From what material do we create the scenes that will one day walk and talk their way across the screen? What is the clay we twist and shape, keep or throw away? What is the “substance” of story?

In all other arts the answer is self-evident. The composer has his instrument and the notes it sounds. The dancer calls her body her instrument. Sculptors chisel stone. Painters stir paint. All artists can lay hands on the raw material of their art—except the writer. For at the nucleus of a story is a “substance,” like the energy swirling in an atom, that’s never directly seen, heard, or touched, yet we know it and feel it. The stuff of story is alive but intangible.

“Intangible?” I hear you thinking. “But I have my words. Dialogue, description. I can put hands on my pages. The writer’s raw material is language.” In fact, it’s not, and the careers of many talented writers, especially those who come to screenwriting after a strong literary education, flounder because of the disastrous misunderstanding of this principle. For just as glass is a medium for light, air a medium for sound, language is only a medium, one of many, in fact, for storytelling. Something far more profound than mere words beats at the heart of a story.

And at the opposite end of story sits another equally profound phenomenon: the audience’s reaction to this substance. When you think about it, going to the movies is bizarre. Hundreds of strangers sit in a blackened room, elbow to elbow, for two or more hours. They don’t go to the toilet or get a smoke. Instead, they stare wide-eyed at a screen, investing more uninterrupted concentration
than they give to work, paying money to suffer emotions they'd do anything to avoid in life. From this perspective, a second question arises: What is the source of story energy? How does it compel such intense mental and sentient attention from the audience? How do stories work?

The answers to these questions come when the artist explores the creative process subjectively. To understand the substance of story and how it performs, you need to view your work from the inside out, from the center of your character, looking out at the world through your character's eyes, experiencing the story as if you were the living character yourself. To slip into this subjective and highly imaginative point of view, you need to look closely at this creature you intend to inhabit, a character. Or more specifically, a protagonist. For although the protagonist is a character like any other, as the central and essential role, he embodies all aspects of character in absolute terms.

THE PROTAGONIST

Generally, the protagonist is a single character. A story, however, could be driven by a duo, such as THELMA & LOUISE; or by a trio, THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK; or by the seven samurai or THE DIRTY DOZEN. In THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN an entire class of people, the proletariat, create a massive Plural-Protagonist.

For two or more characters to form a Plural-Protagonist, two conditions must be met: First, all individuals in the group share the same desire. Second, in the struggle to achieve this desire, they mutually suffer and benefit. If one has a success, all benefit. If one has a setback, all suffer. Within a Plural-Protagonist, motivation, action, and consequence are communal.

A story may, on the other hand, be Multiprotagonist. Here, unlike the Plural-Protagonist, characters pursue separate and individual desires, suffering and benefiting independently: PULP FICTION, HANNAH AND HER SISTERS, PARENTHOOD, DINER, DO THE RIGHT THING, THE BREAKFAST CLUB, EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN, PELLE THE CONQUEROR, HOPE AND GLORY,

HIGH HOPES. Robert Altman is the master of this design: A WEDDING, NASHVILLE, SHORT CUTS.

On screen the Multiprotagonist story is as old as GRAND HOTEL; in the novel older still, War and Peace; in the theatre older yet. A Midsummer Night's Dream. Multiprotagonist stories become Multiplot stories. Rather than driving the telling through the focused desire of a protagonist, either single or plural, these works weave a number of smaller stories, each with its own protagonist, to create a dynamic portrait of a specific society.

The protagonist need not be human. It may be an animal, BABE, or a cartoon, BUGS BUNNY, or even an inanimate object, such as the hero of the children's story The Little Engine That Could. Anything that can be given a free will and the capacity to desire, take action, and suffer the consequences can be a protagonist.

It's even possible, in rare cases, to switch protagonists halfway through a story. PSYCHO does this, making the shower murder both an emotional and a formal jolt. With the protagonist dead, the audience is momentarily confused; whom is this movie about? The answer is a Plural-Protagonist as the victim's sister, boyfriend, and a private detective take over the story. But no matter whether the story's protagonist is single, multi or plural, no matter how he is characterized, all protagonists have certain hallmark qualities, and the first is willpower.

A PROTAGONIST is a willful character.

Other characters may be dogged, even inflexible, but the protagonist in particular is a willful being. The exact quantity of this willpower, however, may not be measurable. A fine story is not necessarily the struggle of a gigantic will versus absolute forces of inevitability. Quality of will is as important as quantity. A protagonist's willpower may be less than that of the biblical Job, but powerful enough to sustain desire through conflict and ultimately take actions that create meaningful and irreversible change.

What's more, the true strength of the protagonist's will may hide behind a passive characterization. Consider Blanche DuBois,
The protagonist of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. At first glance she seems weak, drifting and will-less, only wanting, she says, to live in reality. Yet beneath her frail characterization, Blanche’s deep character owns a powerful will that drives her unconscious desire: What she really wants is to escape from reality. So Blanche does everything she can to buffer herself against the ugly world that engulfs her: She acts the grand dame, puts doilies on frayed furniture, lampshades on naked light bulbs, tries to make a Prince Charming out of a dullard. When none of this succeeds, she takes the final escape from reality—she goes insane.

On the other hand, while Blanche only seems passive, the truly passive protagonist is a regrettably common mistake. A story cannot be told about a protagonist who doesn’t want anything, who cannot make decisions, whose actions effect no change at any level.

**The PROTAGONIST has a conscious desire.**

Rather, the protagonist’s will impels a known desire. The protagonist has a need or goal, an object of desire, and knows it. If you could pull your protagonist aside, whisper in his ear, “What do you want?” he would have an answer: “I’d like X today, Y next week, but in the end I want Z.” The protagonist’s object of desire may be external: the destruction of the shark in *Jaws*, or internal: maturity in *Big*. In either case, the protagonist knows what he wants, and for many characters a simple, clear, conscious desire is sufficient.

**The PROTAGONIST may also have a self-contradictory unconscious desire.**

However, the most memorable, fascinating characters tend to have not only a conscious but an unconscious desire. Although these complex protagonists are unaware of their subconscious need, the audience senses it, perceiving in them an inner contradiction. The conscious and unconscious desires of a multidimensional protagonist contradict each other. What he believes he wants is the antithesis of what he actually but unwittingly wants.

