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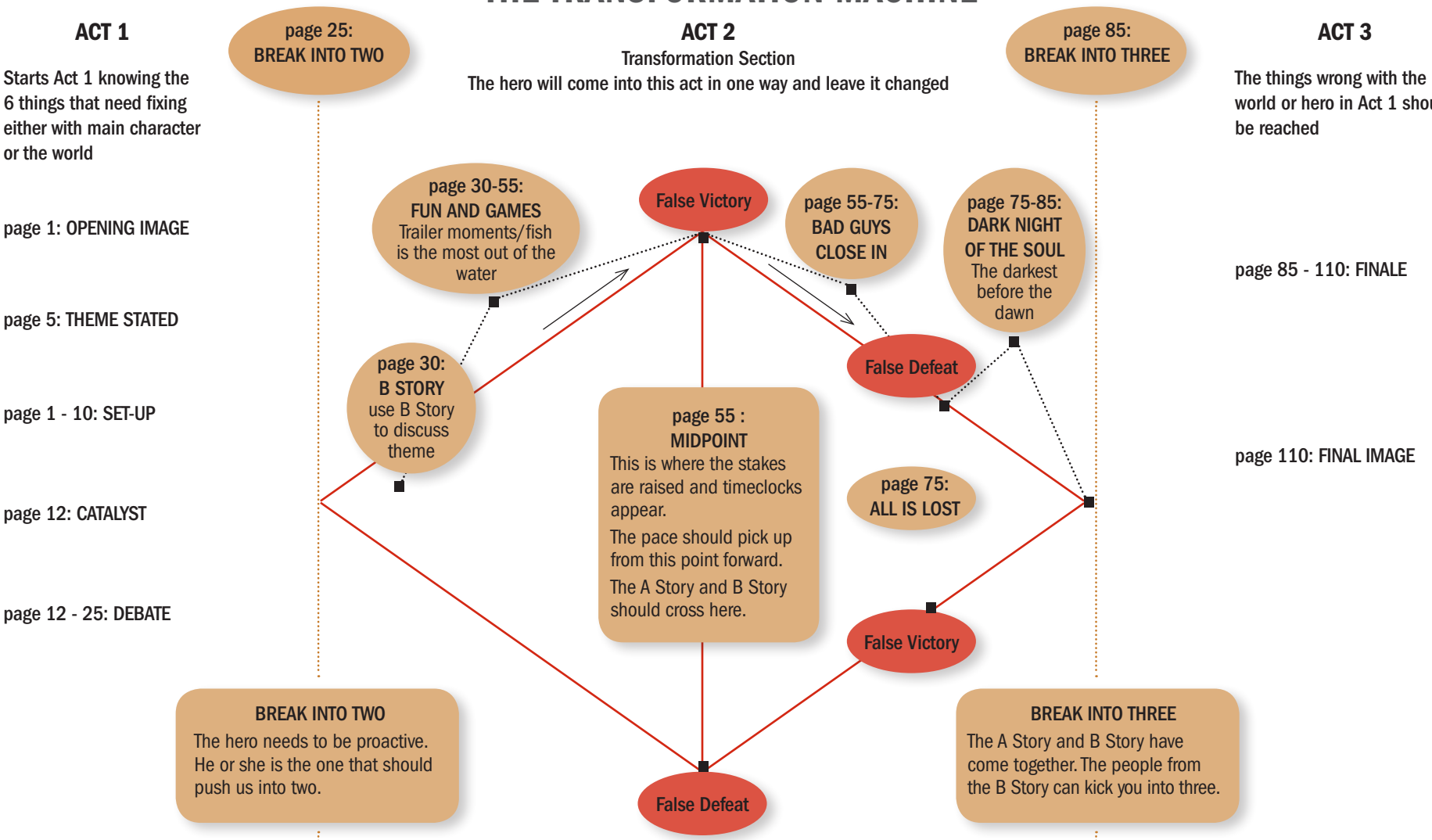

THE 15 BEATS

Opening Image

Theme Stated

Set-Up

Catalyst

Debate

Break into Two

B Story

Fun and Games

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THE 15 BEATS

Midpoint

Bad Guys Close In

All Is Lost

Dark Night of the Soul

Break into Three

Finale

Final Image

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Itching to start writing your screenplay?

Of course you are!

Will I let you start writing your screenplay?

Keep itching!

But you certainly are getting closer. And think about all that you've accomplished so far. You've polished your one-line and pitched enough "civilians" to know you've got a good one. You've screened a dozen movies that are in the category of story you're trying to tell. You've come up with the perfect hero and antagonist, and amped up both the hero's primal goal and the conflict in the way of his achieving it. And now it's time to take all that great info you've gleaned about your script and figure out how to write the sucker.

There is no greater thrill when I am working on a newly born movie idea than the battle cry: *"Let's beat it out!"*

It means it's time to put all those great scenes and ideas and characters "up on The Board" and see what goes where, which character does what,

and whether you need every scene you've imagined… or have to invent all new ones.

It's time to do the measure-twice/cut-once calculation that will save you time, allow you to pitch "beat for beat" and build the foundation and ironwork of your screenplay.

It's time to talk about **structure**.

STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE, STRUCTURE…

After coming up with the idea, and identifying the "who" in your movie — and who it's for — the structure is the single most important element in writing and selling a screenplay. Good structure is ironclad. And when you sell your script, having a well-structured screenplay will show that you have really done the work in making a blueprint that is solid and sound. The **credit jumpers** can change the order of your scenes; they can erase your dialogue; they can add new characters and take others away — and they will! — but if you've done the work on structure, and know how and why your story works, no matter how they tinker, your screenplay will remain strong.

It will remain yours.

Not to get too self-protective, but a strong structure guarantees your writing credit. More than any other element, the bones of a screenplay, as constructed in the story beats of your script, will be proof to those who decide who gets credit at the Writers Guild of America (WGA) that the work is primarily yours. Talk to any writer whose credit has been arbitrated and they'll tell you. For a spec screenwriter, your guarantee that you stay in the picture, and that the fabulous cash and prizes called **residuals** — which come in lovely lime green envelopes at the most unexpected (and welcome) times — will be yours.

The craftsmanship it takes, the patient work, the magic of storytelling on film, all come together in how you execute and realize structure. It is a skill you *must* know.

I came to structure slowly and late. And mostly I came to it out of desperation. How many meetings did I go to early on where I pitched my movie idea by giving the exec the concept, a few "cool" scenes, and then simply stopped and smiled… because I had nowhere else to go? Gad! I remember the first time I was hired to write a screenplay and the executive asked me about my "Act Break." I had exactly *zero* idea of what this nice person was talking about. This was before I'd even *heard* about Syd Field

(whom I consider to be the father of the modern movie template), and when I finally read and digested Field's opus *Screenplay*, I knew I had found something truly career-saving.

Oh! *Three* acts! Imagine that?

And yet, it was not enough. Like a swimmer in a vast ocean, there was a lot of open water in between those two Act Breaks. And a lot of empty script space in which to get lost, panic, and drown. I needed more islands, shorter swims.

