is ultimately unsatisfactory because the scene starts at a high level of intensity, remains at the same level of intensity for the duration, and ends in much the same way. The athleticism of presenting the scene as a single shot is impressive, but it serves up no novel or complicating dramatic incident (the scene comes about halfway through the film, by which time we have all been thoroughly convinced that Theron's character is a badass, so even that feels like a repetition).

The only dramatic change in the scene, then, is the movement of Theron's character from a stories-up apartment to the building's exit. After a while, the scene becomes a lengthy mush of painful exchanges of blows. This sequence doesn't have a Three, it has a One. A character has to get down a stair... and she does.

All the way up the long narrative ladder is the totality of your film, show, novel, what have you. Since I have spoken so much

about *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, already, I might as well break down its gross anatomy into the paradigm:

The Set-up: Indiana Jones, a faithless and mercenary archaeologist who will stop at nothing to get his prize, receives the assignment of a lifetime.

The Complication: Jones has to partner with an old lover, but in spite of his growing emotional attachment, he prevails in finding the Ark.

The Punch-Line: Jones willingly gives up the Ark in exchange for his lover's life and survives the Wrath of God unleashed by the opening of the Ark by showing faith and refusing to even look at the prize he sought all along.

I don't feel the need to go into great depth into why and how this film works as a three-act structure because Indiana Jones' journey is fairly simple, though never simplistic, and feels self-evident to me. Also because - as I mentioned previously - if any aspect of writing has ever been analyzed to death, it's the three act structure of a film. Syd Field's *How To Write a Screenplay*, Robert McKee's *Story*, Christian Vogler (adapting Joseph Campbell), Blake's Snyder "fifteen beats" from *Save The Cat* - and pretty much everyone who has ever written about how to create a successful screenplay has essentially codified the three act structure in their own words... and the ones who don't, the ones who claim to subverting the idea of Set Up/ Complication/Punch Line, mostly land in that exact same place regardless of intent.

Films that succeed as art and entertainment describe how a character's or a set of characters' journey through a sequence of events leave them indelibly changed (or tragically unchanged in spite of the audience's rooting for the contrary) and that movement courses naturally through the Set-Up/Complication/ Punchline architecture of the Three. This is not to take anything from anyone who tries to teach screenwriting in any one way. Not everyone understands the basics the same manner, no two storytelling minds are the same, and the more ways there are to explain these basics, the better the quality of screenwriting as an art will be in toto.

Around this time in any discussion of screenwriting structure, someone will chime up with a number of examples that do not follow the structure and are still valid works of art. It is absolutely true - Peter Greenaway's *The Falls* comes to mind. At the same time, films that many hold up as being anti-structure, are completely within the paradigm. As challenging as Fellini's *8 1/2*, Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*, Bela Tarr's *Satantango,* and pretty much Andrei Tarkovsky's entire oeuvre may be, these films tell stories, and stories have a natural tendency to begin, develop, and conclude.

Going back to my story about "tell it to me as if it were a joke," then, the revelation for me was just how frequently this pattern repeats in the descending levels of narrative, not just in the greater story. The sequence, the scene, the monologue, the sentence (some words in the German language are three-act plays in their own right). Understanding this is useful because it clarifies what these elements have to accomplish in order to earn their keep in the story. Does this line deliver the character's intention in a way that is unexpected? Does your scene have a discernible shape with a dramatic question that is developed through the body of the scene? Does the scene end with a new and surprising dramatic question born from the movement of the scene? Seeking your Three from line to line, scene to scene, sequence to sequence - or, in the case of serialized television, episode to episode and blocks of episodes throughout a season - is an effective way to test whether the basic building blocks of your story have the necessary integrity to stand on their own.

Whether you call them "The Pledge, The Turn, and The Prestige," or "The Set-Up, The Complication, and The Punchline," or "The Acceptance of the Call, The Belly of the Beast, and The Return with the Boon," "Act 1, Act 2, and Act 3," or quite simply "the beginning, middle and end," this tripartite structure is a recurring, golden mean-like, basic unit of storytelling. Finding your Three frees you to experiment with what truly matters: clever plotting, profound characters, impactful scenes, and thematic resonance. The Three is the stage, you step on it and perform your own magic.

Of course, you don't have to take my word for it. As a card-carrying member of Generation-X, I credit the old *Schoolhouse Rock* Saturday Morning cartoons for a great deal of my understanding of the universe. In one of its most telling and amusing vignettes, *Schoolhouse Rock* taught us pretty much all you need to know about finding and nurturing your Three:

Three is a magic number
Yes it is, it's a magic number
Somewhere in that ancient mystic trinity
You get three as a magic number
The past and the present and the future
Faith and hope and charity
The heart and the brain and the body
Give you three as a magic number

It takes three legs to make a tripod or to make a table stand
It takes three wheels to make a vehicle called a tricycle
And every triangle has three corners
Every triangle has three sides
No more, no less, you don't have to guess
When it's three, you can see
Its a magic number