This is self-evident. What would be the point of giving a character a subconscious desire if it happens to be the very thing he knowingly seeks?

**The PROTAGONIST has the capacities to pursue the Object of Desire convincingly.**

The protagonist’s characterization must be appropriate. He needs a believable combination of qualities in the right balance to pursue his desires. This doesn’t mean he’ll get what he wants. He may fail. But the character’s desires must be realistic enough in relationship to his will and capacities for the audience to believe that he could be doing what they see him doing and that he has a chance for fulfillment.

**The PROTAGONIST must have at least a chance to attain his desire.**

An audience has no patience for a protagonist who lacks all possibility of realizing his desire. The reason is simple: No one believes this of his own life. No one believes he doesn’t have even the smallest chance of fulfilling his wishes. But if we were to pull the camera back on life, the grand overview might lead us to conclude that, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” that most people waste their precious time and die with the feeling they’ve fallen short of their dreams. As honest as this painful insight may be, we cannot allow ourselves to believe it. Instead, we carry hope to the end.

Hope, after all, is not unreasonable. It’s simply hypothetical. “If this . . . if that . . . if I learn more . . . if I love more . . . if I discipline myself . . . if I win the lottery . . . if things change, then I’ll have a chance of getting from life what I want.” We all carry hope in our hearts, no matter the odds against us. A protagonist, therefore, who’s literally hopeless, who hasn’t even the minimal capacity to achieve his desire, cannot interest us.
The PROTAGONIST has the will and capacity to pursue the object of his conscious and/or unconscious desire to the end of the line, to the human limit established by setting and genre.

The art of story is not about the middle ground, but about the pendulum of existence swinging to the limits, about life lived in its most intense states. We explore the middle ranges of experience, but only as a path to the end of the line. The audience senses that limit and wants it reached. For no matter how intimate or epic the setting, instinctively the audience draws a circle around the characters and their world, a circumference of experience that's defined by the nature of the fictional reality. This line may reach inward to the soul, outward into the universe, or in both directions at once. The audience, therefore, expects the storyteller to be an artist of vision who can take his story to those distant depths and ranges.

A STORY must build to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

In other words, a film cannot send its audience to the street rewriting it: “Happy ending . . . but shouldn’t she have settled things with her father? Shouldn’t she have broken up with Ed before she moved in with Mac? Shouldn’t she have . . . ?” Or: “Downer . . . the guy’s dead, but why didn’t he call the cops? And didn’t he keep a gun under the dash, and shouldn’t he have . . . ?” If people exit imagining scenes they thought they should have seen before or after the ending we give them, they will be less than happy moviegoers. We’re supposed to be better writers than they. The audience wants to be taken to the limit, to where all questions are answered, all emotion satisfied—the end of the line.

The protagonist takes us to this limit. He must have it within himself to pursue his desire to the boundaries of human experience in depth, breadth, or both, to reach absolute and irreversible change. This, by the way, doesn’t mean your film can’t have a sequel; your protagonist may have more tales to tell. It means that each story must find closure for itself.

The PROTAGONIST must be empathetic; he may or may not be sympathetic.

Sympathetic means likable. Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, for example, or Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in their typical roles: The moment they step onscreen, we like them. We’d want them as friends, family members, or lovers. They have an innate likability and evoke sympathy. Empathy, however, is a more profound response.

Empathetic means “like me.” Deep within the protagonist the audience recognizes a certain shared humanity. Character and audience are not alike in every fashion, of course; they may share only a single quality. But there’s something about the character that strikes a chord. In that moment of recognition, the audience suddenly and instinctively wants the protagonist to achieve whatever it is that he desires.

The unconscious logic of the audience runs like this: “This character is like me. Therefore, I want him to have whatever it is he wants, because if I were he in those circumstances, I’d want the same thing for myself.” Hollywood has many synonymous expressions for this connection: “somebody to get behind,” “someone to root for.” All describe the empathetic connection that the audience strikes between itself and the protagonist. An audience may, if so moved, empathize with every character in your film, but it must empathize with your protagonist. If not, the audience/story bond is broken.

THE AUDIENCE BOND

The audience’s emotional involvement is held by the glue of empathy. If the writer fails to fuse a bond between filmgoer and protagonist, we sit outside feeling nothing. Involvement has nothing to do with evoking altruism or compassion. We empathize for very personal, if not egocentric, reasons. When we identify with
a protagonist and his desires in life, we are in fact rooting for our own desires in life. Through empathy, the vicarious linking of ourselves to a fictional human being, we test and stretch our humanity. The gift of story is the opportunity to live lives beyond our own, to desire and struggle in a myriad of worlds and times, at all the various depths of our being.

Empathy, therefore, is absolute, while sympathy is optional. We’ve all met likable people who don’t draw our compassion. A protagonist, accordingly, may or may not be pleasant. Unaware of the difference between sympathy and empathy, some writers automatically devise nice-guy heroes, fearing that if the star role isn’t nice, the audience won’t relate. Uncountable commercial disasters, however, have starred charming protagonists. Likability is no guarantee of audience involvement; it’s merely an aspect of characterization. The audience identifies with deep character, with innate qualities revealed through choice under pressure.

At first glance creating empathy does not seem difficult. The protagonist is a human being; the audience is full of human beings. As the filmgoer looks up on the screen, he recognizes the character’s humanity, senses that he shares it, identifies with the protagonist, and dives into the story. Indeed, in the hands of the greatest writers, even the most unsympathetic character can be made empathetic.

Macbeth, for example, viewed objectively, is monstrous. He butchers a kindly old King while the man is sleeping, a King who had never done Macbeth any harm—in fact, that very day he’d given Macbeth a royal promotion. Macbeth then murders two servants of the King to blame the deed on them. He kills his best friend. Finally he orders the assassination of the wife and infant children of his enemy. He’s a ruthless killer; yet, in Shakespeare’s hands he becomes a tragic, empathetic hero.

The Bard accomplished this feat by giving Macbeth a conscience. As he wanders in soliloquy, wondering, agonizing, “Why am I doing this? What kind of a man am I?” the audience listens and thinks, “What kind? Guilt-ridden … just like me. I feel bad when I’m thinking about doing bad things. I feel awful when I do them and afterward there’s no end to the guilt. Macbeth is a human being; he has a conscience just like mine.” In fact, we’re so drawn to Macbeth’s writhing soul, we feel a tragic loss when at climax Macduff decapitates him. Macbeth is a breathtaking display of the godlike power of the writer to find an empathetic center in an otherwise contemptible character.

