CHAPTER 17
STRETCHING THE TENSION

Every scene in your novel should have tension in it, whether that comes from outright conflict or the inner turmoil of character emotions.

You create tension by giving the viewpoint character a scene goal. What does he want, and why? It has to matter to him or it won’t matter to the readers.

Next, what keeps him from the goal? It may be the opposing action of another character or a circumstance he finds himself in.

Finally, make most scenes come out with the character suffering a setback. This ratchets up the tension for the scenes to follow because he’s getting farther from solving his story problem.

Even in scenes that are relatively quiet, characters can feel inner tension in the form of worry, concern, irritability, anxiety.

In Evan Hunter’s The Moment She Was Gone, Andrew Gulliver’s twin sister, a schizophrenic, is missing. Andrew and his brother, and sister-in-law take stock. The sister-in-law tries to lighten things:


I hate it when my sister-in-laws tries to be funny about Annie. I think she does this only to gain further favor with Aaren, who by the way has never thought any of our sister’s little escapades were in the slightest bit comical, even when they really were. As for example, the time she peed on a cop’s shoes in Georgia.

“Or maybe we ought to go look for her piano,” Augusta adds, compounding the felony.

“Augusta, you’re not being funny,” I say.

By throwing Andrew’s irritability against Augusta’s “humor,” Hunter increases the overall tension in the story.

So put a sympathetic character into a situation that is life or death, and maintain tension in all your scenes. That’s how you create that plausable uncertainty that makes readers love novels.

I’ve already noted that fiction is not reality, but the stylized rendition of reality for emotional effect.

A corollary is that real time is not fictional time. Nor should it be.

You are free to slow down time anytime you like, and the time to do it is when you can stretch the tension.

When you have any moment of action, conflict, or tension, consider the various ways you can keep it going.

Slowing time, like slow motion in the movies, is one way to go. In fiction, however, you have a lot of other options. Here are a few of them.

STRETCHING THE ACTION

In Lee Child’s Worth Dying For, Jack Reacher throws a punch. No surprise there. Reacher has many ways to mess up another human being. How long does a punch take to throw? From decision to landing, a second maybe? Or even less?

Why waste the moment? Lee Child takes over two pages to render that one second. He starts with an observation and reaction in Reacher’s mind:

Reacher saw the dark blue Chevrolet and instantly linked it through Vincent’s testimony back to the motel to the two men he had seen from Dorothy Cox’s barn, while simultaneously questioning the connection, in that Chevrolets were very common cars and dark blue was a very common color, while simultaneously recalling the two matched Iranians and the two matched Arabs he had seen, and asking himself whether the rendezvous of two separate pairs of strange men in winter in a Nebraska hotel could be just a coincidence, and if indeed it wasn’t, whether it might then reasonably imply the presence of a third pair of men, which might or might not be the two tough guys from Dorothy’s farm, however inexplicable those six men’s association might be, however mysterious their purpose, while simultaneously watching the man in front of him dropping his car key, and moving his arm…

And on it goes, one thought, for several more lines. Note that this is all supposed to be firing off in his mind in a single instant.

Thus Reader acts:

He twisted from the waist in a violent spasm and started a low sidearm punch aimed at the center of the Iranian’s chest. Chemical reaction in his brain, instantaneous transmission of the impulse, chemical reaction in every muscle system from his left foot to his right fist, total elapsed time a small fraction of a second, total distance to target less than a yard, total time to target another small fraction of a second, which was good to know right then, because the guy’s hand was all the way in his pocket by that point, his own nervous system reacting just as fast as Reacher’s, as his elbow jacked up and back and trying to fire whatever the hell it was he wanted, be it a knife, or a gun, or a phone, or a driver’s license, or a passport, or a government ID, or a perfectly innocent letter from the University of Tehran proving he was a world expert on plant genetics and an honored guest in Nebraska just days away from increasing local profits a hundredfold and eliminating world hunger at one fell swoop.

Where? And the punch hasn’t even landed yet! When it does:

Two hundred and fifty pounds of moving mass, a huge fiat, a huge impact, the zipper of the guy’s coat driving backward into his breastbone driving backward into his chest cavity, the natural elasticity of his ribs giving it yield whole inches, the resulting violent compression driving the air from his lungs, the hydrostatic shock driving blood back into his heart…

We’ll leave it there for now. To see what happened to the poor Iranam who had the bad fortune to cross Jack Reacher, you can read the book.

The point is that Lee Child squeezes an amazing amount of tension out of a few seconds because he’s not at all afraid to make us wait.

And that’s the key to tension. It is waiting. The longer the better.

Can you write a whole book like this? Of course not. You pick your spots, and you don’t do it the same way all the time.

1. Find a scene in your novel where you have the moment of highest tension.
2. Refer back to the material in “Action” on page 203.
3. Now, stretch your scene out another 25 percent. You can do it. Use all the techniques we’ve discussed: slow motion, inner thoughts, dialogue, description (which does double duty), and so on.
4. Analyze the scene for readability, trimming or adding as you see fit.
5. Find the next most intense scene. Repeat steps 2 through 4.
6. Repeat the process with yet another scene in your novel.

Note: The more intense the tension, the longer you can draw it out. But even a scene of relatively low tension can be expanded, even if it’s just by one paragraph. Consider a simple moment like this:

Our cook ordered me to the kitchen. She was furious. “There’s some folks who don’t eat like us,” she whispered fiercely.

In To Kill a Mockingbird, however, Harper Lee does not let this slate by so quickly. Scout, six years old at the time, embarrasses Walter Cunningham. A boy from school who peppers molasses on his food:

It was then that Calpurnia requested my presence in the kitchen.