Viki King filled in a lot more of that open water for me in a book with the unlikely "Get Rich Quick" title of *How to Write a Movie in 21 Days*. And yet, even with midpoints and B stories, there was still way too much room to screw up.

So I developed my own.

From what I'd seen in movies, read about in screenplay books, and found myself relying on, I developed the Blake Snyder Beat Sheet. I wrote out 15 beats and managed to squeeze them all in on a one-page document on which the fifteen islands would fit — flush left.

It looks like this:

THE BLAKE SNYDER BEAT SHEET

PROJECT TITLE:
GENRE:
DATE:

1. Opening Image (1):

2. Theme Stated (5):

3. Set-up (1-10):

4. Catalyst (12):

5. Debate (12-25):

6. Break into Two (25)

7. B Story (30):

8. Fun and Games (30-55):

9. Midpoint (55):

10. Bad Guys Close In (55-75):

11. All Is Lost (75):

12. Dark Night of the Soul (75-85):

13. Break into Three (85):

14. Finale (85-110):

15. Final Image (110):

Isn't this pure? And easy?

I use this simple one-page blank form whenever I have a pitch meeting. I won't let myself go into that meeting until I've filled in every space — and there aren't that many spaces. You can only write one, maybe two sentences explaining what each beat is, and that's perfect. Like the one-line description of the movie as a whole, I learned that if I can't fill in the blank in one or two sentences — I don't have the beat yet! I am just guessing. I am treading water, about to drown. Yet it isn't until I work on the form, and try to fill in those blank spaces, that I even know I have a problem!

The numbers in parentheses are the page numbers where the beats take

place. A script in terms of page count should be about as long as a good jockey weighs: 110. Though some dramas run longer, the *proportions* are the same. I want my act breaks, midpoints, and All Is Lost moments to hit their marks. And I insist they do. Take a look at *Blank Check* where, five minutes into the movie, roughly page 5 of the script, the theme is stated loud and clear. Look at where the midpoint, the All Is Lost, and break into three hit. They're perfect, and stayed that way from script to screen because Colby and I worked our butts off to make it so from the first draft of that script to the last. It worked because our structure was sound and we had tried it from every angle to make sure it was sound; it defied those who wanted to overwrite us, because we had nailed the structure.

Some of these terms may be unfamiliar to you. What, you may ask, is "fun and games"? Well that's my name for it. And not to worry, it's found in both dramas and comedies. What is the "Dark Night of the Soul"? Again, another "Eureka!" But a beat you've seen about a million times.

The codifying of these beats is now available to you anytime. The Blake Snyder Beat Sheet (The BS2) is here to help. But before you go off half-baked, or all-baked for that matter, let me explain and give examples of what I mean by each section of the screenplay as outlined in this form.

Do you have a choice in this matter?

No, you do not!

OPENING IMAGE (1)

The very first impression of what a movie is — its tone, its mood, the type and scope of the film — are all found in the opening image. I can think of many great ones: the reckless motorcycle ride through the English countryside leading to the death of *Lawrence of Arabia*; the gated, looming castle behind which lurks the mysterious *Citizen Kane*; and even silly ones like the opening image of *Animal House* — who could forget the motto of Faber College: "*Knowledge is good*" beneath the statue of the Faber College founder? Don't we know what we're in for with all three of these examples? Don't each of these opening images set the tone, type, style, and stakes of the movie as a whole?

The opening image is also an opportunity to give us the starting point of the hero. It gives us a moment to see a "before" snapshot of the guy or gal or group of people we are about to follow on this adventure we're all going to take. Presumably, if the screenwriter has done his job, there will also be an "after" snapshot to show how things have changed. Like many of the beats on the BS2, the opening image has a matching beat: the final image. These are bookends. And because a good screenplay is about change, these two scenes are a way to make clear how that change takes place in your movie. The opening and final images should be opposites, a plus and a minus, showing change so dramatic it documents the emotional upheaval that the movie represents. Often actors will only read the first and last 10 pages of a script to see if that drastic change is in there, and see if it's intriguing. If you don't show that change, the script is often tossed across the room into the "Reject" pile.

So the opening image does a lot. It sets the tone, mood, and style of the movie, and very often introduces the main character and shows us a "before" snapshot of him or her. But mostly what it does is get us to scrunch down in our seats in the movie theater and say: "This is gonna be good!" And since you've just screened a dozen movies like the one you're about to write, you can think of at least six that have standout opening images. All good movies have them.

THEME STATED (5)

Somewhere in the first five minutes of a well-structured screenplay, someone (usually *not* the main character) will pose a question or make a statement (usually *to* the main character) that is the theme of the movie. "Be careful what you wish for," this person will say or "Pride goeth before a fall" or "Family is more important than money." It won't be this obvious, it will be conversational, an offhand remark that the main character doesn't quite get at the moment — but which will have far-reaching and meaningful impact later.

This statement is the movie's **thematic premise**.

In many ways a good screenplay is an argument posed by the screenwriter, the pros and cons of living a particular kind of life, or pursuing a particular goal. Is a behavior, dream, or goal worth it? Or is it false? What is more important, wealth or happiness?

"He who has the gold makes the rules!" Preston's lunkhead brother tells him, and that's the Theme Stated in the first five minutes of *Blank Check*. Is the statement true? That's what the movie will debate.

Who is greater in the overall scheme of things — the individual or the group? And the rest of the screenplay is the argument laid out, either proving or disproving this statement, and looking at it, pro and con, from every angle. Whether you're writing a comedy, a drama, or a sci-fi monster picture, a good movie has to be "about something." And the place to stick what your movie is about is right up front. Say it! Out loud. Right there.

If you don't have a movie that's about something, you're in trouble. Strive to figure out what it is you're trying to say. Maybe you won't know until your first draft is done. But once you do know, be certain that the subject is raised right up front — page 5 is where I always put it.

But make sure it's there. It's your opening bid.

Declare: I can prove it. Then set out to do so.

SET-UP (1-10)

The first 10 pages of the script, or first dozen pages at most, is called the "set-up." If you're like me, and like most readers in Hollywood, this is the make-or-break section where you have to grab me or risk losing my interest. Think of all the good set-ups you've seen in **the first reel** — the first ten minutes — which "sets up" the hero, the stakes, and goal of the story… and does so with vigor!

The set-up is also the place where, if you're me the writer, I make sure I've introduced or hinted at introducing every character in the A story. Watch any good movie and see. Within the first 10 minutes you meet or reference them all. Make sure by your page 10 you have done the same.

The first 10 pages is also where we start to plant every character tic, exhibit every behavior that needs to be addressed later on, and show how and why the hero will need to change in order to win. She's an isolated writer who lives in a make-believe world (*Romancing the Stone*); he's a hip, slick, and savvy foreign-car importer who's as glib as he is cold (*Rain Man*); she's a ditzy airhead who doesn't appear to have much substance (*Legally Blonde*).

