**TIM'S SCENE IS IN BLACK TYPE**

<span style="color:red">**SHAWN'S COMMENTARY IS IN RED TYPE**</span>

"God damn Matt. I've been looking forward to this trip for a year and he has to go and fuck it up." said Adam.

<span style="color:red">Choosing your "narrative altitude" at the beginning of your story is critical.</span>

<span style="color:red">1. Do you begin with what filmmakers call a wide establishing shot to give your reader an immediate sense of the story's world, an above the ground vantage point that establishes the narrative device you will be using throughout or,</span>

<span style="color:red">2. Do you begin your story on the ground in medias res, in the middle of things, either in the middle of descriptive action (the beginning of a James Bond movie) or in a dialogue between one or more characters?</span>

<span style="color:red">The choice you made here is #2, you began in medias res.</span>

"Look," John said, "we have to go back. What other choice do we have?"

"It's not like it's his fault." said Cory.

The sunroom on the top deck was flooded with the midday sun. Not a cloud in the sky as the four men sipped sullenly from their beers.

<span style="color:red">This is the first indication of where this scene is taking place and it is not very specific. If I didn't know that you were writing a story set on a ship, I'd have no clue of where this was. Also you indicate in this description that there are four men, but you've introduced only three speakers and an off presence "Matt."</span>

"Yeah, but it had to be him right? Who else would that happen too?" Craig said.

<span style="color:red">Having more than three characters speaking to one another is very difficult for the reader to keep track. Especially at the start of a story. The reader has no mind picture of any of these characters and without one. He or she is incapable of telling one voice from another. Without specificity of characterization and a more focused approach to the scene, readers will not engage.</span>

"How many times did his car break down or run out of gas and we had to come and get him? That one night after the game it was raining so hard I almost got swiped by a car while putting gas in his tank."

The door to the galley slid open and Mick stepped in. His skin was tanned leathery and his hair was golden from thirty years leading dives under the Australian sun. He was more sinew than muscle now, but in his younger days his blue eyes would have beckoned more than a few women to bed.

"I've radioed and let them know we're heading back. Sorry about this guys. You'll get a full refund."

"Hmph," Chris muttered. "You mean John will get a refund."

John shot Chris a look then looked at Mick.

"Is there no way to salvage the trip? Can we come back out or hit another reef instead?" John said.

"No way." Mick said. "All of the equipment has to be gone over with a fine-toothed comb after what happened. I've never had this happen before and want to make sure it never happens again. No more dives. No more excursions. We need to head back now and get Matt to a hypo chamber as soon as possible."

more original. But when you doing rough molding of a scene, don't kill yourself over this kind of stuff. Accept that it's just place keeper text and keep writing. No one is every going to read this…unless you are courageous like Tim Grahl to show your early work to the world so that others can benefit.

Mick walked out and left the four alone.

They drank quietly for a few minutes.

The above two sentences represent 3rd person omniscient point of view. I write about point of view in a few chapters in The Story Grid. It's important to make some early decisions about point of view and for the kind of book you're writing here (an action story with a clock that will escalate/complicate into something that you're not quite sure of yet, but probably mano a mano)

A very important element in all stories is to have a central "story spine," which means that you need a character (or characters) that the reader can emotionally attach to. This character (the protagonist) is in search of a global "want." You need to make that "want" abundantly clear as early in the telling as possible. If it's a compelling want (something believable and attractive to the reader) the reader won't be able to help themselves rooting for the character to get it. And they'll want to keep reading to see if the character is successful or unsuccessful.

So what you need to do is add a character that will serve as your protagonist and give them a desire for something.

"Ah fuck," Chris said, "I'm gonna go check on Matt and see how he's feeling."

Chris stood and walked out of the sunroom, sliding the door closed behind him. His knuckles showed white against the railing as he walked along the deck towards the stairs. He glanced into the cockpit as he walked by and saw Mick throwing switches on the control board muttering curses under his breath.