On the other hand, in recent years many films, despite otherwise splendid qualities, have crashed on these rocks because they failed to create an audience bond. Just one example of many: INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE. The audience’s reaction to Brad Pitt’s Louis went like this: “If I were Louis, caught in his hell-after-death, I’d end it in a flash. Bad luck he’s a vampire. Wouldn’t wish that on anybody. But if he finds it revolting to suck the life out of innocent victims, if he hates himself for turning a child into a devil, if he’s tired of rat blood, he should take this simple solution: Wait for sunrise, and poof, it’s over.” Although Anne Rice’s novel steered us through Louis’s thoughts and feelings until we fell into empathy with him, the dispassionate eye of the camera sees him for what he is, a whining fraud. Audiences always disassociate themselves from hypocrites.

THE FIRST STEP

When you sit down to write, the musing begins: “How to start? What would my character do?”

Your character, indeed all characters, in the pursuit of any desire, at any moment in story, will always take the minimum, conservative action from his point of view. All human beings always do. Humanity is fundamentally conservative, as indeed is all of nature. No organism ever expends more energy than necessary, risks anything it doesn’t have to, or takes any action unless it must. Why should it? If a task can be done in an easy way without risk of loss or pain, or the expenditure of energy, why would any creature do the more difficult, dangerous, or enervating thing? It won’t. Nature doesn’t allow it . . . and human nature is just an aspect of universal nature.

In life we often see people, even animals, acting with extreme behavior that seems unnecessary, if not stupid. But this is our objective view of their situation. Subjectively, from within the expe-
rience of the creature, this apparently intertemperate action was minimal, conservative, and necessary. What’s thought “conservative,” after all, is always relative to point of view.

For example: If a normal person wanted to get into a house, he’d take the minimum and conservative action. He’d knock on the door, thinking, “If I knock, the door’ll be opened. I’ll be invited in and that’ll be a positive step toward my desire.” A martial arts hero, however, as a conservative first step, might karate-chop the door to splinters, feeling that this is prudent and minimal.

What is necessary but minimal and conservative is relative to the point of view of each character at each precise moment. In life, for example, I say to myself: “If I cross the street now, that car’s far enough away for the driver to see me in time, slow down if needed, and I’ll get across.” Or: “I can’t find Dolores’s phone number. But I know that my friend Jack has it in his Rolodex. If I call him in the midst of his busy day, because he’s my friend, he’ll interrupt what he’s doing and give me the number.”

In other words, in life we take an action consciously or unconsciously (and life is spontaneous most of the time as we open our mouths or take a step), thinking or sensing within to this effect: “If in these circumstances I take this minimum, conservative action, the world will react to me in a fashion that will be a positive step toward getting me what I want.” And in life, 99 percent of the time we are right. The driver sees you in time, taps the brakes, and you reach the other side safely. You call Jack and apologize for interrupting him. He says, “No problem,” and gives you the number. This is the great mass of experience, hour by hour, in life. BUT NEVER, EVER IN A STORY.

The grand difference between story and life is that in story we cast out the minutiae of daily existence in which human beings take actions expecting a certain enabling reaction from the world, and, more or less, get what they expect.

In story, we concentrate on that moment, and only that moment, in which a character takes an action expecting a useful reaction from his world, but instead the effect of his action is to provoke forces of antago-

nism. The world of the character reacts differently than expected, more powerfully than expected, or both.

I pick up the phone, call Jack, and say: “Sorry to bother you, but I can’t find Dolores’s phone number. Could you—” and he shouts: “Dolores? Dolores! How dare you ask me for her number?” and slams down the phone. Suddenly, life is interesting.

THE WORLD OF A CHARACTER

This chapter seeks the substance of story as seen from the perspective of a writer who in his imagination has placed himself at the very center of the character he’s creating. The “center” of a human being, that irreducible particularity of the innermost self, is the awareness you carry with you twenty-four hours a day that watches you do everything you do, that chides you when you get things wrong, or compliments you on those rare occasions when you get things right. It’s that deep observer that comes to you when you’re going through the most agonizing experience of your life, collapsed on the floor, crying your heart out . . . that little voice that says, “Your mascara is running.” This inner eye is you: your identity, your ego, the conscious focus of your being. Everything outside this subjective core is the objective world of a character.

A character’s world can be imagined as a series of concentric circles surrounding a core of raw identity or awareness, circles that mark the levels of conflict in a character’s life. The inner circle or level is his own self and conflicts arising from the elements of his nature: mind, body, emotion.

When, for example, a character takes an action, his mind may not react the way he anticipates. His thoughts may not be as quick, as insightful, as witty as he expected. His body may not react as he imagined. It may not be strong enough or deft enough for a particular task. And we all know how emotions betray us. So the closest circle of antagonism in the world of a character is his own being: feelings and emotions, mind and body, all or any of which may or may not react from one moment to the next the way he expects. As often as not, we are our own worst enemies.
all the sources of antagonism outside the personal: conflict with social institutions and individuals—government/citizen, church/worshipper; corporation/client; conflict with individuals—cop/criminal/victim, boss/worker, customer/waiter, doctor/patient; and conflict with both man-made and natural environments—time, space, and every object in it.

THE GAP

STORY is born in that place where the subjective and objective realms touch.

The protagonist seeks an object of desire beyond his reach. Consciously or unconsciously he chooses to take a particular action, motivated by the thought or feeling that this act will cause the world to react in a way that will be a positive step toward achieving his desire. From his subjective point of view the action he has chosen seems minimal, conservative, yet sufficient to effect the reaction he wants. But the moment he takes this action, the objective realm of his inner life, personal relationships, or extra-personal world, or a combination of these, react in a way that's more powerful or different than he expected.
This reaction from his world blocks his desire, thwarting him and bending him further from his desire than he was before he took this action. Rather than evoking cooperation from his world, his action provokes forces of antagonism that open up the gap between his subjective expectation and the objective result, between what he thought would happen when he took his action and what in fact does happen between his sense of probability and true necessity.

