

Stairway to Hell (Plotting)

Stories are strange creatures. More specifically, they're vertebrates. They need a spine (i.e., they need a plot). Today, we'll explore one popular plot that you can use when writing your stories. I call this plot "Stairway to Hell."

Stairway to Hell is a plot based on escalation. Things go from bad to worse to egregious. Popular examples of this plot might include movies like *The Hangover* or *Meet the Parents*. This kind of plot typically begins with a situation that is potentially unstable (e.g., a bachelor party in Las Vegas). Next, anything that can go wrong, does go wrong (e.g., the bachelor party drinks too much; they black out; they can't find the groom; Mike Tyson shows up; etc.). As the story escalates, the characters in the story will be forced to respond and unfold/reveal themselves. I imagine we've all had this experience before: being confronted with a dire situation and suddenly learning who we *really* are. Situations find us out. This is bad for life but good for storytelling.

Anyways, let's return to the "Stairway to Hell." Essentially, the author is taking a potentially flammable situation and periodically dousing it with gasoline. The goal of each new scene is to make the flame a little bigger, hotter, a brighter color, etc.

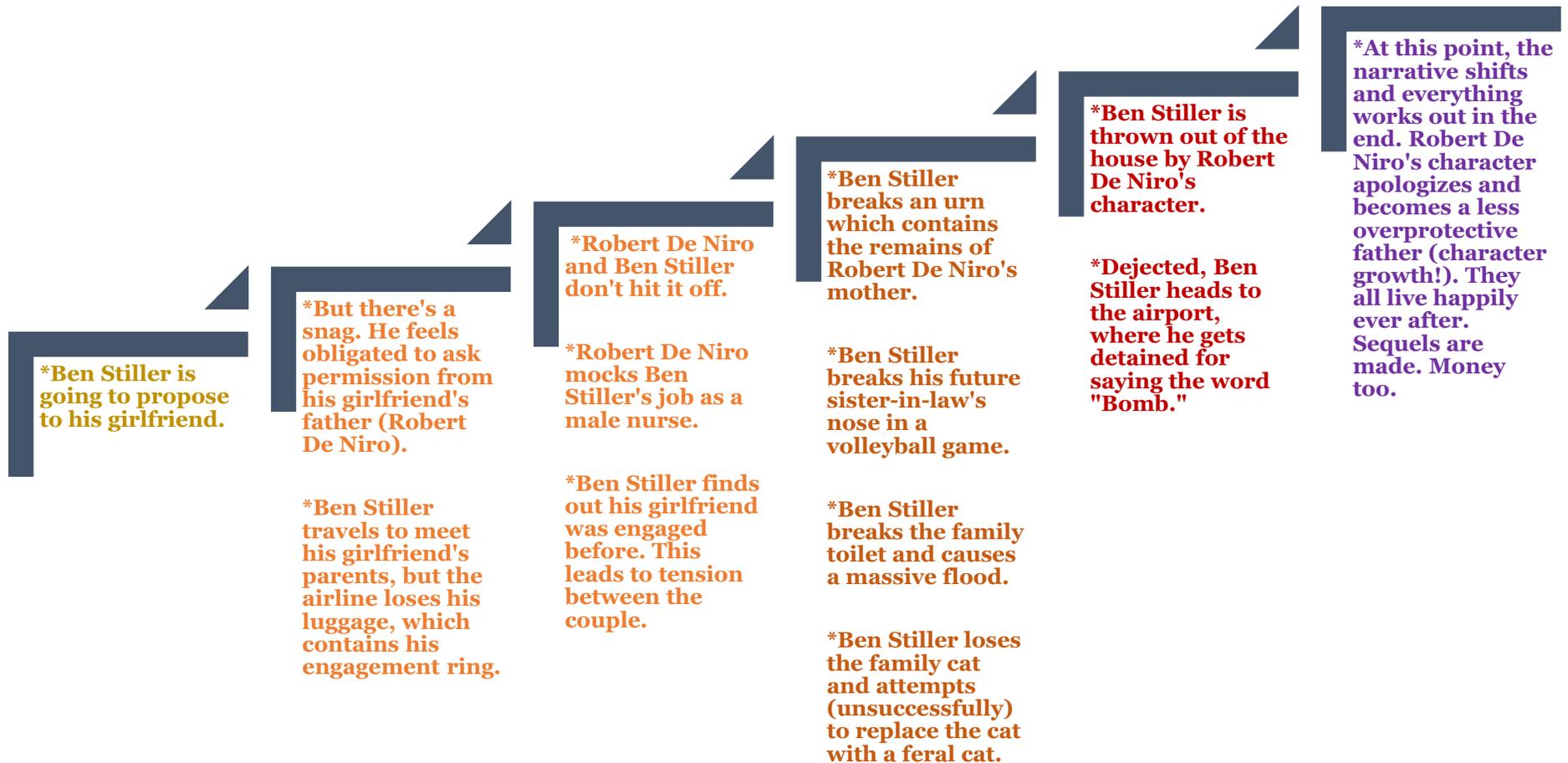
Below is a generic template for "Stairway to Hell":



Caution: If you simply put your characters through a jungle gym of terrible events, that's not going to automatically create a good story. A good story needs more than that. It needs heart. It needs psychological complexity. So each time you escalate the story, you're also trying to complicate your characters. Put differently, escalation = complication. Imagine your characters are circular in shape. With each new scene, your characters should grow and become more unique, harder to pin down, harder to summarize in one line, etc. Ideally, your characters should enter the story with a circumference the size of a penny but end the story with a circumference the size of the sun.