"Everything ok?" Chris said.

Mick jumped, startled and turned around.

"Oh yeah, just a bit of a problem getting the nav to point us home. I'll have it cleared up in a few minutes." Mick said. "You heading below?"

"Yeah." Chris said.

"Can you holler at Tommy to come up and give me a hand?"

"Sure thing." Chris said.

He headed down the narrow staircase, both hands on the railings. He ducked his head around the first cabin's door.

"Heyo Tommy."

"Yeah?" Tommy said.

"Mick says he needs you in the cockpit for something."

"Ok thanks."

The previous few sentences are what I call "shoe leather." What that means is that the writer tells the reader what a character is going to do and then he actually puts what he is going to do on the page. Don't put this stuff in your story. It insults the intelligence of the reader. They don't want to be bogged down with stage direction or stage business. They see right through the writer's fumbling around for a real direction to the scene. Cut this kind of stuff.

Chris made his way down the short hallway, passing each of the individual cabins that his friends were supposed to have for the week. He reached the rear cabin and slowly slid the door open.

Matt laid curled up on the top of the sheets. He twitched in his sleep and was sweating though the air was cool. Chris almost woke him but thought better of it after the morning he'd had and turned to go back upstairs and join the others.
As he passed the cockpit, he overheard Mick and Tommy arguing in low voices.

"What are the odds?" Tommy said. "You ever have anything happen like this before? First the vest and now this?"

"No." Mick said. "But if it's not coincidence, then what the hell is going on?"

Mick looked up at Chris and plastered a fake smile on his face.

"Need anything?" Mick said.

"No, nothing. Just checking on Matt."

"Great. We'll be heading out soon then." Mick said.

Both Mick and Tommy stared at Chris until he finally walked past and back to the sunroom. Cory, Craig, and John had stepped out and were sliding the door shut.

"Where you guys heading?" Chris said.

"Gonna catch a nap while we start heading back." John said.

<span style="color:red">The above is more stage business/shoe leather that the reader will skip.</span>

"Figure we can get Mick to whip us up our farewell dinner once we're on our way since we're heading back early." Craid added.

"Plus, we don't feel like hanging out with a depressed, drunk Adam." Cory said with a smile, loud enough for Adam to hear through the door. "That guy's a real bitch."
Adam shot him the middle finger.

"You allright?" John asked Chris.

"Yeah, yeah, all better."

Chris hugged the wall tightly and let the guys pass him on their way downstairs.
He slid the door to the sunroom open and poked his head in.

"Adam, you ok?" he said.

Adam shrugged.

"I'm allright." he said. "Just pissed. The first real vacation I've had in years and it's done on day one."

Adam tossed his bottle in the recycling and reached into the fridge for another beer.

"At least there's plenty to drink." Adam said.

Chris rolled his eyes and headed onto the open deck. He laid down on the sunbed, stretched, and closed his eyes.

—

"Oy," Tommy said, "You seen Adam?"

Chris blinked against the sun and sat up shading his eyes. He must have dozed off. How long was he out?

"Um," Chris said. "Last I've seen him he was in the sunroom. He's not there?"

"No." Tommy said, glancing around quickly.

Though Chris had only known him a day, so far Tommy had fit the stereotype of a the laid back Australian perfectly. But now, the dive master was fidgeting, looking around quickly.

"Everything ok?" Chris said.

"Yeah, yeah." Tommy said. "Yeah, all's good. We're having a bit of trouble with the nav but it's not a big deal. Mick's done this trip a hundred times and could get us back with his eyes closed. Just checking in with everyone."

Tommy turned around and headed back towards the bow.

"No worries, I'll find him." Tommy said.

Chris stood, grabbed a beer from the mini-fridge — seriously, this boat must have a dozen of these things — twisted the top off and walked towards the stern. He stopped a couple feet from the railing and stared at over the ocean for several minutes drinking the beer.