And when there's something that our hero wants or is lacking, this is the place to stick the **Six Things That Need Fixing**. This is my phrase, six is an arbitrary number, that stands for the laundry list you must show — repeat SHOW — the audience of what is missing in the hero's life. Like little time bombs, these Six Things That Need Fixing, these character tics and flaws, will be exploded later in the script, turned on their heads and cured. They will become **running gags** and **call-backs**. We, the audience, must know why they're being called back! Look at *Big* and its primary set-up: "You have to be *this* tall to go on this ride." On the list of Six Things That Need Fixing there are other needs besides a height requirement. The kid in *Big* can't get the girl, have any privacy, etc. But in Act Two he gets all those things when he magically turns *Big*. And those call-backs only work because we have seen them in the set-up.

Jeez, but that's a lot of stuff to do in the first 10 pages! But there it is. If you want to play with the *Big* boys, these are the tasks you must accomplish.

One last word on the set-up as it relates to Act One. I like to think of movies as divided into three separate worlds. Most people call these three acts, I call 'em **thesis**, **antithesis**, and **synthesis**. The first 10 pages and the rest of Act One is the movie's thesis; it's where we see the world as it is before the adventure starts. It is a full-fledged documentation of the hero's world labeled "before." There is a calm before the storm in this world, and especially in the set-up. If events that follow did not occur, it would pretty much stay this way. But there is a sense in the set-up that a storm's about to hit, because for things to stay as they are… is death. Things *must* change.

CATALYST (12)

The package that arrives in *Romancing the Stone* which will send Joan Wilder (Kathleen Turner) to South America; the telephone call that informs Tom Cruise his father has died in *Rain Man*; the dinner at which Reese Witherspoon's fiancé announces he's dumping her in *Legally Blonde* — these are the catalyst moments: telegrams, getting fired, catching the wife in bed with another man, news that you have three days to live, the knock at the door, the messenger. In the set-up you, the screenwriter, have told us what the world is like and now in the catalyst moment you knock it all down. Boom!

I frankly love the catalyst moment, and I really miss it when I don't see it done, or done well. *Have* to have it. Like my pet peeve — the lack of decent Save the Cat scenes in hip, slick movies — this is another one that bugs me when it's not there. I like the catalyst moment because — it's life. Those moments happen to all of us. And life-changing events often come disguised as bad news. Like many of the beats in the BS2, the catalyst is not what it seems. It's the opposite of good news, and yet, by the time the adventure is over, it's what leads the hero to happiness.

When I'm writing a screenplay, my catalyst moment will float around for the first couple of drafts. The set-up will be too long, the story is clogged with details, and that page 12 catalyst beat is somehow, mysteriously, on page 20. Well, cut it down and put it where it belongs: page 12. And when you start trimming all your darlings away, you'll suddenly realize that's why we have these little structure maps — all that boring detail was redundant or you weren't very good about showing it economically. The catalyst point is the first moment when something happens! Thank God! And if it's not there, the reader will get antsy. Your coverage will read: "No Plot" because you'll have lost the reader's attention. Page 12 — Catalyst. Do it.

DEBATE (12-25)

This is a section of the script, between pages 12 and 25, that used to really baffle me. When the telegram comes on page 12 informing me that my sister is being held by pirates, I know what I have to do! So why do I, the writer, have to vamp to the Act Break until my hero does what he's supposed to?

The debate section is just that — a debate. It's the last chance for the hero to say: This is crazy. And we need him or her to realize that. Should I go? Dare I go? Sure, it's dangerous out there, but what's my choice? Stay *here*?

My writing partner Sheldon Bull and I have been working on our Golden Fleece movie. In Act One, a kid is kicked out of military school and sent home to find… his parents have moved. Well, the kid's stuck. He can't go back to military school and he can't stay where he is. He knows where his parents moved to, so now it's a decision: Should he go on the road to find them? This is our chance to show how daunting a feat this is going to be. Can you imagine? But since it's a comedy, we've also made it funny. Our kid hero is taken to the edge of town at the end of Act One by a friendly cabbie. The kid looks ahead to a spooky-looking road down which he knows he must travel if he is to find his folks. *Gulp!* But his fear is quickly made light of when he's heckled by a driver passing by. And so, on a fun note, and making a firm decision, off he goes.

Your moment of truth may not be so clear-cut, but it's important to remember that *the debate section must ask a question of some kind*. In *Legally Blonde* the catalyst of the fiancé dumping Elle Woods quickly segues to her solution: Go to Harvard Law. "But can she get in?" That is the question posed in the debate section of that movie. The debate section thus becomes showing how Elle answers that question. And when she manages to zoom her LSATs, create a lascivious admissions video, and get accepted, the answer to the question is clear: Yes! And like the kid hero in our "*Home Alone* on the road" movie, Elle can happily march into Act Two. She has answered the debate question and can now proceed.

BREAK INTO TWO (25)

It happens on page 25. I have been in many arguments. Why not page 28? What's wrong with 30? Don't. Please.

In a 110 page screenplay, it happens no later than 25.

Page 25 is the place where I always go to first in a screenplay someone has handed me (we all have our reading quirks) to see "what happens on 25." I want to know 1) if anything happens and 2) if this screenwriter knows that something *should* happen. And I mean something big.

Because that's what is supposed to happen… on 25.

As discussed above, the act break is the moment where we leave the old world, the thesis statement, behind and proceed into a world that is the upside down version of that, its antithesis. But because these two worlds are so distinct, the act of actually stepping into Act Two must be definite.

Very often when I am writing a screenplay, my act break will start off vaguely. I'll find that events will draw the hero into Act Two. This is incorrect. The hero cannot be lured, tricked, or drift into Act Two. The hero must make the decision himself. That's what makes him a hero anyway — being proactive. Take *Star Wars*. The event that prompts Luke Skywalker on his journey is his parents being killed, but the decision to "go on the road" is his. Luke cannot wake up on Han Solo's starship wondering how he got there, he has to choose to go. Make sure your hero does likewise.

B STORY (30)

The B story begins on page 30. And the B story of most screenplays is "the love story." It is also the story that carries the theme of the movie. I also think that the start of the B story, what takes place around page 30, is a little **booster rocket** that helps smooth over the shockingly obvious A story act break. Think about it. You've set up the A story, you've put it into motion, now we've had this abrupt jump into Act Two and you've landed in a whole new world. The B story says: "Enough already, how about talking about something else!" Which is why the cutaway is usually in line with the A story… but new in scope.

The B story gives us a breather.

Let's take *Legally Blonde*, for instance. The B story is Elle's relationship with the manicurist she meets in Boston. And it is a much needed break from the A story. We've met Elle. She's been dumped. She's decided to go to Law School. She gets there. And school is tough. Well, enough already, let's have a little time-out! Let's go slightly off theme here and meet someone new. Thus, the manicurist. And yes, while it is not a traditional boy-girl love story, it is in fact "the love story." It's where Elle will be nurtured. It is also the place where Elle confides what she is learning in the School of Hard Knocks she's experiencing at Harvard Law — and the place from which she'll draw the strength she needs for the final push into Act Three and ultimate victory.