Every human being acts, from one moment to the next, knowingly or unknowingly, on his sense of probability, on what he expects, in all likelihood, to happen when he takes an action. We all walk this earth thinking, or at least hoping, that we understand ourselves, our intimates, society, and the world. We behave according to what we believe to be the truth of ourselves, the people around us, and the environment. But this is a truth we cannot know absolutely. It's what we believe to be true.

We also believe we're free to make any decision whatsoever to take any action whatsoever. But every choice and action we make and take, spontaneous or deliberate, is rooted in the sum total of our experience, in what has happened to us in actuality, imagination, or dream to that moment. We then choose to act based on what this gathering of life tells us will be the probable reaction from our world. It's only then, when we take action, that we discover necessity.

Necessity is absolute truth. Necessity is what in fact happens when we act. This truth is known—and can only be known—when we take action into the depth and breadth of our world and brave its reaction. This reaction is the truth of our existence at that precise moment, no matter what we believed the moment before. Necessity is what must and does actually happen, as opposed to probability, which is what we hope or expect to happen.

As in life, so in fiction. When objective necessity contradicts a character's sense of probability, a gap suddenly cracks open in the fictional reality. This gap is the point where the subjective and objective realms collide, the difference between anticipation and result, between the world as the character perceived it before acting and the truth he discovers in action.

Once the gap in reality splits open, the character, being willful and having capacity, senses or realizes that he cannot get what he wants in a minimal, conservative way. He must gather himself and struggle through this gap to take a second action. This next action is something the character would not have wanted to do in the first case because it not only demands more willpower and forces him to dig more deeply into his human capacity, but most important, the second action puts him at risk. He now stands to lose in order to gain.

ON RISK

We'd all like to have our cake and eat it too. In a state of jeopardy, on the other hand, we must risk something that we want or have in order to gain something else that we want or to protect something we have—a dilemma we strive to avoid.

Here's a simple test to apply to any story. Ask: What is the risk? What does the protagonist stand to lose if he does not get what he wants? More specifically, what's the worst thing that will happen to the protagonist if he does not achieve his desire?

If this question cannot be answered in a compelling way, the story is misconceived at its core. For example, if the answer is: "Should the protagonist fail, life would go back to normal," this story is not worth telling. What the protagonist wants is of no real value, and a story of someone pursuing something of little or no value is the definition of boredom.

Life teaches that the measure of the value of any human desire is in direct proportion to the risk involved in its pursuit. The higher the value, the higher the risk. We give the ultimate values to those things that demand the ultimate risks—our freedom, our lives, our souls. This imperative of risk, however, is far more than an aesthetic principle, it's rooted in the deepest source of our art. For we not only create stories as metaphors for life, we create them as metaphors for meaningful life—and to live meaningfully is to be at perpetual risk.

Examine your own desires. What's true of you will be true of
every character you write. You wish to write for the cinema, the foremost media of creative expression in the world today; you wish to give us works of beauty and meaning that help shape our vision of reality; in return you would like to be acknowledged. It’s a noble ambition and a grand achievement to fulfill. And because you’re a serious artist, you’re willing to risk vital aspects of your life to live that dream.

You’re willing to risk time. You know that even the most talented writers—Oliver Stone, Lawrence Kasdan, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala—didn’t find success until they were in their thirties or forties, and just as it takes a decade or more to make a good doctor or teacher, it takes ten or more years of adult life to find something to say that tens of millions of people want to hear, and ten or more years and often as many screenplays written and unsold to master this demanding craft.

You’re willing to risk money. You know that if you were to take the same hard work and creativity that goes into a decade of unsold screenplays and apply it to a normal profession, you could retire before you see your first script on the screen.

You’re willing to risk people. Each morning you go to your desk and enter the imagined world of your characters. You dream and write until the sun’s setting and your head’s throbbing. So you turn off your word processor to be with the person you love. Except that, while you can turn off your machine, you can’t turn off your imagination. As you sit at dinner, your characters are still running through your head and you’re wishing there was a notepad next to your plate. Sooner or later, the person you love will say: “You know . . . you’re not really here.” Which is true. Half the time you’re somewhere else, and no one wants to live with somebody who isn’t really there.

The writer places time, money, and people at risk because his ambition has life-defining force. What’s true for the writer is true for every character he creates:

The measure of the value of a character’s desire is in direct proportion to the risk he’s willing to take to achieve it; the greater the value, the greater the risk.

THE GAP IN PROGRESSION

The protagonist’s first action has aroused forces of antagonism that block his desire and spring open a gap between anticipation and result, disconfirming his notions of reality, putting him in greater conflict with his world, at even greater risk. But the resilient human mind quickly remakes reality into a larger pattern that incorporates this disconfirmation, this unexpected reaction. Now he takes a second, more difficult and risk-taking action, an action consistent with his revised vision of reality, an action based on his new expectations of the world. But again his action provokes forces
of antagonism, splitting open a gap in his reality. So he adjusts to the unexpected, ups the ante yet again and decides to take an action that he feels is consistent with his amended sense of things. He reaches even more deeply into his capacities and willpower, puts himself at greater risk, and takes a third action.

Perhaps this action achieves a positive result, and for the moment he takes a step toward his desire, but with his next action, the gap will again spring open. Now he must take an even more difficult action that demands even more willpower, more capacity, and more risk. Over and over again in a progression, rather than cooperation, his actions provoke forces of antagonism, opening gaps in his reality. This pattern repeats on various levels to the end of the line, to a final action beyond which the audience cannot imagine another.

These cracks in moment-to-moment reality mark the difference between the dramatic and the prosaic, between action and activity. True action is physical, vocal, or mental movement that opens gaps in expectation and creates significant change. Mere activity is behavior in which what is expected happens, generating either no change or trivial change.

But the gap between expectation and result is far more than a matter of cause and effect. In the most profound sense, the break between the cause as it seemed and the effect as it turns out marks the point where the human spirit and the world meet. On one side is the world as we believe it to be, on the other is reality as it actually is. In this gap is the nexus of story, the cauldron that cooks our tellings. Here the writer finds the most powerful, life-bending moments. The only way we can reach this crucial junction is by working from the inside out.

