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# Thorpes Falls

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Thorpes Falls

by

Natalie Guerin

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## Table of Contents:

- Main thesis, Thorpes Falls:
  - ENTERING THORPES FALLS – 1
  - ERRANDS – 2
  - WORK – 12
  - SCHOOL – 15
  - RELATIONSHIPS – 22
  - MEAL – 26
  - FAMILY – 31
  - RUN AWAY – 36
  - BROTHERS – 38
  - DOWNTOWN – 41
  - TROUBLE – 42
  - REUNION – 45
  - ESCAPE – 54
  - FRIENDSHIP – 56
  - TAKEOUT – 59
  - FOUND – 64
  - PLANS – 67
  - LEAVING: THOPES FALLS – 69
- Craft Essay – 70
- Bibliography – 79

## Thorpes Falls

### ENTERING: THORPES FALLS

Small towns are worlds in themselves.

Thorpes Falls is one such town. However, there exists no waterfall, not anymore—since a dam was built years ago, and the water stopped, leaving only the ebbing, relatively still body that surrounds the town from the south that serves as the main entrance, commonly through its ferries. As such, the name remains as proof of another natural rapid that man has since tamed. From the mainland, there are the roads, twisting and veiny; the way in via the automobile proves to be as rough as it was when everyone was still using horse and carriage. Trees further trap it in, thick with pine and foliage.

Entering is a rite of passage. The mistake many make is overestimating whether they want to stay. Most who come here aren't native, and those who leave don't usually find their way back to Thorpes Falls. It's not so much that they find the outside world to be better, or the commute too bothersome (as excellent an excuse as it is), but that after a certain point, they can't bear returning.

People get busy. And you become too busy for home, which in the absence, can change into something unrecognizable.

## ERRANDS

Malka is a busy woman—at least, she always appeared as such. Busy doing something for him, something for her, something for everyone, because she was kind is what people thought. Because she needed the distraction was part of it.

Right now, she's busy making sure everything was in order, a daily tradition before she goes out—wallet, car keys, shopping list— she drew her eyes to one item she'd written on it:

-Steaks

A somber feeling washed over her at this reminder of the knowledge that she'd never see Alena again. Of course, in the back of her mind, she could already imagine her sarcasm, 'I wouldn't miss me'—or something like that. Your memory of someone and how they are is always fallible, just a tiny view of who they are, a tip of the iceberg of their personality.

Shebby, her Labrador, whined under her hand—it's a tempting thought, taking the dog with her. But that also involved the ordeal of *taking the dog with her*. Grabbing the leash, calming her down in the car, calming her down when she got back *to* the car—she feels like a bad owner for not taking her with her, but she doesn't plan on being gone that long. Alena said that she was badly behaved, that she should have taught Shebby more manners. If she did then maybe Shebby would poop less in the house. She'd say Alena wasn't a dog person, but... was it mean of her to think that Alena wasn't exactly a *people* person either? She's not sure what kind of people Alena liked. Malka hoped that all their years together made her one of them.

It was only when she got outside that she realized she'd forgotten her car keys. How silly of her. There was so much to get done, though, that she can't stand nailed in one spot, berating herself for this—and this is what propelled her to search the house again for the metallic shine,

going up and down and down and up the two floors in a blur. It upset Shebby again to see her come back, and she ended up having to calm down the dog *again* before she could finally leave, a little behind schedule—she’s starting to sound like Alena now. Time for this and time for that, Alena was always hammering down on getting time contained.

Time didn’t quite work like that for Malka, however. There were things she wanted to get done and people she’d want to see but she kept it as more of a guideline—to see how everything else would progress.

She starts her tour of errands. There’s a dampness to the air—the docks are their main industry. Fishing and the ferries. Everyone liked to claim that they were out here in nature, yet the dam in the distance always seems to contradict that.

There are so many familiar faces that she sees. It’s comforting to Malka, to think this part of her life might never change... which is exactly why, when telling the news, she gets a variety of gentle touches, on her arm and her shoulder. It’s almost like someone died, but she’s just leaving. She reassures them that Alena has a *good* reason for it—new opportunities.

The thought of everything having a reason is comforting. Alena, however, always insisted that things only happen through coincidence and hard work—she always went back and forth between whether luck existed or not, usually depending on how well she was doing. Alena never took ‘everything happens for a reason’ as anything *but* a reason to make *her* the reason why things happen. She’d said it was an excuse, just a reason to let things pass you by while you ‘sit on your ass’ in her words, not Malka’s (that’s not to say that Malka didn’t swear—she just wasn’t as careless about it as Alena was. If you were to hear such a word in Malka’s voice, it was a desperate moment).

In the market she bumps into someone, causing them to drop an egg carton onto the linoleum tiles.

“I’ll pay for them,” said Malka immediately—internally, mad that something would go wrong like this. Broken eggs meant bad omens.

“It’s fine—I’m sure they’re...” The woman opened the egg carton—three out of twelve cracked, “... salvageable. Maybe I could get a discount.”

“Even if they didn’t come like that?”

“As far as you and I know,” She looked at Malka, “They did,” Florence shined her a smile.

Malka flashed her own back, happy to see yet another acquaintance, “How have you been lately?” she asked, both as a natural, easy question, but also genuinely—things had been hard for Florence, with the death of her husband years ago.

“I’ve been fine,” Florence said neutrally, to where it was believable. Enough to not make Malka interrogate her about any true feelings—a tendency between the line of ‘an empathetic heart’ and ‘just too nosy’.

“Nicholas is doing well in school,” unprompted, Florence veered the conversation to the youngest of her two sons—still in high school, sixteen, “But I’m worried about his social life... he doesn’t get out much.”

“That’s normal for teenage boys,” Malka commented as if she’d raised one herself. She’d like to one day. Currently single, she dreamed of a big family.

“You have a point,” Florence said, Malka unsure if she really did or if Florence was just trying to be polite, “Vincent’s been helping out so much around the house,” the older at seventeen—a year made all the difference between the two teenagers, “and I’m so appreciative, but his grades...” she gave a look of ‘I hate to say this’, “... I don’t want him to repeat another year,” She bobbed between bragging and worries, compliments mixed with concerns.

Florence paused amidst her talk about her boys, “I’ve had to take more hours lately,” she grabbed a nearby pear, feeling for how good it was, “I’m worried I’m not there enough for them.”

“I’m sure they understand,” was Malka’s immediate answer. Florence’s pursed lips showed that it either wasn’t the right one or the one that she was looking for. Malka wasn’t sure about how she should correct herself, so she didn’t.

“Well,” Florence said, scooting her grocery-basket up her arm, “I have to go. Tell Alena I’ll miss her.”

“I will!” Malka said, all the while wondering how much time Alena might have spent with *anyone* outside of her job.

She made a quick ‘pit stop’ at home to do several things: calm down Shebby, put away groceries, make sure she had everything she needed, cursed the inevitable forgotten object (baking mix), decide that the object (baking mix) was best left for another shopping trip, feed Shebby, have a quick lunch of once-reheated leftover soup (twice re-heated is when it starts to go from ‘charmingly mushy’ to ‘just mushy’), make a quick lunch to take to Alena at her workplace, try and calm down Shebby before she leaves, fail in calming down the dog from

bark-whining, decide that a quick distraction is better than risk of overfeeding and poop in the house later, fill the dog bowl again, make a quick escape to the car, leave before Shebby starts whine barking anyways.

Malka didn't mind delivering to Alena, it was a nice system that they'd worked out together, to save Alena the minutes that it'd take getting the food. She knew that Alena always spent it revising work—even if she couldn't imagine how the few minutes would make any difference in the hours she was doing anyways. She'd chastise Alena for not eating enough.

It rained on the way to the studio where Alena worked—interned, technically, as Alena had *always* corrected her. Alena treated it the same way a CEO might see a job at McDonalds: like it's not a 'real job', despite earning a paycheck all the same. So Malka called it a job.

In distance there's a herd of cars coming forward for the lunch rush. She tapped the steering wheel. Green reflected on the pavement below, and that was the signal for her to go. She managed to find a parking spot easily, a small miracle that Malka had always found herself thankful for—not that she was bad at parallel parking, but it made her so nervous.

Inside the studio, it was bright and humid. Without the framing of television, there's something surreal about seeing the sets where they're filmed. Initially it was a welcome relief from the cold wetness outside, but she soon became uncomfortable sweating in her sweater. Like an impatient child, she leaned on her heels, waiting for Alena—she almost dared to venture into the studio, even though *technically* she wasn't someone working there, but she'd gotten lost among the sets before. And then scolded for not having an ID badge—like they were running

something professional. Well, they were, for people who told about the weather and ran local programs from the community college.

But, eventually, she spotted the familiar, dyed green hair walking towards her—“Alena!” she called out, opening her arms to other woman. Courteous of the folder held against her blouse, Alena put it down so that the precious contents (Malka could only guess that it must be scripts) wouldn’t be smushed before she let Malka embrace her as tightly as she could.

“You don’t have to dress professionally, and you *chose* to wear a sweater in here?” Alena immediately commented.

“I didn’t think to wear a t-shirt underneath,” Malka admitted.

“I keep telling you to,” Alena started fanning herself with the folder, “I swear they turn up the lights so bright that everything feels as hot as hell.”

“Other than too-bright lights,” Malka said, “how’s work?” small talk to avoid the elephant in the room that risked trampling everything. It sometimes felt as if Alena was oblivious to its presence—something Malka was both glad and a tad resentful for. Of course Alena shouldn’t focus on the misery of her leaving, but at the same time, it made her worry that leaving might not have been such a deliberation for her.

Alena shrugged, masking any obvious feelings, “Could be better. I’m always glad that it’s not worse—like that I’m not stuck here anymore.” A smile spread across her face, “I’m finally moving up. Can you believe that?”

“Of course I can.” Malka lightly covered her mouth with her hand, “because you deserve it,” she paused, insecurity seeping through, “There’s nothing keeping you back tonight... right?”