The B story is also very often a brand new bunch of characters. We have not always met the B story players in the first 10 pages of the screenplay. We did not even know they existed. But since Act Two is the antithesis, they are the upside down versions of those characters who inhabit the world of Act One. Again, the B story ally in *Legally Blonde* is a perfect example. Isn't Jennifer Coolidge, the wonderful actress who portrays manicurist Paulette Bonafonté, the funhouse mirror version of the girls from Elle's sorority house back at UCLA? This is why the character is so successful. She is a classic anti-thesis creature.

The B story then does a lot. And you must have one. It provides not only the love story and a place to openly discuss the theme of your movie, but gives the writer the vital “cutaways” from the A story. And it starts on 30.

FUN AND GAMES (30-55)

The fun and games section is that part of the screenplay that, I like to say, provides: **The promise of the premise**. It is the core and essence of the movie's poster. It is where most of the trailer moments of a movie are found. And it's where we aren't as concerned with the forward progress of the story — the stakes won't be raised until the midpoint — as we are concerned with having "fun." The fun and games section answers the question: Why did I come to see this movie? What about this premise, this poster, this movie idea, is cool? When you, the development exec, ask for "more set pieces," this is where I put them. In the fun and games.

This, to me, is the heart of the movie. When I discovered what this section of the screenplay needs to do, and why it's there, it leapfrogged me ahead 10 places. For me it happened in the summer of 1989. And it was a definite "Hazzah!" moment that is rarely so clear. When I was writing my very first draft of *Stop or My Mom Will Shoot!* I was sort of stuck. I had this great premise, which was: "*Dirty Harry* gets a new partner — his mother." But what was that? What was that movie about? What were the dynamics of the comedy? (Many of you I'm sure are *still* asking.) Then one day I was sitting up in my office in the Fithian Building in Santa Barbara, California, and I had a great idea: the world's slowest chase! What if Joe the cop and his Mom are shot at by bad guys? And what if they give chase. But what if, instead of Joe jumping behind the wheel and driving — his Mom does. And she drives like a Mom, complete with holding her arm across Joe's chest when they stop at all the stop signs. When I sold my script and went to my first meeting at Universal, the executive told me that when he read that scene, that's when he decided to buy my script. Why? Because that's when he knew there was something to this idea. I had delivered on the promise of the premise. And where did I put that great set piece? Right where it belonged — in the fun and games section of the screenplay.

This goes for drama as well. The fun and games in *Die Hard* show Bruce Willis first outwitting the terrorists. The fun and games in *Phone Booth* occur when Colin Farrell realizes the seriousness of his

predicament. We take a break from the stakes of the story and see what the idea is about; we see the promise of the premise and need not see anything else. I also call it fun and games because this section is lighter in tone than other sections. So Jim Carrey gets to walk around and act like God in *Bruce Almighty*. And Tobey Maguire gets to try out his oddly onanistic super powers in *Spider-Man*. It's also where the buddies in all buddy movies do their most clashing. Get it?

Fun and games.

Learn it, love it, live it.

MIDPOINT (55)

There are two halves in a movie script and the midpoint on page 55 is the threshold between them. We can talk about the importance of the two act breaks, but to me the midpoint is as important, especially in the early going of laying out a script's beats. I have found, in reviewing hundreds of movies, that a movie's midpoint is either an "up" where the hero seemingly peaks (though it is a false peak) or a "down" when the world collapses all around the hero (though it is a false collapse), and it can only get better from here on out. When you decide which midpoint your script is going to require, it's like nailing a spike into a wall good and hard. The clothesline that is your story can now be strung securely.

I made the discovery of how important this midpoint moment is quite by accident. In the early days of my movie-writing career, I used to audiotape movies so I could listen to them in my car when I drove back and forth to meetings between Santa Barbara and L.A. The bargain-basement tapes I bought (I was dead flat broke at the time) had 45 minutes on each side. By coincidence, the drive between Santa Barbara and Los Angeles is divided evenly by a mountain overpass at exactly the midpoint of the drive. Forty-five minutes from starting each trip, as I hit the top of that hill, side A of each tape ended and I had to turn it over to the other side. One night I taped the old comedy classic *What's Up, Doc?*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich and starring Ryan O'Neal and Barbra Streisand. And I discovered, the next day as I topped the mountain crest, that the movie was perfectly, evenly divided into two halves and that its midpoint was a "down."

The first half of *What's Up, Doc?* ends as fire envelops O'Neal's hotel room. A slow fade brings us to the next day, as he wakes up a broken man, and finds… Barbra Streisand waiting to help him — the fire was, after all, her fault! Imagine the revelation I experienced as I topped the mountain pass and the first half of *What's Up, Doc?* that I had taped came to an end. The movie had two even halves! The power and the purpose of a strong midpoint was forever clear to me.

What can we learn from creaky old movies? Lots. For example, the classic midpoint as Ryan O'Neal and Barbra Streisand share the nadir moment in *What's Up, Doc?*

After that I began to see how many movies had midpoints that changed the whole dynamic of the film. But the midpoint does more than present an "up" or "down." You will hear the phrase " **the stakes are raised** at the midpoint" in a lot of script meetings. Because they are. It's the point where the fun and games are over. It's back to the story! It's also the point where if you have a "false victory" where, say, the hero has been given an Out-of-the-Bottle bit of magic, he gets everything he thinks he wants. But it's a false victory because the hero has a ways to go before he learns the lesson he really needs. It just *seems* like everything's great.

The midpoint has a matching beat in the BS2 on Page 75 called "All Is Lost," which is described as "false defeat." These two points are a set. It's because the two beats are the inverse of each other. The rule is: It's never

as good as it seems to be at the midpoint and it's never as bad as it seems at the All Is Lost point. Or vice versa! In the *What's Up, Doc?* example, Ryan O'Neal actually wins the coveted prize at the All Is Lost moment on page 75. But it is a false victory, tainted by the rogue's gallery of crooks descending on the awards ceremony, and setting the action of Act Three into motion. The midpoint and All Is Lost moments of *What's Up, Doc?* represent those for a "down" midpoint. The midpoint is either false victory or false defeat, and the All Is Lost is the opposite of it.

Don't believe me?

Check out the movies you rented in your genre and see if this midpoint-All Is Lost axis isn't in every single one.

BAD GUYS CLOSE IN (55-75)

The section of script from page 55 to page 75, the midpoint to the All Is Lost, is the toughest part of the screenplay. (There's a hard bit of truth for you!) It never fails to be the most challenging for me, and there's no method to get through it other than to just to muscle your way.

This is where your skills as a bullhead come in handy!

The term "Bad Guys Close In" applies to the situation the hero finds himself in at midpoint. All seems fine, but even though the bad guys — be they people, a phenomenon, or a thing — are temporarily defeated, and the hero's team seems to be in perfect sync, we're not done yet. This is the point where the bad guys decide to regroup and send in the heavy artillery. It's the point where internal dissent, doubt, and jealousy begin to disintegrate the hero's team.