She was furious, and when she was furious Calpurnia’s grammar became erratic. When in tranquility, her grammar was as good as anybody’s in Macomb. Atticus said Calpurnia had more education than most colored folks.

When she squinted down at me the tiny lines around her eyes deepened. “There’s some folks who don’t eat like us,” she whispered fiercely.

12% • 71 of 99

report an error
Conflict and Suspense
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By delaying the payoff—Calpurnia’s rebuke—Lee stretches the moment a bit more, letting us feel with Scout the anticipation of what is to come. She does it by giving us a bit of background and then a physical description of Calpurnia’s expression. A few lines that create more tension:

1. Find ten places in your novel where you move quickly from a stimulus to a character’s response. It may be the action of another character, something observed, or a line of dialogue.
2. Insert between the stimulus and response at least four lines.
3. Analyze and add as needed, but keep something new as between the original stimulus and response.

Example:
John slammed the door. “We have to talk,” he said.

Change to something like:
John slammed the door. Mary’s heart kicked her chest. She dropped the magazine into her lap and pushed back against the chair.

John crossed the room like General Patton. Mary knew that walk. It was part of his military, take-the-hill style. There was no arguing with it. It was always submit or get out of the way.

When he got to within five feet of the chair, he stopped, his frown lines deep enough to hold loose change. He pointed his finger at her face. “We have to talk,” he said.

STRETCHING EMOTIONAL TENSION

The same principle holds for tension within a character. When there is a strong emotion to be portrayed, take your time.

Jennifer Weiner’s Good in Bed is the story of Annie Shapiro, a “plus size” woman who finds out that her ex-boyfriend has written about his love affair with her in a woman’s magazine for all to see.

Annie’s said the words aloud to me when I read the first line of the article: “I’ll never forget the day I found out my girlfriend weighed more than I did.”

“Samantha’s voice sounded like it was coming from far, far away. ‘Cannie, Cannie, are you there?’”

“I’ll kill him!” I choked.

“Take deep breaths,” Samantha counseled. “In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

Bery, my editor, cast a puzzled look across the partition that separated our desks. “Are you all right?” she mouthed. I squeezed her eyes shut. My head was somehow laced on the carpet. “Breathe!” I could hear Samantha say, her voice a tinny echo from the floor. I was wheezing, gasping. I could feel chocolate and bits of candy shell on my teeth. I could see the quote they’d lifted, in bold-faced pink letters that screamed out from the center of the page.

Study the word choices in that excerpt. The forward momentum is slowed in order to enhance the singularity and emotion of the moment.

SLOWING DOWN THE TERROR

Still another strategy comes when there is a feeling of outright terror. In real life it might pass by in a moment but not in fiction, which pulls the reader along for a ride. The following is from 24 Hours by Greg Iles:

When Abby turned away from the bedroom, something gray fluttered in front of her eyes. She instinctively swatted the air, as she would at a spiderweb, but her hand hit something solid behind the gray. The gray thing was a towel, and there was a hand inside the air. The hand clamped the towel over her nose, mouth, and one eye, and the strange smell she’d noticed earlier swept into her lungs with each gasp.

Notice the senses Iles uses in this one paragraph: sight, touch, and smell. Notice what he leaves out: sound. Have you ever seen a scene in a movie where the terror happens silently? It’s often more menacing that way. Here is the literary equivalent.

Now Iles slows down the scene and ramps up the feeling:

Terror closed her throat too tightly to scream. She tried to fight, but another arm went around her stomach and lifted her into the air, so that her kicking legs flailed uselessly between the wide-spaced walls of the hallways. The towel was cold against her face. For an instant Abby wondered if her daddy had come home early to play a joke on her. But he couldn’t have. He was in his plane. And he would never scare her on purpose. Not really. And she was scared. As scared as the time she’d gone into ketosis, her thoughts flying out of her ears as soon as she could think them, her voice speaking words no one had ever heard before. She tried to fight the monster holding her, but the harder she fought, the weaker she became. Suddenly everything began to go dark, even the eye that was uncovered. She concentrated as hard as she could on saying one word, the only word that could help her now: “Mama,” but the word died instantly as the wet towel.

This is a fairly large block of text, especially for a thriller. But Iles knows he has a moment worth exploiting. Readers will not notice because they are in the terror right with the character.

Another strategy to accomplish the same thing is to use lines and lines of clipped language. One of the chapters in Ray Bradbury’s Dandelion Wine has three women walking to a movie, then home, again, in the dark. It’s a warm summer night, but the town is in the grip of a special fear. Someone they have dubbed the Lonely One has been killing women in the town. The chapter is all about the suspense—will he strike again at one of these ladies?

Bradbury sets up the terror with the chiming of a courthouse clock. Sound becomes very important in creating the mood.

Throughout the section the courthouse clock rings out the time, telling us it’s getting later and darker.

“Listen!” said Lavina.

They listened to the summer night. The summer-night crickets and the far-off tone of the courthouse clock making it eleven forty-five.

“Listen.”

Lavina listened. A porch swing creaked in the dark and there was Mr. Trent, not saying anything to anybody, alone on the swing, having a last cigar. They saw the pink ash swaying gently to and fro.

A little bit later:

The courthouse clock struck the hour. The sounds blew across a town that was empty, emptier than it had ever been. Over empty streets and empty lots and empty lawns the sound faded.

Finally, Lavina is alone walking home.

She froze again.

Wait, she told herself.

She took a step. There was an echo.

She took another step.

Another echo. Another step, just a fraction of a moment later.

Bradbury uses staccato line structure here to stretch the terror. You can, too.
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