“Not going to miss it,” Alena said—Malka was unsure as to whether it was a reassurance, or an attempt to get Malka off of her back, “We agreed to eight, I’m leaving at seven sharp.”

“You don’t have to leave *that* early,” now Malka was starting to feel like she was burdensome.

“What are they going to do, fire me? ... I guess they could give a bad recommendation,” Alena shrugged her shoulders, “but I’ve got it written down in my schedule. I won’t miss it. Promise. By the way, when I come over—do you need anything that I should pick up?”

“It’s fine. I have everything I need at home.” Except for baking mix, but that wasn’t something she was about to make Alena do a whole trip for. But she knows Alena isn’t the type to do errands in neat little bundles—when she needs something, she just goes out and gets it. She’s single minded like that, focused on one goal. Malka struggles to keep the word ‘selfish’ from her mind, “But I’m happy for you,” Malka held her hands together, pulling at her fingers so that she could resist tugging at the strings of her sweater like a fidgety child.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Alena’s words seemed underwhelming to Malka—like she was still holding back, even now. She couldn’t use the word *excited* just once? Malka certainly hoped she was for everything she was giving up here. Then again—Malka’s fears came to surface with the thought that this might be nothing to her. Another rung on the ladder she’s more than happy to step over. That the decision was so easy that Malka didn’t even come to mind.

Alena reached for Malka’s shoulder, “Maybe once I get everything settled where I’m moving, we could—”

“If you keep talking, you’ll have no time for lunch!” Malka insisted, slightly moving away from her touch.

“It’s not like I’m going to be on camera today. I can eat while I work.”

“*Alena,*” a certain voice said behind them, carrying a sense of charisma that only felt charming when you didn’t know it in person. “I’m glad I caught you,” It belonged to a blonde-haired woman with every hair perfectly styled in place, her smile plastic—one that was broadcast all over Thorpes Falls: Bella Glass. “I was wondering if you could do something for me,” her eyes glanced towards Malka before coming back to Alena, “After *your* lunch, of course,” every little conversation with her felt like a news cast of its own, as if she thought the camera never left the room.

“You know I’m leaving today, right?” Alena said Malka guessed that the lack of need for anymore loyalty made her more bold... well, more than usual, anyway. She toed that line between ‘vague comments’ and ‘something you could get sacked for’.

“Bella!” Malka greeted loudly, to where the news caster couldn’t plausibly say she didn’t notice her, “It’s so nice to see you!”

“Hello Malka,” Bella responded coolly—as if *Malka* were the one intruding on a private conversation here. It already made her feel as if Bella were only responding out of obligation, so she knew she had to act quickly, “How’s Olivia?”

“She’s doing *fantastic* as always!” Plastic melded to something more genuine—Malka knew she couldn’t resist the bait of bragging about her daughter, “She’s maintaining a four-point-o. She’s the top of her class, you know.”

Alena all the while slipped away during Bella's bragging fest—Malka shoved down the bit of resentment that this small-town newscaster had prevented her from giving her sister a goodbye hug. But Bella had a way of talking that made you *think* whatever she was speaking about was the center of the universe in that moment.

"We're looking at colleges together," Bella continued, "it's so hard finding one that's good enough for her, but not too far away."

"Isn't she in her junior year of high school?" Malka knew that much from their sparse conversations.

"It's never too early to think about your future education." Sometimes Malka wondered if Bella studied a quote book every night.

Malka recalled when she was in that year of high school—college was out of the question as something she could handle, let alone afford. Alena went as soon as she was able, getting her degree done in a three-year record time. Malka was still at part-time at the local community college. "I'm sure you're proud of her. Tell her I said congratulations," Malka paused. She didn't know as much about Olivia as she did, say, Florence's kids. That likely amounted to Florence being better conversation.

"Thank you," Bella said—despite her smile, the tone said 'Go away, you're wasting my time'.

"Well," Malka said, giving a smile of her own, "It was so nice catching up." She contemplated making a fruit basket for the absence of Alena and sending it to the studio, out of spite.

Malka left, the cold coming as a relief until her hands were shaking and she was clawing at her car keys to get back inside of her vehicle. She almost wished Alena had said something—*she* was the one leaving, so she wouldn't have had to deal with the social consequences of having said something rude to someone you might see again. She could be so single minded. Selfish wasn't the word to describe it—goal oriented? It sounded like the sort of thing you'd put on a resume. So, of course, that also sounded like the perfect way to describe Alena.

But, as of now, Malka had more pressing matters to deal with when she got home. Like the poop Shebby left inside the house. The moment she tried scolding her—*bad dog, bad, no Shebby, you don't poop in the house*—she felt bad when she saw Shebby sulk in a corner, almost as if the dog was trying to self-discipline herself. She pet Shebby for reassurance, but also, to assuage her own guilt for the whole ordeal.

Malka couldn't help but wonder, as she was scratching behind Shebby's ears, hitting that *good spot* that made Shebby hit the floor with a *whap-whap-whap* of her back leg, if even the simple desire for friendship can be fake somehow if you're still using it for your own ends, even if it's just 'I hate to be by myself'.

As if possibly reading her mind, Shebby's answer was a lick on her hand. *Good dog.*

## WORK

Alena ate the leftover soup Malka had given her cold. The microwave was down—for the third *fucking* day in a row, too. Like they knew she was leaving so they said 'why even bother'—

of course she knew she wasn't the sole reason. It was just her luck. Anyway, she resisted mentioning it to Malka, because then *Malka* would, in her typical fashion, apologize for shit she can't change, but somehow feels like she should be magically able to. She was always such a people pleaser—she could read it in her eyes, 'please like me, don't hate me'. It drove Alena up the wall and made her continue driving on the ceiling.

So, of course, she never mentions any of this to Malka. It's a skill she learned from networking so much. You don't have to get *along* to network, necessarily, but god, it makes the day go by easier. Well, that, and references.

As she's at her desk, picking at her cold soup with a spoon Malka had provided her, she contemplated when Malka had ever gone out for herself. Not anyone else, no errands, no 'let's go here for him' or 'oh this was on the way so I did this for her'—*herself*... Okay, that was judgmental, even for her. But it was kind of true, in a sense, which is exactly why she'd never *dream* of saying it out loud to Malka. Sure, call Alena selfish, but isn't doing things for others and expecting gratification kind of selfish in its own right? At least be honest about it, that's always been Alena's perspective. Even when she's relatively kind, trying to help Malka, it's mostly because Malka's her sister. A family relation. Otherwise, she tried to never do anything for free—

"*Alena,*" she heard a certain, *familiar* self-important newscaster's voice broadcast its way over to her ears. She clanged her spoon on her desk, as if that wasn't a clear-enough-indication of 'it's my *LUNCH BREAK*', "Alena, I'm so sorry to *bother* you," no, no you aren't, at least be *honest* about it. Bella was someone who was far better to watch than engage with. She always had the aura of someone who went to acting school to be one of those A-listers but then got stuck in this small town. As someone who was born and raised here, she was more than

happy to get her foot *out* the door of this place—so naturally, as Alena surmised, she must be at least a *little* resentful at the opportunity in her lap right now. She could tell from the smile. Once you worked at this studio long enough you can tell the difference between the myriad of them.

“I was wondering...” Bella paused—something Alena was sure she *thought* made her seem humbler, “if you could do me a *small* favor?”

“It’s my last day,” Alena reaffirmed.

“It won’t take long,” she had that tone of ‘if you don’t do this I’ll do everything within my power to make your life hell as much as I can manage’.

Alena paused, assessing the risk here. On one hand, it’s her last day, and she’s well within her right to tell Bella to go away with every metaphor she can manage *without* uttering the F-word in the workplace. On the other hand, small town people can get nasty. Nastily *petty*. And does she really want *that* following her?

Alena exhaled, “Fine,” she’d get bored being cooped up in the studio, she reasoned. She always liked the assignments that got her out in the field—for more reasons than just ‘not breathing around Bella’, who she’s sure is also wondering why Alena is daring to breathe the same air as her. It better not make her miss dinner. She knows she can’t give everything Malka wants—like being the selfless person she is—so, at the very least, she wanted one last conversation with her to clear the water. Reassure Malka that they’re still on good standing.

Where she was going, she should be able to be more hands on, not just as an intern, but as someone *working professionally*—it wasn’t high up, obviously, but—

Alena felt a folder slap into her lap.

“Everything you need to know should be in there,” Bella said, “I *really* appreciate you doing this for me—we’re going to miss you when you’re gone. You do such good work here.”

It’s very kind of Bella to state this as she’s twisting Alena’s arm. Alena thumbed through the folder—meeting someone for an interview downtown. Alright, she could do this.

As she saw the blonde left, one of the things she found herself looking forward to was the idea of not being her lackey anymore.

## SCHOOL

“Everyone in this school hates me.”

“Use I language,” the school counselor pestered.

Still being a teenager, Nicholas wasn't very subtle when he sighed, audibly exhaling and letting his shoulders droop before, reluctantly, following her instructions, "*I feel like everyone in this school hates me,*" the therapist he went to when dad died said the same thing.

"Why do you think that?" she asks, "You seem to have friends here."

"Yeah," Nicholas admits. He omits that they're not the ones he really wants. He feels like he's just drifting with anyone who'll hang out with him, anyone who will allow him, essentially. His eyes glance to a poster in the room that had a kitten hanging on a branch with the words—wait for it—*Hang in there!* Therapist's office also had a variation of this. He wonders if everyone within the field has to have this exact setup or if it's just the small town ones.

"So not everyone hates you," ah, she spoke like she just unlocked one of his *greatest* inner-mechanisms, a real Sigmund-Freud (aren't his views largely outdated? That's what Wikipedia browsing has told him, anyways), "You're more likable than you think."

"Thanks," it has a slight whine to it from an involuntary voice-crack. Puberty is supposed to make him more mature but right now it's making him seem even more pathetic. Something he doesn't want to be, since he's already known as 'kid with the dead dad'.