I've never had an easy time with Bad Guys Close In. It's the weakest part of *Blank Check*, and Colby and I were convinced at the time that it was fatal to our story. While writing a teen comedy called *Really Mean Girls* with Sheldon Bull, we had a similarly hard time with this section. (Not to mention the fact that we didn't know Tina Fey was writing *Mean Girls* already!) In our very similar story, four underdog girls decide to fight back against the evil blonde Alpha females in their high school. By midpoint they have "out-bitched" them, sent the mean girls packing, and become the superior clique in school. Well, now what? Sheldon and I didn't have a clue.

We answered that question, after a lot of painful think time, by going back to the basics. The evil girls naturally re-group. We even wrote a very funny scene where we see them do that. Then internal dissent among our heroes begins. Popularity starts to go to their heads, each begins to take credit for their victory, and the question of who is the most popular divides them. By All Is Lost, it's the reverse of the way it is at midpoint — the evil girls resume their "rightful" place, and our heroes depart the field in shame. All is *really* lost.

That simple dynamic took us weeks to figure out. It only seems obvious now. Until we solved it, we didn't know.

That is a classic example of what should happen in the Bad Guys Close In section of any script. The forces that are aligned against the hero, internal and external, tighten their grip. Evil is not giving up, and there is nowhere for the hero to go for help. He is on his own and must endure. He is headed for a huge fall, and that brings us to…

ALL IS LOST (75)

As addressed above, the All Is Lost point occurs on page 75 of a good, well-structured screenplay. We know it is the opposite of the midpoint in terms of an "up" or a "down." It's also the point of the script most often labeled "false defeat," for even though all looks black, it's just temporary. But it seems like a total defeat. All aspects of the hero's life are in shambles. Wreckage abounds. No hope.

But here's my little trade secret that I put into every All Is Lost moment just for added spice, and it's something that many hit movies have. I call it **the whiff of death**.

I started to notice how many great movies use the All Is Lost point to kill someone. Obi Wan in *Star Wars* is the best example — what will Luke do now?? All Is Lost is the place where mentors go to die, presumably so their students can discover "they had it in them all along." The mentor's death clears the way to prove that.

But what if you don't have an Obi Wan character? What if death isn't anywhere near your story? Doesn't matter. At the All Is Lost moment, stick in something, anything that involves a death. It works every time. Whether it's integral to the story or just something symbolic, hint at something dead here. It could be anything. A flower in a flower pot. A goldfish. News that a beloved aunt has passed away. It's all the same. The reason is that the All Is Lost beat is the "Christ on the cross" moment. It's where the old world, the old character, the old way of thinking dies. And it clears the way for the fusion of thesis — what was — and antithesis — the upside down version of what was — to become synthesis, that being a new world, a new life. And the thing you show dying, even a goldfish, will resonate and make that All Is Lost moment all the more poignant.

You'd be surprised where this truism shows up. In the comedy hit *Elf*, starring Will Ferrell, the filmmakers stick exactly to the BS2 and there is even a moment where the whiff of death is clearly seen.

Will Ferrell senses the "whiff of death" as he contemplates suicide in the All Is Lost moment of *Elf*.

In that story, about a human (Will) raised as an elf in Santa Claus's North Pole, Will comes to New York to find his "real dad," James Caan. The hilarious upside-down world of Act Two includes a classic anti-thesis character, Will's love interest, who is working as a "fake" elf in a department store at Christmas time. But later, when it all goes to hell one night for poor Will, when his real father rejects him and the world gets too complicated, we even have a death moment at page 75. Will pauses on a city bridge and, looking out at the water waaaay below, clearly contemplates suicide. When I saw this film in the theater I practically yelled out "See! Whiff of death!" but managed to restrain myself. And yet, there it was, plain as day.

Take a look at your dozen movies you've screened and find the All Is Lost point. Does it have the whiff of death in some aspect? Most certainly it will. All good, primal stories must have this. It resonates for a reason.

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL (75-85)

So now you're in the middle of a death moment at the All Is Lost point, but how does your character experiencing this moment feel about it? This question is answered in a section of the screenplay I call Dark Night of the Soul. It can last five seconds or five minutes. But it's in there. And it's vital. It's the point, as the name suggests, that is the darkness right before the dawn. It is the point just before the hero reaches way, deep down and pulls out that last, best idea that will save himself and everyone around him. But at the moment, that idea is nowhere in sight.

I don't know why we have to see this moment, but we do. It's the "Oh Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?" beat. I think it works because, once again, it's primal. We've all been there — hopeless, clueless, drunk, and stupid — sitting on the side of the road with a flat tire and four cents, late for the big appointment that will save our lives. Then and only then, when we admit our humility and our humanity, and yield our control of events over to Fate, do we find the solution. We must be beaten *and know it* to get the lesson.

The Dark Night of the Soul is that point. It's in comedies and dramas because it's real and we all identify. And in a good, well-structured screenplay, it's in there between pages 75 and 85. And thank God, because by page 85, when the hero finally figures it out, we get to see him realize…

BREAK INTO THREE (85)

… Hazzah! The solution!

Thanks to the characters found in the B story (the love story), thanks to all the conversations discussing theme in the B story, and thanks to the hero's last best effort to discover a solution to beat the bad guys who've been closing in and winning in the A story, lo! the answer is found!!

Both in the external story (the A story) and the internal story (the B story), which now meet and intertwine, the hero has prevailed, passed every test, and dug deep to find the solution. Now all he has to do is apply it.

The classic fusion of A and B is the hero getting the clue from "the girl" that makes him realize how to solve both — beating the bad guys *and* winning the heart of his beloved.

An idea to solve the problem has emerged.

The world of synthesis is at hand.

FINALE (85-110)

The finale is Act Three. This is where we wrap it up. It's where the lessons learned are applied. It's where the character tics are mastered. It's where A story and B story end in triumph for our hero. It's the turning over of the old world and a creation of a new world order — all thanks to the hero, who leads the way based on what he experienced in the upside-down, antithetical world of Act Two.

The finale entails the dispatching of all the bad guys, in ascending order. Lieutenants and henchman die first, then the boss. The chief source of "the problem" — a person or thing — must be dispatched completely for the new world order to exist. And again, think of all the examples in the movies you've screened of how this is true. The finale is where a new society is born. It's not enough for the hero to triumph, he must change the world. The finale is where it happens. And it must be done in an emotionally satisfying way.