As he'd already done a dozen times since stepping onboard, he fought back against the sea sickness as the catamaran rocked gently on the sea.
He drained the last drop of the beer, twisted the cap back on the bottle, and tossed it over the railing.

After another moment, Chris turned and walked back towards the sunroom. He might as well go back down to his room and try go to sleep. It was much easier to keep from vomiting when he was unconscious.

He ran his hand along the rail as he made his way back towards the stairs.

"Fuck!"

The yell came from the cockpit.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

Chris moved quickly still keeping a grip on the railings.

He saw John already almost up the stairs with Cory and Craig not far behind him.

Chris made it to the cockpit door before them and turned in.

Adam was already standing just inside the door and Tommy was kneeling down next to Mick in a spreading mess of blood.

Tommy's hands were covered in the blood and there was a red streak across his face.

The captain's neck had been hacked open.

There were at least five gaping cuts from different angles. From the look of the spray around the cockpit and the amount of blood on the floor, at least one of those cuts had opened Mick's artery.

Tommy was still screaming and cursing. The five friends stood in shocked horror unable to stop staring at the grisly scene.

Several minutes passed as Tommy finally quieted and the first of the guys shifted his feed uneasy.

Tommy looked slowly up at the four men. His face and bear chest were smeared with Mick's blood. His face was purple with rage.

"Which of you fuckers did this?"

We discussed in the podcast the fact that you have one too many "inciting incidents here."

In the movie DEAD CALM, which I highly recommend, the inciting incident occurs in the very first sequence of the movie.

Sam Neil comes home from the Navy for X-mas vacation.  He's at the train station expecting his wife Nicole Kidman and his son to be there to greet him.  He arrives and they're not there.  There's a cut and we see him still standing waiting, until two policeman who have a photo of him look at him.  They approach.

Neil is taken to a hospital and discovers that his son has been killed and his wife is unconscious.  They were in a car accident on their way to pick him up.

That's the INCITING INCIDENT of the Story.

Sam Neil is our protagonist. His life is completely upended by the death of his son and the severe damage to his wife…not just the physical damage, but the psychological damage.

Neil is a Navy Captain, so he decides to take a leave from service and take his wife on an extended cruise. He's going to restore the balance to his life and his wife's life by spending time with her, just the two of them and their dog on the open sea. In the DEAD CALM waters of the Pacific Ocean.

So we have a protagonist who's life has been pushed out of equilibrium (for the worse…) that WANTS to rebuild his life with his wife. If he can get her to metabolize her grief, everything will be okay.

That's the opening scene of the Story. Simple, effective, and extremely well done. From the start we're rooting for Sam Neil. We want him to heal his wife and we admire his stoicism and strength.

So this is the kind of scene you want to start your Story, Tim.

You want to establish a protagonist whose life is thrown out of balance who makes a choice to fix it.

Now the idea that we noodled and decided on pursuing from the podcast is that there is a boat at sea.

It's twelve hours away from civilization.

The people on board on there for a deep-sea scuba diving adventure.

Their lives are thrown out of balance when one of the diver's gets sick. Not just any kind of sick either. By all indications, the diver has THE BENDS.

So let's think about what's required in a SCENE.

1. An Inciting Incident, which can either be a) Causal or b) Coincidence

   Your INCITING INCIDENT is causal…the diver misread his/her instruments and surfaced too soon. He/she is ill.

2. Progressive complications that culminate in a Turning Point (which can be either active or revelatory) that incites a

Right now, the stakes aren't really escalating in any real way. All of the guys are just complaining and things don't go from bad to worse to worse still to Holy Shit how are we going to get out of this mess?

The Turning Point in your scene is revelatory…one of the guys has THE BENDS (one of them has to be a doctor or medic who would be able to "diagnose" the situation)

3. Crisis, which is a question that the character must answer through choice. It will either be a "best bad choice" or an "irreconcilable goods choice."