**WRITING FROM THE INSIDE OUT**

Why must we do this? Why during the creation of a scene must we find our way to the center of each character and experience it from his point of view? What do we gain when we do? What do we sacrifice if we don’t?

Like anthropologists, we could, for example, discover social and environmental truths through careful observations. Like note-taking psychologists, we could find behavioral truths. We could, by working from the outside in, render a surface of character that’s genuine, even fascinating. But the one crucial dimension we would not create is emotional truth.

The only reliable source of emotional truth is yourself. If you stay outside your characters, you inevitably write emotional clichés. To create revealing human reactions, you must not only get inside your character, but get inside yourself. So, how to do this? How, as you sit at your desk, do you crawl inside the head of your character to feel your heart pounding, your palms sweating, a knot in your belly, tears in your eyes, laughter in your heart, sexual arousal, anger, outrage, compassion, sadness, joy, or any of the uncountable responses along the spectrum of human emotions?

You’ve determined that a certain event must take place in your story, a situation to be progressed and turned. How to write a scene of insightful emotions? You could ask: How should someone take this action? But that leads to clichés and moralizing. Or you could ask: How might someone do this? But that leads to writing “cute”—clever but dishonest. Or: “If my character were in these circumstances, what would he do?” But that puts you at a distance, picturing your character walking the stage of his life, guessing at his emotions, and guesses are invariably clichés. Or you could ask: “If I were in these circumstances, what would I do?” As this question plays on your imagination, it may start your heart pounding, but obviously you’re not the character. Although it may be an honest emotion for you, your character might do the reverse. So what do you do?

You ask: “If I were this character in these circumstances, what would I do?” Using Stanislavski’s “Magic if,” you act the role. It is no accident that many of the greatest playwrights from Euripides to Shakespeare to Pinter, and screenwriters from D. W. Griffith to Ruth Gordon to John Sayles were also actors. Writers are improvisationalists who perform sitting at their word processors, pacing their rooms, acting all their characters: man, woman, child, monster. We act in our imaginations until honest, character-specific
emotions flow in our blood. When a scene is emotionally meaningful to us, we can trust that it'll be meaningful to the audience. By creating work that moves us, we move them.

CHINATOWN

To illustrate writing from the inside out, I'll use one of the most famous and brilliantly written scenes in film, the second act climax of CHINATOWN by screenwriter Robert Towne. I'll work from the scene as performed on screen, but it can also be found in the third draft of Towne's screenplay, dated October 9, 1973.

Synopsis

Private detective J. J. Gittes is investigating the death of Hollis Mulwray, commissioner of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Mulwray has apparently drowned in a reservoir, and the crime baffles Gittes's rival, Police Lieutenant Escobar. Near the end of the Act Two, Gittes has narrowed suspects and motives to two: either a conspiracy of millionaires led by the ruthless Noah Cross killed Mulwray for political power and riches; or Evelyn Mulwray killed her husband in a jealous rage after he was found with another woman.

Gittes follows Evelyn to a house in Santa Monica. Peering through a window, he sees the "other woman," seemingly drugged and held prisoner. When Evelyn comes out to her car, he forces her to talk and she claims that the woman is her sister. Gittes knows she doesn't have a sister, but for the moment says nothing.

The next morning he discovers what appears to be the dead man's eyeglasses in a salt water pond at the Mulwray home in the hills above L.A. Now he knows how and where the man was killed. With this evidence he goes back to Santa Monica to confront Evelyn and turn her over to Escobar, who's threatening to pull Gittes's private investigator's license.

CHARACTERS

J. J. GITTES, while working for the district attorney, fell in love with a woman in Chinatown and while trying to help her somehow caused her death. He resigned and became a PI, hoping to escape corrupt politics and his tragic past. But now he's drawn back into both. What's worse, he finds himself in this predicament because, days before the murder, he was duped into investigating Mulwray for adultery. Someone's made a fool of Gittes and he's a man of excessive pride. Behind his cool demeanor is an impulsive risk-taker; his sarcastic cynicism masks an idealist's hunger for justice. To further complicate matters, he's fallen in love with Evelyn Mulwray. Gittes's scene objective: to find the truth.

EVELYN MULWRAY is the victim's wife and daughter of Noah Cross. She's nervous and defensive when questioned about her husband; she stammers when her father is mentioned. She is, we sense, a woman with something to hide. She has hired Gittes to look into the murder of her husband, perhaps to conceal her own guilt. During the investigation, however, she seems drawn to him. After a close escape from some thugs, they make love. Evelyn's scene objective: to hide her secret and escape with Katherine.

KHAN is Evelyn's servant. Now that she's widowed, he also sees himself as her bodyguard. He prides himself on his dignified manner and ability to handle difficult situations. Khan's scene objective: to protect evelyn.

KATHERINE is a shy innocent who has lead a very protected life. Katherine's scene objective: to obey evelyn.

THE SCENE:

INT./EXT. SANTA MONICA—BUICK—MOVING—DAY

Gittes drives through Los Angeles.

To work from the inside out, slip in Gittes' mind while he drives to Evelyn's hideaway. Imagine yourself in Gittes'
pov. As the streets roll past, you ask:

"If I were Gittes at this moment, what would I do?"

Letting your imagination roam, the answer comes:

"Rehearse. I always rehearse in my head before taking on life's big confrontations."

Now work deeper into Gittes's emotions and psyche:

Hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, thoughts racing: "She killed him, then used me. She lied to me, came on to me. Man, I fell for her. My guts are in a knot, but I'll be cool. I'll stroll to the door, step in and accuse her. She lies. I send for the cops. She plays innocent, a few tears. But I stay ice cold, show her Mulwray's glasses, then lay out how she did it, step by step, as if I was there. She confesses. I turn her over to Escobar; I'm off the hook."

EXT. BUNGALOW—SANTA MONICA

Gittes' car speeds into the driveway.

You continue working from inside Gittes' pov, thinking:

"I'll be cool, I'll be cool..." Suddenly, with the sight of her house, an image of Evelyn flashes in your imagination. A rush of anger. A gap cracks open between your cool resolve and your fury.

The Buick SCREECHES to a halt. Gittes jumps out.

"To hell with her!"

Gittes SLAMS the car door and bolts up the steps.

"Grab her now, before she runs."

He twists the door knob, find it locked, then BANGS on the door.