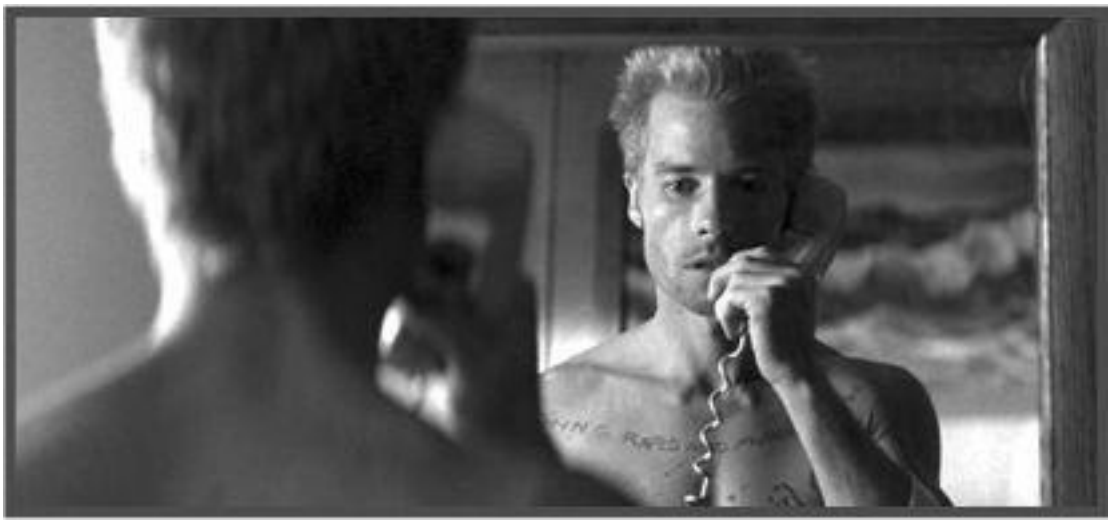
FINAL IMAGE (110)

As stated earlier, the final image in a movie is the opposite of the opening image. It is your proof that change has occurred and that it's real. If you don't have that final image, or you can't see how it applies, go back and check your math — there is something not adding up in Act Two.

SUMMARY

So now that I've laid out these 15 beats for you, and used examples like *What's Up, Doc?* , I'm sure all you hip, young screenwriting whipper-snappers are saying, yeah, right old man. Maybe this applied in your day, but we don't need it anymore. We eschew the need to "like" a hero (we dig *Lara Croft*!!!) and those boring old story beats are passé. Who needs 'em? What about *Memento*!!

Have I grasped the basic gestalt of your objection?



Existential dilemmas are what close on Saturday night, as the low-performing art house gem *Memento* proves. Gimmick or really dull movie? You decide.

If so, and though I've tried to pepper my examples with many newer movies, like *Legally Blonde*, you still may not believe me when I say this stuff applies. Still. Always.

So for you nay-sayers, who say nay, let me use an example from my genre, PG Comedy, that shows how these beats apply in the modern world you need to master.

Oh, and btw, screw *Memento*!

Let's use a $100 million Box Office (B.O.) hit. Would that satisfy you? Let's look at a great poster and logline, with a great star that satisfies all the beats in the BS2. Let's take a look at the Sandra Bullock comedy, *Miss Congenialty*.

To start, it's got a great title. And its logline — an ugly duckling FBI agent goes undercover as a contestant to catch a killer at the American Miss pageant — certainly satisfies the four elements from Chapter One: irony, compelling picture, audience and cost, and a killer title. Let's see if it beats out according to the BS2?

MISS CONGENIALITY

(A $100 million hit comedy in 15 beats)

Opening Image: *Miss Congeniality* opens on Sandra Bullock's character in flashback as a playground tough. The image is: Sandra surrounded by boys. Sandra is a tomboy and she's beating them up. Sandra has issues. When we CUT TO: The Present, Sandra is still surrounded by boys, still a tomboy, but she's an FBI agent, at home in the world of Men — kind of.

Theme Stated: When Sandra declares that she doesn't need to worry

about being "feminine" because she's an FBI agent, that statement is the movie's theme. But is this statement true? We shall see. The movie will explore the subject of femininity. It is an essay on the pros and cons of being tough *and* a woman. Can you be both? That's what this movie is *about*.

The Set-up: By page 10 we have met everyone who will appear in the A story of the movie and "set up" the world. We've met Benjamin Bratt, whom Sandra kind of likes. But she is off his radar; he likes "classy" girls that Sandra scoffs at. We also meet Sandra's boss (Ernie Hudson) and the world of the FBI. It's tough, a boy's club, and Sandra fits right in. And though she is a wheezing nerd with bad hair and no social life, she *seems* happy — a classic set-up, with a sense a storm's about to hit. It can't stay like this. Stasis equals death.

Catalyst: A classic call to adventure. News comes that there's been a murder threat at the American Miss Pageant. We also meet those in charge of the pageant, Candice Bergen and her son, and their "Bert Parks," William Shatner and his hairpiece — and a very sporty model it is! To stop the murders, they hatch a plan that calls for a female agent to go undercover as a contestant. After going through a database of every available female FBI agent… they pick Sandra.

Let the act break and let the fun and games begin. Ugly duckling Sandra Bullock looks hot, hot, hot in her miniskirt as she strides into Act Two of *Miss Congeniality*.

Debate: But can she pull it off? That is the debate question of this section. It is answered after several funny moments with Sandra's mentor (Michael Caine), who agrees to take on the challenge of turning Sandra into a sexy girl.

Break into Two: Sandra strides from her makeover looking hot, hot, hot in her mini-skirt. Even Benjamin is impressed. Then she stumbles. This isn't going to be easy, but Sandra is ready to try. So let the act break and Act Two begin!

Fun and Games: Classic promise of the premise, including all those funny trailer moments where a pistol-packing FBI agent is undercover at the American Miss pageant. Sandra's water-glass talent show demonstration ends as she leaps off the stage to nab a suspect, etc. The fish is out of water and the clash leads to jokes. This is why we came to this movie. This is what lured us when we saw the poster. And it's fun!

B Story: The love story here is actually between Sandra and the girl contestants. Why? Because the theme of the movie is about femininity and Sandra does not know this world. It is full of funhouse mirror versions of femininity — each contestant has a talent and a quirk and each, to Sandra's surprise, needs and likes her. It is Sandra's interaction with the girls of Girl World that carries the message of the picture and is its heart. And while Sandra also gets to kiss Benjamin by the movie's end, it will be because of the girls that she learns and grows and discovers her feminine side.

Midpoint: The fun and games are over as a new threat to the pageant is announced and Sandra's stakes are raised. We have seen all the fun stuff (Sandra and her water glasses), met the suspects, had the joy of watching a

tomboy interact with the girls she once thought odd. Now the real trouble starts.

Bad Guys Close In: Sandra's doubts about her femininity grow, her conflict with her mentor deepens, and, in this case, actual bad guys move closer, unseen in the shadows of the pageant. Though no one has died, there's a list of suspects.

All Is Lost: Told by her boss to stand down, Sandra refuses. She has a lead on a suspect. But her boss delivers an ultimatum: Either quit the case or be fired. Sandra chooses to stay on at the pageant. Thus, she has reached a classic All Is Lost moment: *She is worse off than when this movie started!* The whiff of death is the death of her identity. Without being "the Girl with the Badge" — who is she? Not even her mentor (Caine) can help, but he does give her a last weapon: a new dress.

Dark Night of the Soul: Sandra arrives for the pageant finale and is a total mess. She's lost in the netherworld of being neither FBI agent nor full-fledged woman. What to do?

Break into Three: With help from friends she's made in Girl World, Sandra is put back together by the other contestants for the pageant finale. Embraced by what was once foreign to her, and confident that the girls really care, Sandra is revived. By helping Sandra, the girls also help themselves.