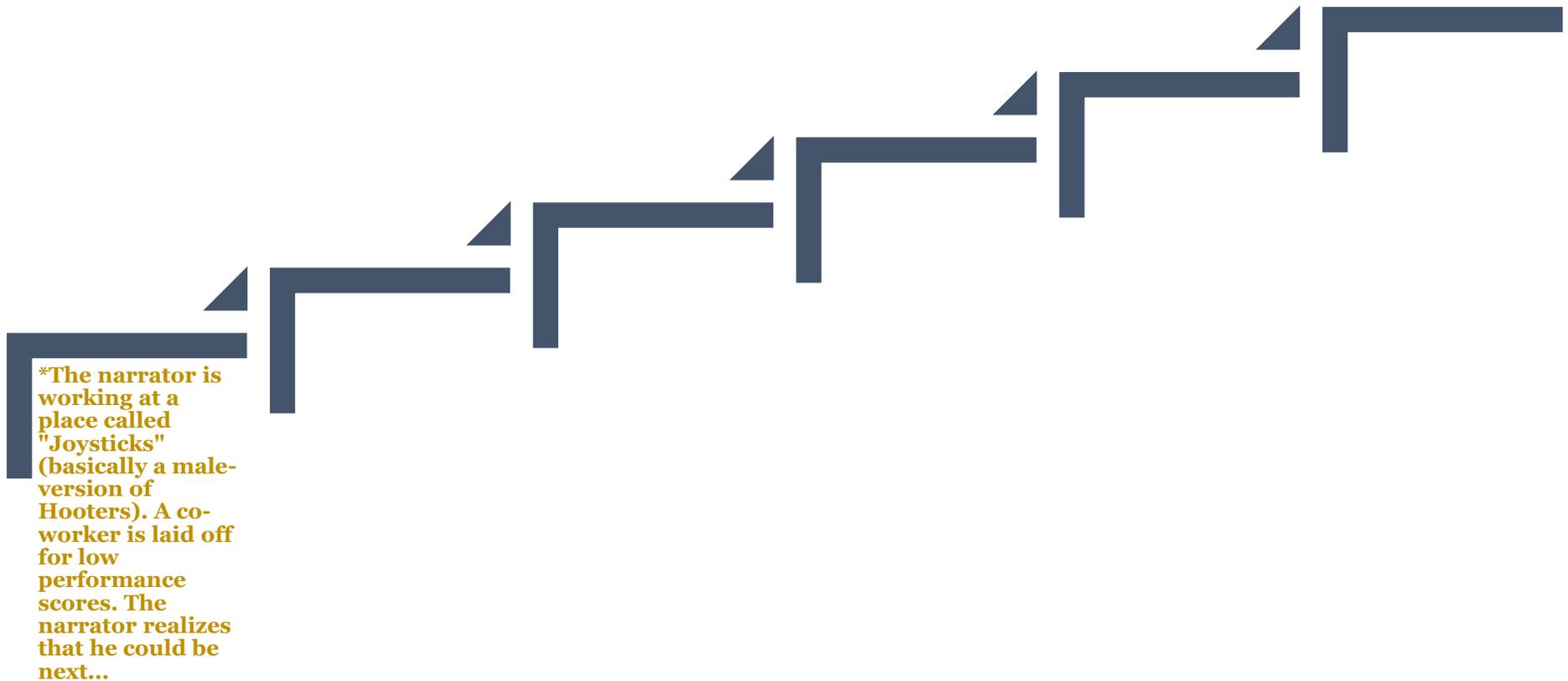
*Okay, so let's look at a fleshed-out example of this plot. Below is a basic summary of the popular comedy titled *Meet the Parents* (a movie which came out in 2000 and stars Ben Stiller, Robert De Niro, and Teri Polo). As you can see, Ben Stiller's character attempts to make a good impression with his future in-laws, but this attempt quickly goes downhill until Ben Stiller's character is eventually kicked out of the house and leaves in disgrace.

Stairway to Hell (*Meet the Parents*)



*Now, let's try to apply this plot structure to the story that you all read for today, George Saunders' "Sea Oak." Split into groups of 2-4 people and fill in the chart to the best of your ability. Go back to the story and look at the individual scenes. Ask yourself the following question: "How is this scene furthering (moving along) the story? How does this scene add new tensions and complications to the characters? What situation/dilemma is being doused with gasoline in this scene?" Lastly, go back to the story and see if it makes a turn at the end: either towards a breaking point (a point of no return) or a point of redemption and possible grace.

Stairway to Hell ("Sea Oak")



Writing Exercise

Lastly, let's try to apply this plot structure of "Stairway to Hell" to your own fiction. Use the next 10 minutes to write on the following prompt:

Choose a character...

- a) Perhaps a teenager, recently diagnosed with diabetes, who joins a Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* class in order to regain control over her body.
- b) Or a retired astronaut, mid-divorce, who is nostalgic about his NASA days and who wishes desperately to return to space.
- c) Or someone of your own devising.

Now, pile trouble onto this character. Thwart their hopes/goals with problems, complications, dilemmas, etc. Put them into a frying pan and then dump them into the fire.

I realize this sounds cruel. Sadly, writing often involves a little cruelty, but the goal is to bring your character to a breaking point, a turning point, a place in which they either fall to a new depth or land on a new ledge. Put differently, the goal is to complicate the character until they're not the same person anymore, for better or worse.