"Goddamn it."

INT. BUNGALOW

KHAN, Evelyn's Chinese servant, hears POUNDING and heads for the door.

As characters enter and exit, shift back and forth in your imagination, taking the pov of one, then the other. Moving to Khan's point of view, ask yourself:

"If I were Khan at this moment, what would I think, feel, do?"

As you settle into this character's psyche, your thoughts run to:

"Who the hell's that?" Paste on a butler's smile. "Ten to one it's that loud mouth detective again. I'll handle him."

Khan unlocks the door and finds Gittes on the step.

KHAN

You wait.

Shifting back into Gittes' mind:

"That snotty butler again."

GITTES

You wait. Chow hoy kye dye! (translation: Fuck off, punk)
Gittes shoves Khan aside and pushes into the house.

As you switch back to Khan, the sudden gap between expectation and result inverts your smile:

Confusion, anger. "He not only barges in but insults me in Cantonese! Throw him out!"

Gittes looks up as Evelyn appears on the stairs behind Khan, nervously adjusting her necklace as she descends.

As Khan:

"It's Mrs. Mulwray. Protect her!"

Evelyn has been calling Gittes all morning, hoping to get his help. After packing for hours, she's in a hell-bent rush to catch the 6:30 train to Mexico. You shift to her pov:

"If I were Evelyn in this situation, what would I do?"

Now find your way to the heart of this very complex woman:

"It's Jake. Thank God. I know he cares. He'll help me. How do I look?" Hands instinctively flutter to hair, face. "Khan looks worried."

Evelyn smiles reassuringly to Khan and gestures for him to leave.

EVELYN
It's all right, Khan.

As Evelyn turning back to Gittes:

Feeling more confident. "Now I'm not alone."
As Gittes:

"What's this lunch bullshit? Do it now."

GITTES
Where's the girl?

Back in Evelyn's thoughts as a gap in expectation fles open with a shock:

"Why's he asking that? What's gone wrong? Keep calm. Feign innocence."

EVELYN
Upstairs, why?

As Gittes:

"The soft voice, the innocent 'why'? Keep cool."

GITTES
I want to see her.

As Evelyn:

"What does he want with Katherine? No. I can't let him see her now. Lie. Find out first."

EVELYN
... She's having a bath now.
Why do you want to see her?

As Gittes:

Disgusted with her lies. "Don't let her get to ya."

Gittes looks around the room and sees half-packed suitcases.

"She's making a run for it. Good thing I got here. Keep sharp. She'll lie again."

GITTES
Going somewhere?

As Evelyn:

"Should have told him, but there wasn't time. Can't hide it. Tell the truth. He'll understand."

EVELYN
Yes, we have a 5:30 train to catch.

As Gittes, a minor gap opens:

"What do ya know? Sounds honest. Doesn't matter. Put an end to her bullshit. Let her know you mean business. Where's the phone? There."

Gittes picks up the telephone.

As Evelyn:

Bewilderment, choking fear. "Who's he calling?"

EVELYN
Jake ... ?

"He's dialing. God, help me . . ."
As Gittes, ear to the phone:

"Answer, damn it." Hearing the desk sergeant pick up.

GITTES
J. J. Gittes for Lt. Escobar.

As Evelyn:

"The police!" A rush of adrenaline hits. Panic. "No, no. Keep calm. Keep calm. It must be about Hollis. But I can't wait. We have to leave now."

EVELYN
Look, what's the matter? What's wrong? I told you we've got a 5:30 train—

As Gittes:

"Enough! Shut her up."

GITTES
You're gonna miss your train.
(into phone)
Lou, meet me at 1972 Canyon Drive ... yeah, soon as you can.

As Evelyn:

Anger rises. "The fool ..." A shred of hope. "But maybe he's calling the police to help me."

EVELYN
Why did you do that?

As Gittes:

Smug satisfaction. "She's trying to get tough, but I've got her now. Feels good. I'm right at home."

GITTES
(tossing his hat on the table)
You know any good criminal lawyers?

As Evelyn, trying to close an ever-widening gap:

"Lawyers? What the hell does he mean?" A chilling fear of something terrible about to happen.

EVELYN
No.

As Gittes:

"Look at her, cool and collected, playing it innocent to the end."

GITTES
(taking out a silver cigarette case)
Don't worry. I can recommend a couple. They're expensive, but you can afford it.

Gittes calmly takes a lighter from his pocket, sits down and lights a cigarette.
As Evelyn:

“Pissed off, are ya? Good. Watch this.”

Gittes slips the cigarette lighter back into his pocket and with the same motion brings out a wrapped handkerchief. He sets it on the table and carefully pulls back the four corners of the cloth to reveal the eyeglasses.

As Evelyn:


As Gittes:

I found these in your backyard in the pond. They belonged to your husband, didn’t they...didn’t they?

The opening. Get her now. Make her confess.

Gittes

(jumping up)

Yes, positively. That’s where he was drowned.

As Evelyn:

Stunned. “At home?!”

What?!

As Gittes:

Fury. “Make her talk. Now!”

Gittes

There’s no time to be shocked by the truth. The coroner’s report proves that he had salt water in his lungs when he was killed. Just take my word for it; all right? Now I want to know how it happened, and I want to know why, and I want to know before Escobar gets here because I don’t want to lose my license.
His sneering, livid face pushes into yours. Chaos, paralyzing fear, grasping for control.

**EVELYN**
I don't know what you are talking about. This is the craziest, the most insane thing...

**GITTES**
Stop it!

**As Gittes:**

Losing control, hands shoot out, grasp her, fingers digging in, making her wince. But then the look of shock and pain in her eyes brings a stab of compassion. A gap opens. Feelings for her struggle against the rage. Hands drop. “She’s hurting. Come on, man, she didn’t do it in cold blood. Could happen to anybody. Give her a chance. Lay it out, point by point, but get the truth out of her!”

**GITTES**
I’m gonna make it easy for you. You were jealous, you had a fight, he fell, hit his head... it was an accident... but his girl’s a witness. So you had to shut her up. You don’t have the guts to harm her, but you’ve got the money to shut her mouth. Yes or no?

---

**As Evelyn:**

The gap crashes shut with a horrible meaning: “My God, he thinks I did it!”