    The CRISIS question is "Do we turn back to get the BENDS guy medical treatment with a good chance of heading headlong into a storm…or Do we head to a safe cove to ride out the storm and then head back when it's passed?"

    This is the Crisis question that the readers need to piece together for themselves. Either the characters go over their options or the third person omniscient narrator lays them out for the reader.

4. The active choice that the character makes is the CLIMAX of the scene.

    What choice happens? Who makes the decision?

    Presently, the Captain is the one who will make this decision. The fact that he ends up dead at the end of the scene is a very good cliffhanger…but one you'll probably want to save for later on in the Story…perhaps as the climax of Beginning Hook…

5. And the Resolution caps the scene to clearly describe the shift of the scene from one value charge to it's opposite.

    The Resolution can be as simple as the Captain giving the order to head back or to set a course for the safety of the cove.

So we know we need all of that stuff in a scene, right?

And we also know that readers require a protagonist in search of a want.

As this is the very first scene in our long form story then, we'll want to have our protagonist "in the scene."

What to do?

Here's an idea.  Before we pound out head on the table until it bleeds, let's think about the global storytelling technique.

What's a standard way (one that's been used in numerous successful action stories throughout time) to present an action story?

There are three choices for your narrative point of view:

1.  Third person omniscient voice…this is the above ground tale telling that we are all familiar with. *Once upon a time, there was a princess*.  I remember this by thinking of the grandfather played by Peter Falk in William Goldman's THE PRINCESS  BRIDE.  Remember the device there?  A grandfather tells his grandson a bedtime story, which evolves into the wonderful fairy tale…

2.  First person…this is the technique of having the protagonist (or unreliable narrator) tell his or her story.  GONE GIRL is a terrific example of using first person narration to wonderful effect.  We "hear" both the female and the male lead characters points of view throughout the novel.

3.  Free Indirect Style…this is a great technique as it combines elements of both third person and first person. *The Silence of the Lambs* uses free indirect style brilliantly.  I have a whole slew of chapters in The Story Grid that talks about this.

Now, the truth of the matter is that all three of these can be used effectively in Action stories and all other stories for that matter.  So how do you choose?

One way to choose is to think about a "narrative device."

Huh?  What's that?

A narrative device is a way to sort of invite the reader into your world gently with a familiar embrace of sorts.

For example, when Steven Pressfield contemplated writing a novel about the battle of Thermopylae, he had to think of a cool way to lead a reader into his world.  I suspect he was enthralled with the famous engraving at Thermopylae:

> The second monument, the ancient one, is an unadorned stone engraved with the words of the poet Simonides. Its verses comprise perhaps the most famous of all warrior epitaphs: Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here obedient to their laws we lie.  Pressfield, Steven (2007-01-30). Gates of Fire . Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

What were those laws I'm sure Steve thought when he read that epitaph? That is where writers find ideas…their own private curiosity.

But there is a hell of a lot of set up that has to take place before you can write that climactic battle. Which is of course the big obligatory payoff of the war novel.

What he came up with is similar to the way Herman Melville solved his EPIC WHALING NOVEL problem. Pressfield, like Melville who based his story on the events that happened upon the whale ship Essex, decided to tell the story through a SOLE SURVIVOR (in MOBY DICK I think two survive (Queequeg does too), but you know what I mean).

Melville let the reader know what narrative device he was going to use immediately with his famous opening line *Call me Ishmael*.

Pressfield was sold on the idea of the "sole survivor" but he had one problem. In the historical record, there was no evidence that anyone from the Spartan side of the battle survived.

Thank God he was writing a novel, right? Because he was "making it up" he decided to do something pretty cool.

He knew that he just didn't want to write about the bloody battle…he wanted to write about a lost world of sorts…what it must have been like to be a Spartan.

So how best to do that?