Finale: The pageant itself. A classic bit of synthesis occurs when Sandra hangs in during the talent portion of her show by using her FBI skills on stage with Benjamin. The two worlds are fused together, answering the question raised in Theme Stated: Yes! She can be both tough *and* sexy. Sandra now catches the bad guys, Candice and her son. (Candice's warped view of her own femininity is what caused her to sabotage the pageant.) Sandra has proven herself to be a woman among women. And she's brought the bad guys to justice.

Final Image: *Miss Congeniality* closes with the opposite of the opening image: Sandra is surrounded by women. Sandra is awarded the coveted Miss Congeniality Award by her fellows — quite a change!

The <u>Real</u> Happy Ending: $100 million in domestic B.O.

Now that you know that it works, you'll start to see how these beats can apply to your script.

EXERCISES

1. Type up the BS2 and carry it with you everywhere. Whenever you have an idle moment, think about a favorite movie. Can the beats of that movie fit into neat, one-sentence descriptions of each of the 15 blanks?

2. Go back to Blockbuster (boy, are they tired of you by now) and check out the 6-12 movies in the genre of the movie you're writing. Sit and watch as the beats of these films are magically filled into the blanks of the BS2.

3. For extra credit, look at *Memento*. Yes, it's an entertaining movie; yes, it even falls into the category of genre "Dude with a Problem." Does it also match the beats of the BS2? Or is it just a gimmick that cannot be applied to any other movie? HINT: For all the hullabaloo surrounding *Memento*, guess how much it made?

And if you want to seriously debate the value of *Memento* in modern society, please go ahead and contact me at the e-mail address provided in Chapter One. But be ready for one hell of an argument from me!! I *know* how much *Memento* made.

Blake Snyder's Beat Sheet - *Explained*

The Blake Snyder Beat Sheet breaks down three-act screenplay structure into 15 bite-size, manageable sections called 'beats', each with a specific goal for your overall story. Below is an explanation of each beat. The page numbers are not strict, they are approximations of where the beats should occur in a 110 page screenplay made of approximately 40 scenes.

THE BLAKE SNYDER BEAT SHEET (aka BS2)

Opening Image (1) – A visual that represents the central struggle & tone of the story. A snapshot of the main character's problem, before the adventure begins. Often mirrors the Closing Image.

Set-up (1-10) – Expand on the opening image. Present the main character's world as it is, and what is missing in their life. Stasis = Death, the "before" life of the protagonist is such that if it stays the same, he or she will figuratively die. In addition, the main character's flaw, his problem that needs fixing over the course of the story, is revealed. (In many stories, it is not the main character's flaw, but another central character's flaw that is presented for him to resolve over the course of the story – for the character to 'arc')

Theme Stated (5) (during the Set-up) – The message, the truth you want to reveal by the end of your screenplay. What your story is about in a larger sense. Usually, it is spoken to the main character or in their presence, but they don't understand this truth…not until they go on the journey to find it. (Meaning produces emotion)

Catalyst (12) – A moment where the opportunity to go on a journey is presented to the main character. Life as it is now changes. It is the telegram, catching your loved-one cheating, allowing a monster onboard the ship, a secret holographic message from a galactic princess, etc. The "before" world is no more, change has begun. (Catalyst is the same as the *Inciting Incident* or *Call to Adventure*)

Debate (12-25) – Change is scary and for a moment, or a brief number of moments, the main character doubts the journey they must take. Can I face this challenge? Do I have what it takes? Should I go at all? Often the hero denies the call to adventure at first.

Break Into Two (Choosing Act Two) (25) – The main character makes a choice and to go on the journey, and our adventure begins. We leave the "Thesis" world and enter the upside-down "Anti-thesis" world of Act Two.

B Story (30) – This is a discussion about the Theme – the nugget of truth. This discussion often takes place between the main character and the love interest. So, the B Story is usually called the "love story".

Fun & Games (30-55) – "The Promise of the Premise" – This is the fun part of the story. The Fun & Games is the first half of Act II where the audience is entertained as the main character explores the new world and overcomes the type of obstacles they have been promised by the premise of the film, it's genre, even it's one-sheet poster. This is when the detective finds his clues and interviews his first witnesses to the murder mystery, when Indiana Jones tracks down the possible resting place of the Arc, when Harry & Sally are stuck together over and over seeming to annoy one another. The Fun & Games are what we came to see the movie for! Don't forget **Pinch # 1** – a reminder of the central conflict at around Scene 16/40. By the end of Fun & Games we've reached progressively difficult complications leading to the Midpoint.

Midpoint (55) – The midpoint is the largest plot twist of the film, it raises the stakes of the main character's goal, can change the goal completely, or at least makes the requirements of the goal much more difficult. It can feel like a new movie is starting as a result of the midpoint. Here the main character must recommit to the new goal, for which there is no turning back. Often it is the B Story that incites the midpoint plot twist. Often a "ticking time clock" for resolving the goal begins ticking at the midpoint.

Bad Guys Close In (55-75) – Now the Fun & Games get serious. The BGCI is the second half of Act II where the audience is exhilarated by an ever more complex and overwhelming set of obstacles to the main character's goal. Here the main character's gifts are of no use, their plans are foiled, their team can be split up, or a trusted friend will betray them. The detective himself is now being chased and shot at, Indiana Jones is discovered by the Nazis and thrown into a snake pit, Harry runs into his first wife and takes out his anger on Sally. In terms of B Story, there is a saying "**sex at 60**", that is page around page 60 or Beat 22/40. Don't forget **Pinch # 2** – another reminder, bringing us back to the central conflict at around Scene 26/40.

All is Lost (75) – The low point of the main character's journey. The moment that the main character loses everything they gained so far, or realizes everything they now have has no meaning. The main character has lost even more than if he'd never gone on the journey in the first place. At the All is Lost, something or someone dies. Blake Snyder calls this the "Whiff of death." It can be physical or emotional, but the death of something old makes way for something new to be born. The detective's partner is killed, and he is powerless because its the commissioner who is behind the original crime. Indy has lost the Arc to the Nazis and believes Marion is dead. Harry & Sally sleep together and may have thrown their entire friendship away.

Dark Night of the Soul – The main character hits bottom, and wallows in hopelessness. The *Why hast thou forsaken me, Lord?* moment. Mourning the loss of what has "died" – the dream, the goal, the mentor character, the love of your life, etc. But, you must fall completely before you can pick yourself back up and try again. Here the main character's arc is complete as they fully understand the truth they could not see when they set out on the journey. The DNOTS is directly followed by "New Information" sometimes delivered via the B Story. This information functions as a second Catalyst that gives the main character the choice again, to pack up and go home, or give it one more try to complete the journey. The DNOTS can be anywhere from 10 pages long to a single action or word by the main character.

Break Into Three (Choosing Act Three) (85) – Thanks to a fresh idea, new inspiration, or last-minute Thematic advice from the B Story (usually the love interest), the main character chooses to try again. The New Information presents the final goal the main character will have to achieve to complete the journey.