**EVELYN**
No!

**As Gittes, hearing her emphatic answer:**

“Good. Finally sounds like the truth.” Cooling off. “But what the hell’s going on?”

**GITTES**
Who is she? And don’t give me that crap about a sister because you don’t have a sister.

**As Evelyn:**

The greatest shock of all splits you in two: “He wants to know who she is... God help me.” Weak with years of carrying the secret. Back to wall. “If I don’t tell him, he’ll call the police, but if I do...” No place to turn... except to Gittes.

**EVELYN**
I’ll tell you... I’ll tell you the truth.

**As Gittes:**

Confident. Focused. “At last.”
GITTES
Good. What's her name?

As Evelyn:

"Her name... Dear God, her name..."

EVELYN
... Katherine.

GITTES
Katherine who?

As Evelyn:

Bracing for the worst. "Tell it all. See if he can take it... if I can take it..."

EVELYN
She's my daughter.

Back in Gittes pov as the expectation of finally prying loose her confession explodes:

"Another goddamned lie!"

Gittes lashes out and slaps her flush across the face.

As Evelyn:

Searing pain. Numbness. The paralysis that comes from a life time of guilt.

GITTES
I said the truth.

She stands passively, offering herself to be hit again.

EVELYN
She's my sister—

As Gittes:

slapping her again...

EVELYN
—she's my daughter—

As Evelyn:

Feeling nothing but a letting go.

As Gittes:

... hitting her yet again, seeing her tears...

EVELYN
—my sister—

... slapping her even harder...

EVELYN
—my daughter, my sister—

... backhand, open fist, grasp her, hurl her into a sofa.

GITTES
I said I want the truth.
At first his assault seems miles away, but slamming against the sofa jolts you back to the now, and you scream out words you've never said to anyone:

**EVELYN**
She's my sister and my daughter.

**As Gittes:**

A blinding gap! Dumbfounded. Fury ebbs away as the gap slowly closes and you absorb the terrible implications behind her words.

Suddenly, Khan POUNDS down the stairs.

**As Khan:**

Ready to fight to protect her.

**As Evelyn, suddenly remembering:**

"Katherine! Sweet Jesus, did she hear me?"

**EVELYN**
(quickly to Kahn)
Khan, please, go back.
For God's sake, keep her upstairs. Go back.

Khan gives Gittes a hard look, then retreats upstairs.

**As Evelyn, turning to see the frozen expression on Gittes' face:**

An odd sense of pity for him. "Poor man... still doesn't get it."

**EVELYN**
... my father and I... understand? Or is it too tough for you?

Evelyn drops her head to her knees and sobs.

**As Gittes:**

A wave of compassion. "Cross... that sick bastard..."

**GITTES**
(quietly)
He raped you?

**As Evelyn:**

Images of you and your father, so many years ago. Crushing guilt. But no more lies:

Evelyn shakes her head "no."

This is the location of a critical rewrite. In the third draft Evelyn explains at great length that her mother died when she was fifteen and her father's grief was such that he had a "breakdown" and became "a little boy," unable to feed or dress himself. This led to incest between them. Unable to face what he had done, her father then turned his back on her. This exposition not only slowed the pace of the scene, but more importantly, it seriously weakened the power of the antagonist, giving him a sympathetic vulnerability. It was cut and replaced by Gittes' "He raped you?" and Evelyn's denial—a brilliant stroke that main-
tains Cross's cruel core, and severely tests Gittes' love for Evelyn.

This opens at least two possible explanations for why Evelyn denies she was raped: Children often have a self-destructive need to protect their parents. It could well have been rape, but even now she cannot bring herself to accuse her father. Or was she complicit. Her mother was dead, making her the "woman of the house." In those circumstances, incest between father and daughter is not unknown. That, however, doesn't excuse Cross. The responsibility is his in either case, but Evelyn has punished herself with guilt. Her denial forces Gittes to face character defining choices: whether or not to continue loving this woman, whether or not to turn her over to the police for murder. Her denial contradicts his expectation and a void opens:

As Gittes:

"If she wasn't raped ... ?" Confusion. "There must be more."

GITTES
Then what happened?

As Evelyn:

Flashing memories of the shock of being pregnant, your father's sneering face, fleeing to Mexico, the agony of giving birth, a foreign clinic, loneliness . . .

EVELYN
I ran away . . .

GITTES
... to Mexico.

As Evelyn:

Remembering when Hollis found you in Mexico, proudly showing him Katherine, grief as your child is taken from you, the faces of the nuns, the sound of Katherine crying . . .

EVELYN
(nodding "yes")
Hollis came and took care of me. I couldn't see her . . . I was fifteen. I wanted to but I couldn't. Then . . .

Images of your joy at getting Katherine to Los Angeles to be with you, of keeping her safe from your father, but then sudden fear: "He must never find her. He's mad. I know what he wants. If he gets his hands on my child, he's going to do it again."

EVELYN
(a pleading look to Gittes)
Now I want to be with her. I want to take care of her.

As Gittes:

"I've finally got the truth." Feeling the gap close, and with it, a growing love for her. Pity for all she's suffered, respect for her courage and devotion to the child. "Let her go. No, better yet, get her out of town yourself. She'll never make it on her own. And, man, you owe it to her."

GITTES
Where are you gonna take her now?
As Evelyn:

Rush of hope. “What does he mean? Will he help?”

EVELYN
Back to Mexico.

As Gittes:

Wheels turning. “How to get her past Escobar?”

GITTES
Well, you can’t take the train. Escobar’ll be looking for you everywhere.

As Evelyn:

Disbelief. Elation. “He is going to help me!”

EVELYN
How... how about a plane?

GITTES
No, that’s worse. You better just get out of here, leave all this stuff here.

(beat)
Where does Kahn live? Get the exact address.

EVELYN
All right...

Light glints off the glasses on the table, catching Evelyn’s eye.

As Evelyn:

“These glasses...” An image of Hollis reading... without glasses.

EVELYN
Those didn’t belong to Hollis.

GITTES
How do you know?

EVELYN
He didn’t wear bifocals.

She goes upstairs as Gittes stares down at the glasses.