"Well," she clasps her hands together, "This was a good session—but you should be going to lunch," it always took up a class period—the counselor had reassured him before that these sessions could be shorter if needed, but, Nicholas never knew how to speak up when he felt trapped in this room, picking at his jacket sleeves, and then if he left maybe, thirty minutes in, it'd mean he's the guy who's *interrupting class* because he was in *therapy* and yeah these sessions are *confidential* but *everyone* knows that he's the kid with the *dead dad who's going to therapy*—

“Is there anything you’d like to talk about next week?” she smiled, blinking at him with eyelashes that were constructed of heavy mascara.

“I dunno,” those were the last two words he said before he finally left. He’s been going to these more since they were set up, every week, interrupting *Calculus* class (it was a coincidence of the time but it also happened to be the best class for him to catch up in), so that he could make his mom happier about his mental health. He felt bad that he knew she worried about him. Like, more than a mom usually should, considering what happened—at least, Nicholas is sure that his mom worries about him more than Vincent. *Vincent* has the active social life and is the football star, and all *he* must worry about (beyond a dead dad) is his awful grades. *Vincent* doesn’t deal with a school counselor. He blew his bangs out of his face as he walked into class to collect the work he missed. Lucky Vincent.

On some level, as Nicholas is getting his lunch from his locker, he knows that the counselor can’t help, and the therapist couldn’t help, if he doesn’t, and didn’t, tell them anything. And there’s lots of things he could tell them. Beyond the school hating him.

The truth is, something Nicholas has also contemplated many times, is that he really wouldn’t know what to say if he were willing to talk. So many subjects—loneliness, life after high school, *dead dad*—and not one word that he could muster about them. He’s admittedly, kind of afraid that one day everyone’s going to look at him and ask why he’s not taking all this help being offered to him. He honestly doesn’t know. It’s not for the attention, because he’d love it if everyone could just *leave him alone* about it.

After eating lunch with his friends—not really friends—acquaintances—friendly acquaintances—and skip all the way to after-school, Nicholas has found himself in a club. It’s

what his counselor has been encouraging him to do for about half a year, but it's only when his mom lightly passed the suggestion to him that he finally relented. He stands in front of the room, contemplating if maybe, he could hide in the bathroom for a few hours and then make up what he did there. It's unlikely Vincent would ever be in something like a computer club. But then that would also require *continuing* to hide in the bathroom after school, and after a while, people start to notice that, and then he'll be known as *the kid who weirdly hides in the bathroom for a few hours after school (with the dead dad)*. So, he takes a step in.

From his first, few minutes of experience, it turns out that the computers are kind of outdated, and what you can do is limited by the hawking eyes of the teachers (can't change anything too much, because they're convinced that even a passing *hard glance* will make the whole thing shut down. He's tempted to correct them on this but he knows what kind of an uphill battle it is to try and get anything through to an adult who's entirely convinced of the wrong thing).

Not being able to take them apart is a shame, because Nicholas is sure that he can see at least a few ways to improve them physically—and even if the computer turns out to be ruined from the tampering, it'd be a learning experience. But not light on the limited budget of a small-town school. Begrudgingly, Nicholas understands.

Drifting closer to the social groups that have formed, just barely far away enough that no one's noticed to break out of their conversations, but that he can still listen in, he hears that some of the members have some of their own projects at home—on account of restrictions here—and he's kind of... tempted to join them. Egads, have the planets aligned? *Him* initiating contact with *another social group*? He can already hear Vincent mocking him (he's a jock, so what else can he expect).

This plan to make himself at least a *little* less lonely in his hobby is stopped dead in its tracks, however, by an old friend, who was one up until the point of eighth grade—a year he’s sought to erase from his memory every time it rears itself into his head. He didn’t even think Oliva would be that interested in computers—isn’t she a popular girl? What are popular people into? Of course, he wouldn’t know, he’s not that popular. He’s hated by the whole school. Unlike Oliva.

He tries to appear like he’s not staring at her from across the room as he’s in a stasis of ‘technically here but interacting with no one’. Every time he’s seen her, passed her by in the halls, glanced at her, he’s replayed imaginary dialogues of what he *could* say if he were to ever try and speak to her again:

*‘Hey Oliva, how are you?’* Okay, good enough start—

*‘Since we stopped talking in eighth grade’* Bad. This imaginary conversation is going bad.

*‘And you sort of completely ignored me since my dad died and all—’* This is a garbage fire Nicholas has no intention of setting off. Can he really blame her? It’s something all the other kids know him as. It’s not one of the reasons everyone *hates* him but it’s why no one wants to *talk* to him—or, at least, the prospect of having that suspicion of what he’s known as confirmed is always ruminating in the back of his mind.

Just as it seems like someone’s noticed him, and is maybe going to invite him to a conversation—a tempting proposition for him—he turns on his heel and leaves, opting to not even hide in the bathroom but instead wait somewhere else for his mom to come. Since she thinks he’s engaging in a social life right now and all.

Nicholas kicks his feet on the scratched-up hallway floor, taking his sweet time down the stair steps. *Closure* is a word that the counselor—and his therapist—used a lot. And it’s something he honestly wants, he guesses. It might at least make him feel better. The only problem is that getting *closure* opened a lot more things than he cared to handle.

So, what’s so bad about letting dead people *stay* dead and never bringing them up, and letting dead friendships stay *dead* in the water and letting them drift by? Something his counselor might even say is that it’s a ‘bad coping mechanism’, but it’s one he can deal with.

“How was your club?” His mom later asks him, when she finally picks him up, around when Vincent’s football practice ended.

“Uh,” Nicholas’s head is at work churning up a predictable lie, “It was fun. I liked talking about my projects with them,” he actually heard *other* people talk about *their* projects until it turned out that even a computer club had his *old friend he doesn’t talk to anymore* in it. And he has to commit to this thing. Great.

Nicholas glances at Vincent, wondering if he had any comments—mocking or otherwise, more likely the former. To his disappointment, he doesn’t. Nicholas could use a good car argument to distract himself.

“That’s *great!*” her voice lifted that slight octave that let Nicholas know that she was genuinely delighted by this (lied about) development, “I’m so glad to know that you’re engaging with more of your peers.” Could she make it any more obvious that she was disappointed in his lack of social life? And that he’s *clearly* the worst one adjusting here? Nicholas looked at Vincent—no comment. He seemed too distracted with the foliage outside.

“How was school for you today, Vincent?” Mom moved onto him—but the pause told Nicholas that he was reluctant to answer.

Time for him to strike, “Did you get another *F*?”

“Did you get more annoying?” was Vincent’s immediate response. He had an A in tossing back retorts.

“Did you—”

“*Nicholas!*” his mother’s harsh scolding rang through the car, catching an argument before it could start, “You need to apologize.” She kept her grip on the steering wheel.

Nicholas avoided her gaze from the rear-view mirror, “... Sorry. I shouldn’t have brought up that you got another *F*.”

“Honey,” her voice was gentle, but firm, with a slight tired edge to it, “It was that you *assumed* he got one,” she explained it to Nicholas like he was a child. She never treated Vincent this way.

Vincent, who only rolled his shoulders, never looking away from the window, “It’s fine.” A pause, “Sorry for calling you annoying.” He must have only said that to get on Mom’s good side, because *he* apologized without *prompting*.

“Whatever,” was Nicholas’s automatic response.

The family was silent the rest of the way home. Nicholas looked outside, but instead of catching trees, got a view of the murky water. Sometimes he had a thought that he’d never dream of telling anyone, especially his counselor, lest she think something’s *really* wrong with him

(beyond the obvious). He wondered where his father's corpse was below the water. They never recovered the body, like the water had swallowed him whole.

Nicholas turned his eyes away from it until they passed by the water that isolated the town. At the very least, he could say that he did have *somewhat* of a plan for where he wanted to go for college: out of state.

## RELATIONSHIPS

"I really have to go," Oliva stepped out of the room of the computer club, "I hope whatever project you're doing goes well."

“It’s like you just got here though,” the other student commented.

Oliva was in so many clubs that, arguably, it was hard to make any meaningful contributions to them, but they looked good on an application. The busier you *seem* the better it *looks*—on some level she resents how practical that is, “I’ll spend some more time here next time,” she said, pausing, “When there’s not a student council meeting I have to get to.” The problem is, there was *always* a student council meeting to go to. It wasn’t just a convenient excuse, it seems like they had a meeting about every little thing. She supposed that it was probably preparing her well for adult life.

Earlier in computer club she’d seen Nicholas. She’d love to catch up, but all the while she prayed, as she always did, that he’d never come up and talk to her. As she usually did, walking briskly down the hall with folders glued to her chest, she imagined what sort of a conversation they might have:

*‘Hey Nicholas, how are things going?’* Decent enough start.

*‘Since we... kind of lost contact in eighth grade.’* Going bad.

*‘And you’ve been completely ignoring me since my parent’s divorce back then.’* And now it’s from bad to worse and would probably get awful if she tried anything beyond the realm of imagination. She knows how people can get when they’re around someone who brings out the worst in them. So, it’s far better for everyone that she keeps her distance. Even if she does find herself disappointed that he didn’t try. Not even a wave. Which, despite her earlier wishes, made her wonder how much he must have really *cared*—Well, whatever. It’s fine. He’s a friend from eighth grade, she should really be more *mature*. People move on all the time. She’d have ignored him anyways.

... It's not entirely fine, as Oliva's ruminating on feelings during the council meeting itself. But things get easier if you *pretend* they are, make a play act of it. She shines a smile every so often to everyone in the room to let them know that she's still listening. She's good at making things seem genuine, all the way keeping up with the debate about what fruit punch should be used for homecoming (in Oliva's silent, unvoiced opinion, fruit punch should not be what they've been spending fifteen minutes and counting of this meeting for).

Somewhat bitterly, she can't help but envy Nicholas in that respect. He looks so *miserable* that everyone rushes to try and help. Wouldn't that be nice.