Finale (85-110) – The main character confronts the antagonist or force of antagonism with new strength. This time around, the main character incorporates the Theme – the nugget of truth that now makes sense to them – into their fight because they have experience from the A Story and context from the B Story. So we can say the main character has left the "Anti-thesis" world and entered the "Synthesis" world. Here the journey will be resolved, one way or another. Blake Snyder further breaks the finale down into five points known as *Storming the Castle*.

Storming the Castle – the five point finale.

1. **Gathering the Team** – now that the main character has decided to cross into Act Three, he must rally his allies, make amends to any of them he's wronged, gather the tools, and make a plan to complete the final task.
2. **Executing the Plan** – the actual storming of the castle, executing the plan seems to be working, despite the castle being quite impenetrable, the team is working together, this is where minor arcs and proofs of growth for the minor characters occur, their defects are now fixed and even useful to the plan. We may lose some nameless soldiers along the way, but the High Tower is in sight, and the plan seems to be working.
3. **The High Tower Surprise** – The hero reaches the high tower where the princess is being kept and finds something shocking: no princess! The hero was overconfident with their plan which is now defunct. Often a "traitor" is exposed and the brilliant plan is exposed as a trap set by the Bag Guy or forces aligned against the hero, and they "knew we were coming." The hero and allies are stopped cold, it looks like ALL IS LOST again.
4. **Dig, Deep Down** – The whole point of the finale is revealed and its not what we expected. The hero is stripped away of all that he thinks is important and relevant at the start of the story, including his original idea for winning at the end, and the hero has to find the last ounce strength to win, but by letting going of his old logic and doing something he would never do when the movie began. Devoid of an obvious human solution, the hero reminds us at some point we have to abandon the natural world, and everything we think we know, and have faith in a world unseen. When Luke Skywalker racing towards the exhaust shaft of the Death Star decides to "let go, and use the force", Where Indiana Jones in the Last Crusade gives up the Holy Grail to save himself and his father.
5. **The Execution of the New Plan** – This is where "on the fly" the hero tries it a new way—and succeeds. He had more faith than any of us, by stepping into the unknown and trusting, the hero finds a way to triumph. This is the true test, can you give up belief in your old ways, truly change (arc) to a new perspective. This is the "face-your-fear" part that reveals the true meaning of your story. Where thinking fast, Humphrey Bogart's plan prevails in Casablanca. When Dev Patel answers the final question that will make him a Slumdog Millionaire.

Final Image (110) – opposite of Opening Image, proving, visually, that a change has occurred within the character.

THE END

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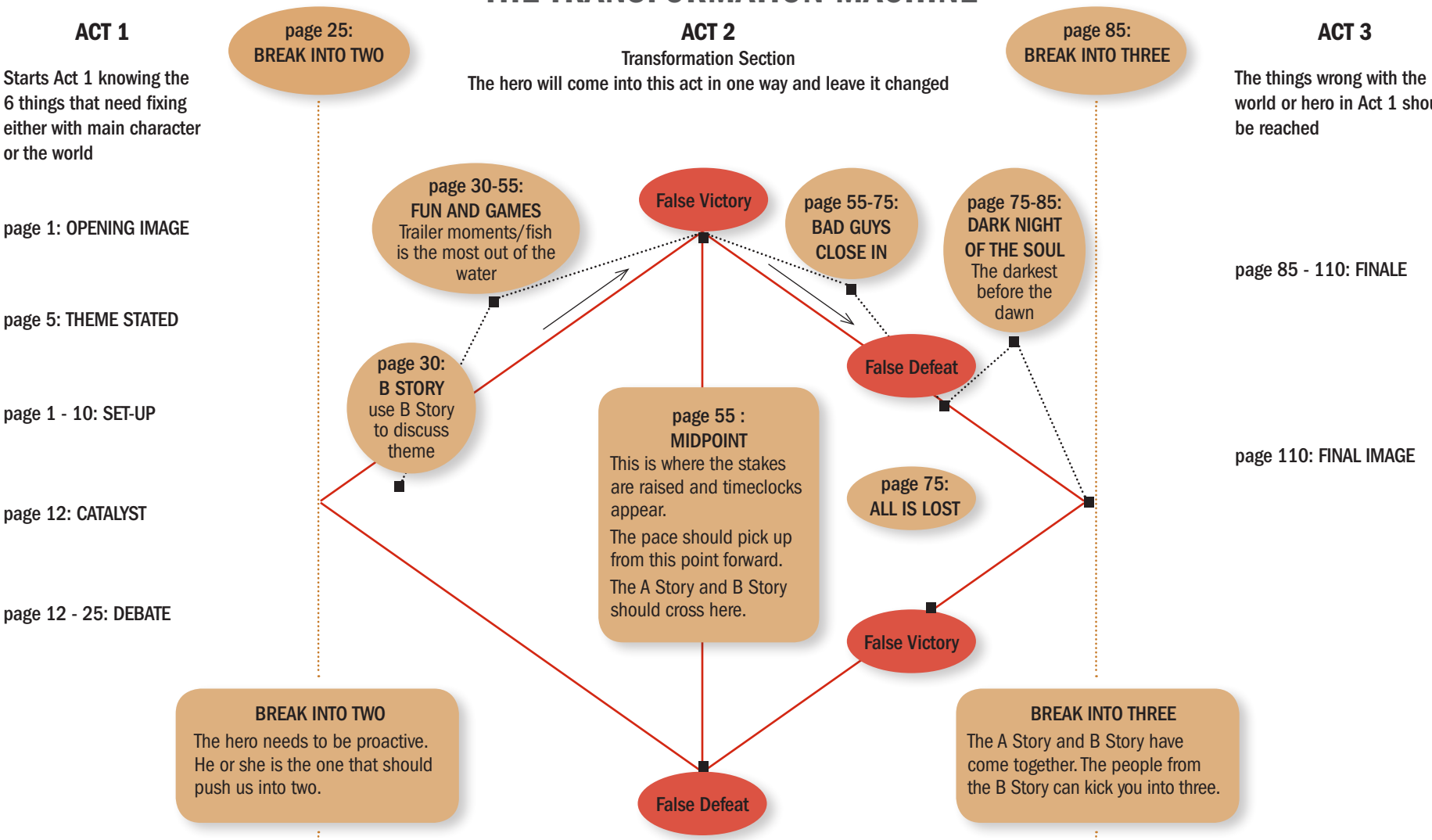

THE BLAKE SNYDER BEAT SHEET

PROJECT TITLE:

GENRE:

DATE:

1. Opening Image (1):

2. Theme Stated (5):

3. Set-Up (1-10):

4. Catalyst (12):

5. Debate (12-25):

6. Break into Two (25)

7. B Story (30):

8. Fun and Games (30-55):

9. Midpoint (55):

10. Bad Guys Close In (55-75):

11. All Is Lost (75):

12. Dark Night of the Soul (75-85):

13. Break into Three (85):

14. Finale (85-110):

15. Final Image (110):