As Gittes:

“If not Mulwray’s glasses...? A gap breaks open. One last piece of truth yet to find. Memory rewinds and flashes back to... lunch with Noah Cross, and him peering over bifocals, eyeing the head of a broiled fish. The gap snaps shut. “Cross killed Mulwray because his son-in-law wouldn’t tell him where his daughter by his daughter was hiding. Cross wants the kid. But he won’t get her because I’ve got the evidence to nail him... in my pocket.”

Gittes carefully tucks the bifocals into his vest, then looks up to see Evelyn on the stairs with her arm around a shy teenager.

“Lovely. Like her mother. A little scared. Must have heard us.”

EVELYN
Katherine, say hello to Mister
You move into Katherine’s pov:

If I were Katherine in this moment, what would I feel?

As Katherine:

Anxious. Flustered. “Mother’s been crying. Did this man hurt her? She’s smiling at him. I guess it’s okay.”

KATHERINE

Hello.

GITTES

Hello.

Evelyn gives her daughter a reassuring look and sends her back upstairs.

EVELYN
(to Gittes)

He lives at 1712 Alameda. Do you know where that is?

GITTES

Sure...

As Gittes:

A last gap opens, flooded with images of a woman you once loved and her violent death on Alameda in Chinatown. Feelings of dread, of life coming full circle. The gap slowly closes with the thought, “This time I’ll do it right.”
another point of view so you can invade that, create an unexpected reaction, and splinter open the cleft between expectation and result.

Having done this, you then go back into the mind of the first character, and find your way to a new emotional truth by asking again: “If I were this character under these new circumstances, what would I do?” Finding your way to that reaction and action, you then step right out again, asking: “And what is the opposite of that?”

Fine writing emphasizes REACTIONS.

Many of the actions in any story are more or less expected. By genre convention, the lovers in a Love Story will meet, the detective in a Thriller will discover a crime, the protagonist’s life in an Education Plot will bottom out. These and other such commonplace actions are universally known and anticipated by the audience. Consequently, fine writing puts less stress on what happens than on to whom it happens and why and how it happens. Indeed, the richest and most satisfying pleasures of all are found in stories that focus on the reactions that events cause and the insight gained.

Looking back at the CHINATOWN scene: Gittes knocks on the door expecting to be let in. What’s the reaction he gets? Khan blocks his way, expecting Gittes to wait. Gittes’s reaction? He shocks Khan by insulting him in Cantonese and barging in. Evelyn comes downstairs expecting Gittes’s help. The reaction to that? Gittes calls the police, expecting to force her to confess the murder and tell the truth about the “other woman.” Reaction? She reveals that the other woman is her daughter by incest, indicting her lunatic father for the murder. Beat after beat, even in the quietest, most internalized of scenes, a dynamic series of action/reaction/gap, renewed action/surprising reaction/gap builds the scene to and around its Turning Point as reactions amaze and fascinate.

If you write a beat in which a character steps up to a door, knocks, and waits, and in reaction the door is politely opened to invite him in, and the director is foolish enough to shoot this, in all probability it will never see the light of the screen. Any editor worthy of the title would instantly scrap it, explaining to the director: “Jack, these are eight dead seconds. He knocks on the door and it’s actually opened for him? No, we’ll cut to the sofa. That’s the first real beat. Sorry you squandered fifty thousand dollars walking your star through a door, but it’s a pace killer and pointless.” A “pointless pace killer” is any scene in which reactions lack insight and imagination, forcing expectation to equal result.

Once you’ve imagined the scene, beat by beat, gap by gap, you write. What you write is a vivid description of what happens and the reactions it gets, what is seen, said, and done. You write so that when someone else reads your pages he will, beat by beat, gap by gap, live through the roller coaster of life that you lived through at your desk. The words on the page allow the reader to plunge into each gap, seeing what you dreamed, feeling what you felt, learning what you understood until, like you, the reader’s pulse pounds, emotions flow, and meaning is made.

THE SUBSTANCE AND ENERGY OF STORY

The answers to the questions that began this chapter should now be clear. The stuff of a story is not its words. Your text must be lucid to express the desk-bound life of your imagination and feelings. But words are not an end, they are a means, a medium. The substance of story is the gap that splits open between what a human being expects to happen when he takes an action and what really does happen; the rift between expectation and result, probability and necessity. To build a scene, we constantly break open these breaches in reality.

As to the source of energy in story, the answer is the same: the gap. The audience empathizes with the character, vicariously seeking his desire. It more or less expects the world to react the way the character expects. When the gap opens up for character, it opens up for audience. This is the “Oh, my God!” moment, the “Oh, no!” or “Oh, yes!” you’ve experienced again and again in well-crafted stories.

The next time you go to the movies, sit in the front row at the wall, so you can watch an audience watch a film. It’s very instruc-
tive: Eyebrows fly up, mouths drop open, bodies flinch and rock, laughter explodes, tears run down faces. Every time the gap splits open for character, it opens for audience. With each turn, the character must pour more energy and effort into his next action. The audience, in empathy with the character, feels the same surges of energy building beat by beat through the film.

As a charge of electricity leaps from pole to pole in a magnet, so the spark of life ignites across the gap between the self and reality. With this flash of energy we ignite the power of story and move the heart of the audience.

THE INCITING INCIDENT

A story is a design in five parts: The Inciting Incident, the first major event of the telling, is the primary cause for all that follows, putting into motion the other four elements—Progressive Complications, Crisis, Climax, Resolution. To understand how the Inciting Incident enters into and functions within the work, let’s step back to take a more comprehensive look at setting, the physical and social world in which it occurs.

THE WORLD OF THE STORY

We’ve defined setting in terms of period, duration, location, and level of conflict. These four dimensions frame the story’s world, but to inspire the multitude of creative choices you need to tell an original, cliché-free story, and you must fill that frame with a depth and breadth of detail. Below is a list of general questions we ask of all stories. Beyond these, each work inspires a unique list of its own, driven by the writer’s thirst for insight.

How do my characters make a living? We spend a third or more of our lives at work, yet rarely see scenes of people doing their jobs. The reason is simple: Most work is boring. Perhaps not to the person doing the work, but boring to watch. As any lawyer, cop, or doctor knows, the vast majority of their time is spent in routine duties, reports, and meetings that change little or nothing—the epitome of expectation meeting result. That’s why in the professional genres—Courtroom, Crime, Medical—we focus on only those moments when