It's later that her mother's the one to pick her up after school instead of one of her friends.

"I had one of my interns take care of things," Bella explains as Oliva climbs into the passenger seat of the red convertible—still so maintained that it was like it was when they first bought it, "so that I could spend more time with *you!*" Bella's slight twitch in her smile shows that she was delighted.

Ah, lucky Oliva. She did her best to smile back.

"How was school, Sweetie?" It had the inflection that, unlike most people, Bella actually cared about what Oliva had to say.

"Oh, things were good." Oliva had no intention of telling her everything; she only told her things that she wouldn't mind telling other people about—Clubs, her friends (as close as she'd allow, anyways. Make yourself likable, but not deeply known. It's dangerous to expose yourself; Bella had taught her that lesson well, and she suspected that she might know it a little better than her mother).

“She’s leaving today,” Bella said as she was driving.

“The intern?” Oliva had heard splotches of gossip here and there, second-hand told through her mother, so she sometimes had to gather through context clues what the truth of matters was.

“She’s leaving for *elsewhere*,” Bella flipped her hair in the exposed, slightly salty air, “I’m sure she would have climbed up the ranks if she chose to stay long enough.” Her mother was insistent on terms of loyalty to deal with the fact that she was stuck here, “Young people have no patience,” she looked at Oliva, “of course, you do.”

Oliva really didn’t need any reassurance that she was always the exception to whatever rules Bella put up.

“We could do something *fun* tonight,” Bella’s hands seem to dance on the steering wheel, “How about a movie? I could rent one from the library.”

“Sure,” Oliva said passively. Let’s see how long these plans might last into the night, until her mother’s *other* plans usually came in. It was easier to just let her mother decide things.

“By the way,” Bella said, shining those pearly whites, “remember to keep up on what *colleges* you want to go to,” she says it in a slight sing-songy tone, like she’s the one going.

“Of course.” Oliva glances at the leaves falling on the side of the road. She’s not sure how she’s going to explain to her mother that what colleges she’s picking out is *not* an invitation to pack up and move out with her. It just makes Oliva want to act out on her plan. The one she’d always been working on, building and building on it throughout the years when there were moments of impulsiveness. It’s what kept her from too many arguments with Bella.

As they drove, they passed by the water, shimmering with sunset light from the horizon, a mix of bright peach dancing on the surface. The boats that came in and out of town rushed through it.

Oliva silently recalled the time when the last ferry went out. They could go pretty late.

## MEAL

The knife pounds the table as Malka chops onions, tap-tap-tap-tap... She throws them into the pan, sizzling as she sautés them. Her eyes are a bit teary, because of the onions, despite having cut them so many times before.

She recalled once trying to teach Alena to cook. Her eyes got so teary from the smell, she asked Malka how she did it. How she could cut so many onions and not cry once. Malka just said she was used to it, and Alena resolved she would just buy them pre-cut from now on.

That was the thing about Alena, always, *always*, on the move, doing everything at once. Never savoring anything. So, she had to make sure she savored this— “Just make it, and by the time you get done, I’ll be there,” Alena had insisted before. She usually ran a schedule so tight that she could plan it to the millisecond so, perhaps foolishly with blind trust, Malka believed her. She’d like to make light conversation with Alena while making the steak, but maybe, that was too much to ask here. Malka knew how to be *humble* with what she had, after all.

She wanted to make sure this was a good dinner-- no, a great dinner. One that Alena could eat and have it linger in her mouth and thought a week, a month, maybe even a year from now, and think 'Damn, that was a good dinner'. And she could still marvel how Malka could cut onions without crying, except now, where she was crying a little, but just a little bit. She couldn't have red eyes when she ate with her sister.

She flavored the steak with pepper. As she continued to prepare the steak, making sure everything was in order before she cooked it, she remembered Alena's excitement when she first said she got the job. That she made it *big*. All that hard work paid off. What she put herself through college for, as if Malka wasn't still doing that.

Alena would be writing for a huge publisher, her work read by so many people. Malka only hoped people would like her food.

The steak sizzled in the pan. Alena would be so far away—Malka thought that by this point, she'd have accepted this reality. She couldn't visit nearly as often as she did now. Malka

doesn't let her face falter. Even now, she couldn't be selfish, wanting to keep Alena close to her, like a toy she never wanted to give up. The response from the town was overwhelming—they all know when someone's leaving. It's like everyone fears this town might evaporate if too many people leave. Malka chases the dog out of the kitchen—*No Shebby, you can't have people food.* The dog whines. It's tempting to give the dog a piece.

In Malka's experience, cooking a good, medium rare steak was a careful balancing act. If the heat is too low then it's just going to be raw on the inside, bleeding meat with no substance. Too high and all you get is flavored leather. Turn the heat up high, to sear it, and then turn it low, to cook the inside carefully, gently. But not all the way. That piece of pink is important. Malka is never sure if she's gotten it right, so she always has to take it off to check. Mostly to check if it's too pink.

Alena isn't an easy person to get along with. Malka's always known this, growing up with her. Rude and brash remarks are how she gets on in the world, repelling those who might want to get close to her. Well, not entirely-- Alena has always known the importance of networking. She knows how to make a good face. It comes off if you're not someone she wants to know. Malka guesses it must be human nature, especially hers, to want to know how deep you can really know someone, which is why it frightens her to think of people who can control their impression on people—she can barely control how this dinner is going as is.

Take the steak off. Cut into it. It bleeds some juices onto the table. Too pink. Malka throws it back onto the stove, where it sizzles, and she hisses at some of the juice getting onto her skin. Rinse with cold water for sixty seconds, to make sure it doesn't form into a blister. It probably will. Malka continues to cook the steak some more, pushing into it, hearing it crackle as she flips it on the other side.

Alena thinks that Malka can cook because she has the time to-- Alena is always going on about her busy schedule. The truth of it, truth that Malka never speaks, is that Alena never makes her own time. Every second she has to use for something, something useful. She can tell that Alena gets antsy if she isn't doing any busywork.

Alena has always emphasized to Malka that this is a transitional period in her life. Alena thinks that, as soon as she gets through college and gets a job beyond retail, then she'll get started, just like she has. Malka purses her lips. Did Alena ever consider that, maybe, she'd like them to stay like that? Forever in a transitional period? Life ebbing within this small town by the water?

She shouldn't think like that. She's being selfish again. Oh no, the steaks-- she quickly takes it off, slaps it on the plate, showing a big, black mark where she left it on for too long. Selfish, selfish, selfish. You left the steak for too long and now you ruined dinner. It's not ruined, she knows this, but-- she cuts into it. The pink has begun to wear away into a brownish grey. This can be her steak. Alena needs to remember this dinner.

Malka throws on the second steak-- she meant the first to be Alena's, because it has exactly the amount of fat and meat that Alena would have liked. Alena hates extra fat on her steak, she thinks it's wasteful-- both on the figure and on the meal. The meat should be the main focus of the meal. And, understandably, Alena thinks the fat is gross. Malka knows she should also think like this, but a self-indulgent part of herself doesn't. She kind of likes the fat. It brings flavor to the steak-- it's why she likes rib-eyes so much. She likes chewing on those ends, sucking out all the flavor, chewing the fat, extending how long she can enjoy the meal until it's gone.

Malka pays closer attention to this one. Making sure that it doesn't get burned. She can cut off the fat from it. Turn on the high. Now go to medium. Now observe it and make sure it doesn't burn.

Malka knows this isn't going to be the steak that Alena prefers, but she can have it. Alena considered cooking a leisurely activity. Something for people who have time. She's always setting her sights higher; nothing is ever enough for Alena. Nothing. She will stop at nothing to get what she wants, and then some, and then find what she wants next. Malka can't help but feel-- but not want to admit-- but still regardless *feel* like she's afraid that she's going to be a steppingstone for Alena. She's moving out, so-- so what's next, Malka wonders? She has other friends, she knows. She has so many friends. Malka collects friends like Alena collects references. But she has no one like Alena.

No. *No no no no no no*-- the steak has been on for too long. She quickly slaps the steak onto the plate, cutting it-- it's not pink at all. Leather. Tasty, tasty leather. Malka has ruined both steaks. She looks at the clock. There's no time to buy any more, and even then, Malka hates to waste food, yet... she sinks onto the counter. She's ruined everything. What if she canceled. She knows that's certainly an option. But it's when Alena is *leaving*.

For once in her life, she curses Alena. That's a lie. She's cursed her many times, never to her face, but Malka likes to think this is the first time she's felt this strongly. Why does she always have to pack her schedule so much? And, and why not have a few days? Why did she wait so long to schedule it? Was she too busy for her sister? Why is she always so busy? Why? Why? Why? *Why?*

Malka shuts off the stove. They'll have to make do with the steaks. She wipes her face. There's a headache coming on, and she knows she can't have this now. Ibuprofen will help.

## FAMILY

Florence finally made it home, parking the SUV in the driveway. She had to act quickly—as soon as her boys climbed out they'd be clamoring to be the ones who helped her with groceries. Nicholas was trying to carry everything himself, and she admired the dedication—but she knew how fast those bags would hit the ground, and he never knew where

things went. With a gentle tug, he relented in giving more of the load to Vincent, but seemed to take it as a victory that Florence had given him the precious task of escorting the eggs and bread. She'd think it silly, if not a symptom of another argument to come.

'Oh, it's *normal* for boys to fight like that. You know how they are,' someone once told her, like *they* knew how to raise two boys alone better than she did. It took her everything not to grip their shoulders, to yell that—no, you *don't* understand, they've never *fought* like that in the past. She tries to stop any arguments before they happen, like she's catching butterflies in a net. She knows she can't stop all of them. Not so much picking battles as much as being *aware* of when they happen. But she doesn't want to create an environment where no one feels like they can speak their mind—especially for Nicholas. He'd explode from how many thoughts and opinions he has. Which is good, because teens need to express themselves, even if it's rude, and as their mother, she's obligated to remind them of language she'd like to indulge in herself sometimes.