He should write about someone from the outside going in to the Spartan world…an everyman from the time period…someone neither rich nor absolutely poor or destitute. Someone like himself. (Just a sidebar here. While I edited *Gates of Fire,* Steve and I have never talked about this stuff…this is just my way "in" to his novel and how he may have written it.)

Okay, so now he has a narrator of sorts. A character like Ishmael in *Moby Dick* who enters the strange Spartan world, goes through trials and tribulations being both repulsed and attracted to it, and ends up fighting alongside the Spartans at Thermopylae. And he finds that he's the only one from his side of the conflict who survives.

Cool, but how is Pressfield going to set up all of that backstory…in as little word count as possible?

Pressfield figured out a brilliant narrative device to solve this problem.

He decided that the conquering enemy, the Persians, would discover the sole survivor. When word goes up the chain of command that there is a Spartan camp survivor, King Xerxes himself demands that the survivor be brought to him.

The survivor is brought to the king, who demands to hear his Story. Only 300 Spartans held back his million man Army for seven days, slaughtering thousands of his best fighters. Xerxes wants to know how in the hell they managed to do it.

Pressfield's choice of narrative device proved irresistible. Not just to me. But to millions of readers around the world. *Gates of Fire* is one of the finest historical novels ever written. No question.

I think Steve cracked it with just that simple single choice…to tell the story through the eyes of a sole survivor being kept alive just long enough to spill the "secrets" of the Spartan world to the enemy.

Okay, so why am I blathering on about Narrative Device?

I think if you take the time to consider it from all of the angles, you will discover a way to not just solve this particular scene, but how to approach additional problems that will inevitably arise in the future.

Here's what I suggest:

Think about a narrative device that will

1.  Immediately engage the reader
2.  Serve as a subplot

What do I mean exactly?

What if the beginning of the story was a deposition or interrogation of the only "witness" to the events? A sole survivor of the events that happened on the ship…

If you were to use that device, the reader will have a "protagonist" to immediately connect to and the comfort level of knowing the way your story is structured. How it will unfold. They'll curl up on the couch with a big cup of coffee if they have a sense of the kind of rainy day yarn you're about to tell them.

In the interview/interrogation structure you have a front story (the actual interview/ interrogation…what's happening etc.) and the back story (which is the big action

sequences of what happened beforehand and how the lead character fits into the events).

The first season of TRUE DETECTIVE used this format as did the classic unreliable narrator movie, THE USUAL SUSPECTS.

So why not begin your story with some sort of foreign "tribunal." What happens when a crime (murder) is committed at sea? The front story could be a "search for the truth" of what happened on that ship…Justice will be at stake for the front crime story.

The backstory will be the Life/Death struggle…who dies, who survives and why?

The protagonist begins as a victim and slowly he/she is under investigation. I think the protagonist could be best served as a woman.

She was found, barely alive, by a cruise ship…

So you could use a little device to start the entire story off like this:

Subject was escorted into recording office and made as comfortable as reasonably possible considering her emaciated condition and severely sun damaged skin.

DOE: (inaudible)

FIRST ADJUSTANT REUMADI: I'm sorry?

DOE: I held my breath with my eyes closed…

FAR: I'm sorry?

DOE: …when they came for me.

FAR:  When who came for you?

DOE: All of them…one after the other…after the other…after the other…

FAR: All of who?

DOE: Might I have some water? Something to eat?

FAR: Of course!  Of course (orders for water and food heard)

DOE: Let me drink, eat and gather myself…I will tell you it all, but first I must rest.


Narrative Device:  Sole Survivor of a boat party lost at sea.  She is going to tell what happened to her in first person.

But because you have the "interview/interrogation" device available, you'll be able to back out of her tale and give another point of view…perhaps one from the lead investigator in the case?  Not sure.  Don't have to solve all of those things now.  What we want to do is crack that first inciting incident scene for the novel and then let it take us along and inform us for future choices.