Nicholas had set down the bag too hard. She knows this because one of the eggs is cracked. She throws it away into the garbage can, washing her hand of the yolk. She knows Nicholas can be *too* rude at times, very mouthy. But at the same time, this is a boy who's lost his father—so—who is *she* to judge how he handles his grief? They say that some people handle it volatily, and perhaps, he just needs to process it that way. She's not sure how much therapy is helping. The first therapist drifted off when Nicholas didn't want to go to anymore visits, before he started seeing the school counselor—she hopes she didn't pressure him into it. She contemplates if Vincent should see a therapist, but he's never expressed the need.

"Thank you so much, Honey," she says, seeing Vincent start to prepare dinner.

“Of course, Mom,” is his automatic response. Nicholas has retreated away from them into the living room, and the promise of later food prevents him from completely fading into his own room.

The thought of how to feed two boys after work seems like a herculean task to her, *‘How can you?’* that little voice in the back of her head asks her, jeering, *‘Making one of your sons cook for you. What an irresponsible mother.’*

“How was your day at school?” she asks, to distract from the thoughts.

“It was okay,” Vincent says, noncommittally. He focuses on cooking.

“I’m sorry Nicholas said that,” she says, like it’s her fault, and since he’s her *son*, it may as well be.

“I shouldn’t be getting Fs.”

“If you need me to help you—”

“I don’t need help,” he snaps along with what’s frying in the pan, “... I didn’t mean to say it like that.”

“It’s okay,” she says as gently as she can, giving a reassuring smile.

She knows they deserve someone better, but she’s not sure how to be that person.

To her dismay, dinner goes much the same in terms of conversation. She’s already exhausted the conversation topics of the day in the car. The only subject left is how her work went; “Fine. Same old, same old,” she says like it’s kind of a joke. Work grinds on her. It’s tempting to ask for something better, but the fear of losing her only support, for her *children*, is too much of a fear. She’ll settle for dreaming of something better.

Speaking of work, it's only when she's going towards her upstairs office after dinner, that she realizes she's *forgotten* something from the dreaded workplace. She hurries back downstairs, "Boys, can you hold down the fort for me?" she asks, sweetly, like there's any chance either of them would ever say no, but she doesn't want to bark orders at them. "I'll be right back."

"Course, mom," Vincent immediately answers.

Nicholas looks up from his phone, "We won't let the house burn down."

This manages to get a laugh out of her.

She gets back into the car, buckling in the seatbelt, checking the rearview mirror to make sure she doesn't hit the garbage can when she's backing up (again), and off she goes—going through the neighborhood during twilight, when the world isn't quite dark yet. The quietness of being alone in the car is different than when her boys are there—and even then, as she hates to admit, she can distract herself by keeping the peace. She read an article once, that not being in your teenager's life affects them for the rest of it.

Florence catches her expression in the rearview mirror. Dour. Once the red of a stoplight illuminates her view, she plasters a smile back on, even if no one will be around to see it. That's what she's worried about—if she ever lets that smile fade, she fears it might never come back. But who can possibly slow down to take care of themselves?

Things have been hard with Adam—her former husband—gone. That much is obvious. But no one says *how* it's hard. She misses his touch, his voice, his face, how he'd sometimes make her breakfast in the morning. How he'd tussle Nicholas's hair, or help with Vincent's homework—he was always better at that, inspiring self-confidence about grades. Florence,

however, is more like Nicholas, a whiz-kid. Numbers come easily to her, but she feels like she's failed when Vincent's had to repeat a year.

Everyone's called her brave. For being a single mother. Is anyone worried about her, she wonders? Or is everyone too polite to voice anything? A wave of emotion comes over her at what she passes—but it's over the strangest thing, really. Their restaurant—the one where she met Adam. It's a simple diner, really, generic food, even more generic people who'd come there as regulars. Fried fish and burgers were their specialty—but even more important was Adam. He worked there, and Florence found herself drifting there often, as people often do in a small town with limited options. She remembers, looking at the darkened interior of the diner, that he didn't get that she was asking him out initially. It was so hard to be *subtle* around him.

Now, she finds herself missing his comforting words, when he knew she was getting too into her own head. He grounded her. Now they're replaced by her own doubts repeating her failures and what's happening to her kids. And she fears they're right.

But she didn't stop to reminisce. She's in the parking lot because of a sign: it's closing forever, thanking everyone for years of patronage. How could it close? Weren't there regulars? Was it because Adam died? Was *nothing* allowed to remain of him? Even the restaurant he frequented? For lack of anyone to touch her, she finds herself cradling in the car, and she turns on the radio—but the classic rock she's heard hundreds of times before from limited stations does nothing to prevent her body from rocking, her own tears pouring down, smearing makeup. In the dark, her hands struggle to open the glove box, and she feels desperately for something—anything to reapply her makeup. It's cheap, possibly bought because she needed it at the time and she forgot about it; the lipstick is the worst color of *Beige Red*, as it so claims, imaginable, but it will work. With shaking hands, she dabs at her face with purse napkins, using the lights of

the closing shops around her as guidance to clean up the tears, and applies the lipstick with only minor screw-ups.

Her worst failure would be for anyone to know something's wrong.

RUN AWAY

“It’s *your* turn to do the dishes, *Nicholas*.”

“I *know*,” Nicholas hates it when Vincent gets on his back like this. It only gets worse when Mom isn’t around. He starts on washing them, and he can *feel* Vincent watching him like a prison guard. He’ll get a ten-year sentence without parole if they’re not squeaky clean.

“You didn’t take out the trash this morning,” Vincent continues.

“I was getting ready for school, so I couldn’t.”

“Because you wake up so late.”

Always reminding him what a *burden* he is. Vincent’s really good at that, “If you think you’re so great,” water splashes from a plate onto the floor, and Nicholas moves before his brother can think to scold him on that as well, “then how’s that *year* you’re repeating?”

Vincent doesn’t answer initially, “I know I’m not great,” he says, quietly, a fact he’s repeated to himself multiple times.

Nicholas keeps rubbing a dish despite it being well over dry. This isn’t the first time he’s regretted saying something like that. He contemplates maybe *apologizing*, quickly, like a kid who broke a vase—

“If you’re so great then why do you always use dad’s death as a crutch?”

Nicholas feels something catch in his throat and he drops the plate onto the ground, a harsh shatter ringing out. Neither of them say anything. Vincent might regret what *he* said now, because he’s reaching a hand towards Nicholas, but he’s quick to slap his brother’s hand away—he doesn’t need his *pity*, “I’m going to bed,” he announces, before he stomps upstairs, slamming the door. He throws himself onto his bed—not crying, just breathing into the pillow. Vincent

didn't need to remind him that it's *his fault* about what happened to dad—because he woke up late in middle school—and dad had to take him later—so he got on the later boat, and—

Vincent blames him. Nicholas just *knows* that he must. Doesn't he know that he blames *himself* enough? Perhaps to prevent himself from getting stuck in his emotions, Nicholas moves on impulse. He grabs his backpack filled with undone homework and begins stuffing it full of clothes. The length from the window to the ground makes him think that it'd probably be a bad idea to jump out, but his mind works out that if he jumps from the roof and *then* to the garbage, he'd probably make it.

He climbs onto the roof from his window, shakily walking along it. Suddenly the ground seems very far away. The weight on his back is throwing off his balance. He hesitates, but the other option is facing Vincent and waiting for Mom to get home. He jumps to the garbage can—and it works, until he slips, and brings down the can with him, getting garbage everywhere, almost worse than when the raccoons got into it. Hitting the wet pavement, he almost thinks he broke something, and hisses—to his luck, no. Just scrapes. They're bleeding a little, but he manages to stand up.

He doesn't let himself look back before he runs off into the night.

## BROTHERS

Vincent, as usual, screwed up. He screwed up in school, screwed up reassuring Mom about how he was doing in school, and most importantly, now, he's screwed up *bad* with Nicholas. He cleaned up the broken plate, wincing at seeing that it was one of the *good* ones too. It had a bunch of fancy, blue swirled markings on it. If Mom asked, he'd take the blame, Nicholas was going through enough right now.

Words were never the strong suit of a big oaf like him. He put the glass shards in the garbage under the sink. As much as he wished he had Nicholas's mind for math, his brother wasn't that much better at words, but he was quicker *thinking* with them, and that's where half of the problems were.

When it came to thinking of how to apologize, Vincent went to deciding on making something Nicholas liked before he'd try and attempt it—chocolate chip brownies. It was to soften the blow by appealing with sweets, but also to give his brother time to cool off. Vincent was never that great with mind stuff, but in picking up cooking, to relieve his mom of *something* from her time at work, it gave him something to do with his hands.

Beating the chocolate mixture together gives him some peace, and some time to contemplate. He remembers what happened when dad died. He can still visualize everything, even involuntarily. Mom was told first—he knew this because she was in the living room with the cop who'd given her the news. She went to get Nicholas, while Vincent was picked up by the cop. It was to be kind, but set in a feeling of dread that Nicholas never had to experience.

At the time Nicholas was in middle-school, eighth grade, and Vincent starting High School at Freshman year. When his little brother was told what happened—it was like someone

had socked him with a brick to the stomach. Disbelief—almost more ready to accept the unlikely reality of it being a horrid prank—and then he began sobbing. Nicholas began sobbing *so hard*.

Vincent nearly drops the baking tin when he recalls the horrid noises of his brother gasping for air, like he was drowning in tears. He shoves the brownies into the pre-heated oven. And Vincent was frozen, unable to grab him, hug him, say everything is okay when it's *not*. And then, in the corner of his eyes, there was his mother, who almost held it together until she saw Nicholas's sobbing reaction, and tears were staining her own cheeks. Vincent elected to stay strong for everyone else, until later that night when he began... what *did* he do. He vaguely remembers that he beat his pillow, and he *might* have started crying. It's in a haze since he passed out. Since then, when he woke up that next morning, the first morning of their dad being dead, that he resigned himself to be the man of the house. Someone needs to be, like baking reconciliation brownies.

It would be so satisfying to throw everything he does back in Nicholas's face, but—he remembers his little brother wailing for his father, and he recoils from it. He can endure whatever Nicholas throws at him. No matter how much the words hurt, like Nicholas thinks he doesn't *know* how stupid he is.

He's interrupted by the sound of metal crashing onto the ground, and runs out, to see the garbage can's insides all over. *Racoons*. He knew someone has to clean it up, but—he looks back at the oven. Brownies first. If they were burnt it'd diminish the apology.

When he went up to Nicholas's room, warm brownies on a plate, he knocked.

No answer.

“Nicholas?” *Knock, knock, knock.*

Still, no answer. It was understandable. What Vincent had said was... horrible. He swallowed, contemplating just leaving the brownies and hoping that would smooth things over, “Things have been hard since, you know...” He paused, forcing himself to spit it out, “Dad died. And I’m sorry.”

Nicholas still wasn’t answering.

“I really miss talking to you,” his throat felt like there was something in it, “I mean like we used to. I hate arguing with you—I shouldn’t be so tough on you—” He wiped his face with his free hand, “I love you.”

He left the brownies by the door. He could wait to hug his brother when he was ready to come out.

## DOWNTOWN

At night, locations take different forms. They can become frightening and exciting all at once. The familiar transformed into something new altogether. To those who are young, streets warp into something eldritch. Those that have their routines know them as the soft, neon lights of a place to stop before going home.

The downtown of Thorpes Falls is not something a tourist would initially be directed to, but is usually reserved for the residents to wind down after a long day of work, and they have nothing to attend to at home.

It's amazing how there can be something unknown in the familiar, yet something reassuring about it as well. You may never consider that there's something you don't know about a place you've known all your life, until you realize that, while you know it like the back of your hand, you've never considered looking at your palm.

## TROUBLE

Nicholas's body wasn't made for gym, so he's not sure what propels him to run through not only the neighborhood, but also downtown, hopelessly turning corners. He wasn't sure if he was more afraid of getting mugged or going home to face consequences (both the possibility of getting grounded, and having to face his own, dumb decision that he didn't want to admit was a very not smart decision).

And he froze when he saw her, standing under a streetlight, trying to read something, and perhaps he would have gone unnoticed, if he hadn't had blurted out, "What are you doing here?!"

Oliva met his gaze, "I could ask you the same thing, you know," unlike Nicholas, she didn't falter when she spoke.

"I'm-- uh--" Nicholas's mind spun fast for the best excuse, "I'm taking a walk."

"This late?"

"Yes."

"On a school night?"

"... Yes..." Nicholas said slowly, before he narrowed his eyes, realizing that who was asking this wasn't any kind of adult authority figure he should respect (or fear), "Well-- well what about you?"

Oliva paused, and Nicholas was afraid that she might be trying to avoid the question, "I'm running away." Her answer is surprisingly blunt.

“... Oh...” Nicholas rubbed his arm, “Uh... Actually I... I am too...” he admitted, resisting asking what Oliva, who lived in one of the biggest houses in the neighborhood, could possibly have to run away from, “Maybe we, could, uh... uh...” he knows it’s a stupid question, where the answer is obvious, “... Go together? Like, run off together.”

The pause makes him expect that she’d tell him to buzz off, at her most polite, “... As long as you don’t get in the way.” She went back to look at her map, walking off, with an unspoken expectation to follow, or get lost.

Nicholas shuffled dirt to keep up, “... So, uh...” He was regretting this already, but his mind convinced him this was better than going home, “... Where are we going?”

“The docks.”

Everything was unclear in the darkness, “Are you sure you-- you know where you’re going?”

“Yes, Nicholas,” the tone would have made him think she was his mom and reminded him just why he’d been so reluctant to ever ‘catch up’ since their lapse in knowing each other.

In actuality, the docks instilled a special kind of dread, that almost made him want to run from this too, “Let me see the map.” He tried to grab at it with sweaty hands.

“What-- no--” Oliva pulls it away from him, tearing it slightly at an edge, right where the compass was. She shot him a disapproving look, “I know where I’m going!”

“Are you-- are you sure, it’s-- it’s pretty dark, you know!”

“I wonder what invention mankind has invented in dark times such as these,” Oliva said, gesturing to yet another streetlamp.

“I’m just-- saying this area is pretty big, and-- and--” the nervousness and embarrassment is getting to him, “I’ll go get directions,” Nicholas says it quickly, and goes into the first building that has a blinking neon OPEN sign.

“Nicholas!” Oliva is unable to stop him from walking right into the bar.

## REUNION

Alena huffed to herself, tapping her fingers along the wooden bar counter. What Bethany's 'little errand' was all about was waiting for an interview about a bar fight, apparently. The only problem was that from asking around, all the patrons were vague about whether one even took place. One insisted it was an exaggeration, even though there was a break in the window covered up by a board. Or maybe this was just a shitty bar. Who knows. Alena can't help if Bella knew what she was doing with this, or if this was *really* something, she thought would be simple. Petty malice is in character, but it's also giving her too much credit.

Alena rolls her shoulder, swallowing back some scotch. She has to be careful not to do too much; she has a ferry to catch. She glances at her watch, cursing how late it's getting, *but* if they *show up* then she *should* be able to do a quick interview, then go to Malka's, *then* catch the ferry. It sounds like a lot, but she's used to tight time squeezes—Malka's never realized how much time crunching she's been doing, just to get to *this* opportunity. Has her sister never realized that she doesn't have to settle for the first thing in front of her?

... She shouldn't think of her sister like that. She mentally thinks *sorry*, as if Malka could hear it.

Alena people watches out of boredom. Mostly just people having conversations—exchanging pleasantries, bitching about their job (doesn't she know it), small news about who's coming and going. News of her leaving might have spread already, at least via Malka, but she doesn't expect anyone to give her a hearty goodbye. She sips on her drink. It's not something she's necessarily sad about, just a fact. There's a couple by the window—not the fucked up

broken boarded one—clearly not their first date. They must have been coming here for years. How quaint.

What catches her eye is when someone bursts in—he’s yelling something to someone outside, and from here, she can tell he’s young. He *sounds* young—puberty squeaks going all over the place. A teenager. She suspects he might be kicked out soon, but then she realizes she *knows* him. She peers, categorizing the face: Nicholas. Florence’s kid. What’s *he* doing here? She’s going to shrug it off, up until he stares at her like a deer in headlights—recognizing her *and* catching that she’s studying him. Oops. He quickly scrambled off further into the back of the bar, letting out a loud *sorry* when he bumped into a table on the way.

She’s going to let well enough alone when the *second* teenager comes in, looking disgruntled, mad even—Oliva, Bella’s kid. Perfect daughter, Miss ‘Four-Point-Oh.’ Alena almost resents her for how much Bella’s bragged about her. But she’s never really interacted with her enough to know whether her mother raised a brat or not. Oliva is looking around the bar, and something catches her sight—probably Nicholas—and like a targeted missile she’s going forward. Her sights completely skipped over Alena.

Alena chugs down her drink and sets down some money. She *has* to know what’s going on now. She makes her way towards the back of the bar, everyone else either uncaring or just wanting to mind their own business about why two teenagers have barged into this adult establishment. Maybe they’d behave better than the people who—supposedly—started a bar fight. She only finds a back entrance and a door to a single bathroom, the latter of which Oliva is standing in front of.

“Nicholas, you’re being ridiculous,” Oliva says to the door. She’s jiggling the handle, maybe not trying to get it open, but rather aggressively assert that he should get out. Alena knows about these kinds of passive-aggressive antics.

“*You’re* the one who’s being ridiculous,” Nicholas retorts through the bathroom he’s locked himself in.

“How?”

“You followed me in here!”

“You *asked* to come with me.”

“I just—wanted to make sure we know where we’re *going*—”

“I *did* and you wanted to ask directions from a *bar*?”

“... I didn’t realize it was a bar,” Nicholas admits, reluctant.

Oliva sighs raggedly, looking at the door—maybe contemplating leaving him in there. Alena knows she would in her position.

“And there’s someone here who recognizes *me!*”

“... *Nicholas*...” Somehow, Oliva sounds like a tired, scolding mother.

“She’ll tell my parents—*our* parents!”

“That’s only if she knows me too,” Oliva pauses, “Which is a possibility. But you *have* to get out of there before we... miss...” she trails off, finally noticing Alena, “Ah,” and so, Oliva realizes what Nicholas meant, “*Hello*,” Oliva shifts into ‘perfect daughter’ mode, “Sorry, my...” she hesitates—is she hesitating on calling him a friend? “... He’s using up the bathroom.”

“I’ll be out *in a minute!*” Nicholas reaches a high octave of yelling.

“I can hold it,” Alena says, “... If you’re afraid I’m going to turn you in for sneaking into a bar, I won’t. But don’t expect me to buy either of you a drink.”

“No, ma’am,” Oliva says respectfully, in a way that makes Alena feel too old.

There’s a pause among all of them.

“So what’s all this about, then?” Alena inquires further. This is a lot of mess for just the excitement of coming into a bar underage.

“We’re... sneaking into a bar—like you guessed,” Oliva says, clearly trying to keep an act up, but Alena will give her props for trying, “And then Nicholas over-reacted—”

“I can still *hear you!*”

“Then be helpful or *shut up!*” There’s a harshness to her voice that even Alena wouldn’t have expected, “Ah, um. I mean. Sorry,” Alena’s not sure if it’s meant for her or Nicholas.

“Is she gone yet?”

“No—”

“Does she know—that we’re—” Nicholas is *trying* to whisper, but appears very unaware of how thin the door is, “*running away?*”

“You kids thirsty?” Alena would pretend she didn’t hear so they don’t scatter as soon as her back’s turned.

“I thought you weren’t going to *buy* us drinks,” Oliva reiterates, oh-so-smart.

“Yeah,” Nicholas says through the door.

“They serve non-alcoholic drinks here,” Alena clarifies. It’s a peace offering.

“I’m fine,” Oliva says quickly.

“I’m a little thirsty,” Nicholas admits.

“Didn’t you have drinks in your *bag*?” Oliva sounds like a mom who’s mad that their kid didn’t pack their lunch right.

“... No,” Nicholas says reluctantly. There’s a light thud—possibly him leaning against the door.

“... I’ll have a Shirley Temple,” Oliva says decisively.

“Root beer.”

Alena walks away, acting as their waitress for the evening—if they end up disappearing, then fine, but trust is important to teens, so there’s a chance her gambit might work out.

“That guy you’ve been waiting for is here,” the bartender says as she approaches the counter again.

“Cool. I’ll have a Shirley Temple, and I know him, so I’ll take a root beer over to him too. He doesn’t drink much,” she says in a quick lie, buying the drinks, sweating with condensation. Thankfully, the bartender isn’t paid enough to care about why Alena is going to the back with these things. To her luck, the kids have started talking in her absence, and she hides herself behind a corner.

“When I said that you could come with me—I didn’t mean that you could get us in *trouble!*” Oliva says in whispering frustration, “Get out of there so we can *run!*”

“I-I, well,” there’s hesitation from Nicholas, “how do I know you’re not going to turn me in? Or tell anyone?”

*“Why would I do that?!”*

“You could have been lying to me.”

Olivia runs a hand down her face. Alena knows how she feels, dealing with people like this, “Why. Would I. Be. *Lying*. To you.”

“Because—we don’t speak for *three* years, and suddenly, you’re just *fine* with me coming with you? That’s suspicious.”

“So, you feel better hiding in a bar bathroom until someone makes you leave?”

“Besides, what do you care? You hate me.”

“I don’t hate you.”

“The whole school hates me.”

Olivia pauses. Like she’s really considering this, “... I think you think that because you’re lonely.”

Alena remembers what it was like to be that age—she never really felt like anyone *hated* her per-say, but it never felt like anyone was that interested in knowing her, either. Then again, she didn’t talk to many people.

“I have friends,” Nicholas says defensively, “I’m not the friendless loser you think I am. Just because I’m not buddy-buddy with the entire school like *you* are doesn’t mean—”

“Do you think I’m happy, Nicholas?”

“... Well, I mean... You’re *popular*, so...”

“If I was happy, then why would I be running away?”

That’s when Alena makes her move, “I got your drinks,” she hands the Shirley to Oliva.

“Thanks,” Oliva says, gently taking it and beginning to sip it.

“I can’t give you your root beer through the door,” Alena says, when Nicholas persists in being stubborn.

After some moments, he finally relents, creaking open the door like he expects a SWAT team to come tackle him. But no, it’s just Alena, standing with Oliva, waiting for him to take his own drink. He does so, slowly nursing it, “Are you... going to tell our parents?” he nervously asks, distrust in his eyes.

“No,” Alena responds plainly.

“Are you just *saying* that, so we don’t *think* you’ll tell our parents?” Clearly Nicholas is not convinced so easily.

“One: I barely know yours,” Alena pointed to Nicholas before gesturing to Oliva, “And your mother doesn’t pay me enough so I’m not telling her either.”

“I understand,” Oliva nods.

They both look like they’re expecting a lecture from her, so, fuck, Alena guesses she has to now, “I could tell you kids that ‘running away isn’t the answer’—but that’s easy to say from where I am now. I don’t know what’s best for either of you.”

“What—what do you mean?” Nicholas finally takes a proper gulp.

“I don’t know either of your situations, so I can’t judge whether you should run away or not,” Alena continues.

“So, you’re not—*concerned* about us?” Nicholas further inquires. This kid’s having second doubts; Alena’s not about to give him thirds.

“No, I mean that,” Alena looks at Oliva for a moment, “You both have your reasons. I won’t help you get to wherever you’re going, but I hope you get to wherever you need to go... Do either of you need anything else from here? They have food from the bar—”

“Thank you, but no,” Oliva says quickly, before Nicholas can possibly respond either, “we should be going,” she glances at the back door.

Alena opens it for them carefully, and to their luck, it’s not attached to any fire alarm.

“You’re helping us?” Oliva says it more like it’s an inquiry.

“Helping you would be getting you from point A to B,” Alena clarifies, “I’m just choosing not to get myself involved.”

Nicholas looks anxious to go out. Oliva takes one of Alena’s hands; it feels cold and wet from touching the glass. “Thank you.” She looks like she wants to give her a hug but is unsure as to how to go about it. Alena humors her by giving her an awkward side hug, Nicholas standing aside all the while, tapping his fingers on the glass. And then they’re off, running into the dark night illuminated by streetlights.

Alena came back around to the front—and immediately, she noticed the missing presence of her interviewee, “Where’d he go?”

“You were a no show,” The bartender explains, uncaring as always, “so they left.”

Alena feels like beating her head against the table and screaming. However, like most people in a civilized society, she instead opts to grit her teeth and mumble, “*Thanks for telling me.*”

This whole thing being a bust, she steps outside, checking her watch—*shit*. Bella’s little ‘favor’, that didn’t even amount to anything, has cost her valuable time with Malka. She taps her foot, knowing the decision she has to make now, and what she decides on, firmly, could be said to be selfish. The exact kind you’d scold the protagonist in a movie for. But she didn’t give a damn about what audience was judging her.

“Hey, Malka? I’m sorry, but something came up,” any longer in this town and she might lose it, “I can’t make it,” She hates it here, “I know—I said I’m sorry—*I know!* ... I love you. Bye. I’ll call when I get there,” she could talk to Malka when she needed to, come and visit. This job, however, was her fleeting meal ticket out of this town. And if she didn’t leave now, she’d miss it. The thing about flaws is that, they’re easy excuses. If you have anything great about yourself then that just means you must work more, because people want more of that.

As Alena caught the last bus going to the docks, standing to avoid grimy seats, she silently wondered how those kids were doing. It was hard to say whether she’d left an impact or become someone who should have done more.

## ESCAPE

Nicholas realized that they were still holding the glasses.

“We’re not returning them,” Oliva said, seeming to sense that he would ask.

The lights of the streets fade as they got further and further away from them. Nicholas considers stopping, but Oliva suddenly pulls at his hand, a wave of motion suddenly going through his body that almost makes him fall over. He didn’t think a cheerleader could be this strong.

“We’ll miss the ferry,” Oliva hurries him along.

Nicholas runs his tongue through his mouth. There’s a lot going through his mind right now. Namely, what happens when—*if*— they manage to make it onto the boat. He’d been so *decisive* when he came out here, yet as soon as he saw her, he just let her take over. He could tell her that he was getting cold feet. She’d probably find that to be a relief, with how determined she was.

The ground turns from pavement to wood as their feet hit the docks. Maybe what he’s afraid of is that this will be his last glimpse of her.

“There it is,” Oliva says, slightly winded, but nowhere as tired as he was. She gestures to the huge boat by the dock, “We made it.” He can see her slight smile through the darkness, “Come on.” She tugs him forward. He mindlessly agrees, but his feet feel like stones.

The water’s rippling, threatening to swallow them both. Will the ferry sink? It could. It might. Just like the one that—*that*—he feels his breath quicken, going through a multitude of scenarios, up to and including drowning. Nicholas became so afraid of that possibility that he quit the swim team. Something his therapist and counselor called a *phobia*.

He's feeling disoriented as he's being dragged forward, the world going far too slow and he's going way too fast-- *It's dark and he doesn't want to get on the ferry but if he doesn't then he'll never see Oliva ever again and she definitely hates him she thinks he's a huge annoyance and probably would be relieved if he drowned in the water where his dead dad is and if he doesn't get on then he'll be known as the bratty kid who ran away who just has problems and always causes them like how he caused his dad to die because he had to make his dad take the later ferry when he woke up late and he doesn't want to get on but if he doesn't—*

Without noticing, he chokes out a sob.

## FRIENDSHIP

“Nicholas? Nicholas—is everything okay?” It’s like he can’t hear her. And when he starts sobbing, she freezes. She can’t handle emotions openly displayed like this. Not unless they were subdued, enough that she could comfort her mother before she was knocked out for the night—just like Bella was tonight, too.

“Nic—Nicholas, it’s alright,” she’s not sure how much she means it. If she really cares he’s sobbing, or if she might want him to just *stop*. She’s aware she’s selfish, that she puts on a mask. Oliva’s aware that much of what she does isn’t real. The ferry’s horn sounds—she recalled her mother’s late-night rambles about ‘packing up and leaving this town’. As a child, this terrified Oliva beyond belief, that Bella might go through with it and drag poor Oliva with her. By now, however, she knew it to be like the growls of a dog backed into a corner. And then in the morning, everything’s peachy keen again. Sweet to the point of saturation. She didn’t *intend* to be there by tomorrow.

If she runs, she can still make it. She takes a step forward. Looking back, she can see Nicholas tightly holding that glass he stole from the bar. She’s not sure what she was thinking, letting him *tag along* like this. She knew he’d get in the way—she *knew* he wasn’t as committed to this as much as she was. If she ran, then, everything would be as it was before, and they would never have to think about each other ever again. Isn’t that what she wants?

Finally, the last horn goes out, and Oliva makes her decision. She lightly grabs Nicholas’s hand, dragging it away from what he’s holding. She’s unable to make out anything he’s saying. Impulsively, as the ferry pulls out of the harbor, she hugs him—gently, so he can

break out of it if he needs to. He doesn't but seems to sink into her instead. As someone who can lift a whole cheerleader, his weight surprises her instead.

“Hey—can you—can you breathe with me?” she swears she can make out a ‘sure’, “In,” breath in, “Out,” breath out. Nicholas doesn't follow her lead, “Come—come on,” she breaths in again—this time, he does it, taking a shaky breath in, like he might collapse, and—oh, hey, it might be a good idea to get him away from the water.

She lets him lean on her, and in the corner of her eye, she can see the boat sail off into the distance. Her escape, leaving. She can't muster any resentment at Nicholas, partially because she's not as sure as she thought about what would have happened if she got on. She really is a flake, isn't she?

Once they're far enough, she sits him down. He's still holding the glass, now as a comfort object.

“I'm—I'm sorry,” Nicholas manages to break out, sounding like he's moving through a wall of snot, “I made you-- I made you miss the boat,” he takes a big snuffle of snot—ew.

For lack of any tissues, she brings out the entire paper towel roll she'd packed.

“Thanks,” he says, wiping his face, “... How prepared *were* you?”

“Very.”

That gets a laugh out of Nicholas, before he looks down, guilty and somber again.

“It's fine,” she says, impulsively bringing out her own glass that she'd stashed into her backpack front pocket earlier, “I don't think it would have given me what I wanted.”

“Then... what *do* you want?”

She pauses, lifting the glass up, seeing the bright moon shine through it, exposing all the dirty stains that couldn't quite be washed out, before she brings it down to Nicholas's tear-strewn face, seeing it warp through the glass, "A friend."

## TAKEOUT

“Something fucked up, I can't come tonight,” Alena’s voice was on the line.

“... Oh,” Malka wasn’t entirely sure what she expected.

“Look, Malka, I'm sorry, I'm really fucking sorry, I should have considered--”

“No, it's okay, really.”

“No, it's not. I can tell you're upset.”

“I'm not upset.” Especially not over those steaks she pre-cooked, with the expectation that Alena’s schedule would have any room for her at all, a fool that she was.

“Whatever. I promise I'll come visit another time, okay? Or maybe you can visit me? I mean, I think you'd have the time for that, right?”

“I guess I will.”

“... Love you, Malka. I'm really sorry.”

“I love you too.”

Malka’s tempted to throw the steaks away, but for not wanting to waste food, she tucks the blackened disasters into the back of the fridge instead. She’s not entirely sure if she feels like eating tonight. When her phone buzzes again, she almost feels like ignoring it. To take a note from Alena’s own, crude language, *fuck* whatever plans she might want to make and then cancel last minute. She was too weak willed to ignore it, and without looking at the number, she answered.

“Malka? It’s Florence.”

“Ah,” Malka leaned on the kitchen table. Her anger faded into disappointment.

“I—” she can hear Florence breathing in through the phone, “I can’t find Nicholas.”

“What do you mean? Was he,” Malka was right in tune in thinking of the absolute worst conclusion, “was he *taken*?” Malka had always found it easier to care about the injustices of others more than her own problems—it makes them sting less to her.

“No. At least—god, I hope not—” the sound of someone else talking to her, “Vincent says he probably ran away... I’m a horrid mother.”

“You’re not.”

“I should have noticed earlier.”

“I couldn’t have.”

“Then what else *can* I do?”

“Your best.”

She can hear Florence break into a smaller sob over the phone, “Thank you.”

Malka finds herself driving all over town. First scouring the neighborhoods, and then in downtown. Despite having lived here, grown *up* here, she feels lost. There’s a pit growing in her stomach—what if he *was* taken? And she was in the middle of some small-town horror story? The thought of someone else being in a worse position soothes her own hurt, although it makes her a tad guilty to think like that. The steering wheel hurts against her blisters.

Once she’s exhausted much of the town—including several roads that she can’t quite tell *are* the same roads from how dark it is—she finds herself at the docks... where Alena had left,

and was likely on her way, to her next *opportunity*. Could Alena have not missed the ferry. For *her*? She knows this is thinking selfishly, but at this point, she can't care anymore—as Alena might say, let the thought police take her away.

Malka steps out of the car, making her way towards the water. Like she's a girl who should know better, she takes a rock and throws it into the water, watching it go *plop*. Alena usually saw people as connections, how to get ahead—and Malka was wondering just where she fit in that. Somewhat bitterly, she thinks she knows where she stands now. Malka has people more... to fill a void. Everyone has one, even the most fulfilled people. And no matter how empty it gets, she just fills it with more people, more connections.

She wants to scream, and almost does, when she sees two younger people on the docks, not alone this evening. She doesn't want to look crazy in front of anyone, but most adults must look like that to teenagers. It's only when she squints that she realizes who she recognizes, however—

“*NICHOLAS!*” she yells, kicking up small pebbles as she bolts to the docks, and her shoes *clonk clonk clonk* on the wood as, her mind having been occupied by horrid possible realities of what's happened to Florence's son, she grabs him, and then wraps her arms around him, hugging him tight, “Your mother is *so* worried—” she sees who he's with, “... Oliva?” there's a soft surprise in her voice.

“It was my idea,” Oliva immediately replies, before Malka can even ask just *what* that was.

“No, it was mine.”

“Don’t try and take the blame—you were following *me*,” Oliva’s sounding more like someone defending how much work they did on a group project. Ah, she takes that from her mother.

“But—I did it impulsively, so—” Nicholas hiccups a little. Poor boy.

“So,” Malka says, forming a conclusion of her own, “are you two on a *date*?” that’s her first instinct—perhaps, forbidden love, and, the tears, from the *drama* of it all, and—

“*No*,” they both say at the same time, like Malka had grown a second head. Not even humoring her.

“... Well,” Malka says, to cover up her own embarrassment, “it doesn’t matter *why* you’re here. It’s just good that you’re found.” She’s still touching Nicholas’s shoulder. He wiggles out of her grip, “If you don’t feel like going back right away,” Malka says, convincing herself that she’s doing a charity favor, “I have some food back home. If either of you are hungry,” someone has to eat those steaks. She’ll tell their mothers what happened with them later. For now, she feels selfish for wanting their company

Oliva pauses, seeming to consider it, and then she touches her stomach, perhaps realizing she really is hungry—she can see Nicholas psychically convey a ‘I told you so’, but over what, Malka can’t tell, “Sure.”

“I mean, I...” he looks at Oliva, then at Malka, “... Okay.”

“Oh, hon,” she tries wiping his face, but reminding her she isn’t his mother, he swats her away.

“I’m fine,” he proclaims. He lets Oliva hand him a paper towel instead.

As they climb into the back of her car, Malka feels hollow when she detects the silent bond between them. And she knows that, despite her hopes of dinner conversation, she will truly have to eat alone when they're both asleep by the time she gets home, leaning on each other.

The third number she calls after Florence's and Bella's (hers went to *voicemail*—she can't *believe* the woman is too busy to even want to know where her daughter is), is for takeout. Alena had a point. It was convenient when you felt too tired to even consider cooking.

## FOUND

There was the release of relief at the phone call Florence received— Nicholas had been found. He was sleeping safely with someone else, a friend of his, in the backseat of Malka’s car. She’d have to do *something* to thank that woman, a real guardian angel if there were any. What followed was instant guilt at not calling the police, but she didn’t want to raise too much of a fuss. Despite her previous efforts, her makeup’s a mess again.

“I’m sorry,” Vincent instantly speaks out, his hands balled up.

“It’s not your fault,” she tries as gently as possible to comfort him, just as she always has.

“If I hadn’t pushed him, he wouldn’t have *left*.”

“Nicholas is an impulsive person,” Florence feels terrible for speaking about her son so coldly, but Vincent appears validated that she spoke something he’s been thinking, “What matters is that he’s going to be okay,” she sighs, before something occurs to her, “What’s strange is that—this isn’t related at all, but...”

“But?” Vincent gently inquires.

“Remember when you were boys—around seven,” what is she talking about, they’re still boys, and even when they become adults, they will *always* be boys to her, “And you hid some vase pieces, because you were convinced the both of you were going to get in trouble for it?”

Vincent nods, and a small smile encourages her to continue.

“And then your father comes home—and he’s trying to fix the vase with you! Like I wouldn’t notice the glue.”

“Uh,” Vincent’s tone makes her worried that this wasn’t the right time to try and lighten things, but instead, he answers with, “neither of us actually broke it. It was dad—he knocked it over by accident, so... me and Nicholas tried fixing it with him. But when you came home—I didn’t mind taking the blame.”

Florence appears surprised, “Oh, honey, you didn’t—*have* to...” she gently touches his face.

“I didn’t want dad to get in trouble.”

“He’s—he *was* such a goofball that I could never get too mad at him.”

“Even if it was your favorite vase?”

“The *favorite* one was actually the one you and Nicholas broke when you played kickball in the house,” Florence retorted.

Vincent laughs a bit—something he should do more often—but then pauses, “I miss him,” Vincent says, which is to be expected, “Do you miss him too?”

She’s taken aback, “Of course I do.”

“You never talk about him.”

No one ever talked about him—and it’s only now that she realizes the silence that had always befallen the subject. No—no *wonder* Nicholas—and Vincent—did they both feel like they couldn’t *speak*? All she can think to say, as she’s wiping her eyes, is, “I’m sorry.”

Vincent hugs her tightly, “I am too.”

Florence runs her fingers through his hair like he was a little boy again, a moment of vulnerability her sons rarely let themselves have anymore.

It's when she gets upstairs to look for car keys that she's foolishly left in her home-office, that she sees the plate left by Nicholas's door.

"I baked them for Nicholas," Vincent says, also upstairs, going to bed at his mother's insistence, "so I was thinking we can save them for him."

Ah, well, if he insists, who is she to—

"But he probably wouldn't notice if you took one."

Florence does so. They're fluffy, with just the right amount of crunch to them. Nicholas doesn't know what he's missing.

## PLANS

*Please* believe Bella when she says that she had plans for tonight. She committed to getting a movie, picking out something she knew Oliva would love. She committed to snacks, popcorn and soda—so unhealthy, but a good movie night is amiss without them. She even committed to picking up Oliva! She’s such a good mother. Unlike Oliva’s father. He never calls. Always busy. She hides his cards like they’re something ugly.

The only thing Bella couldn’t commit to, was her own self-promise of not having a *little* bit of wine before they got to watching it. And then some wine after making a bowl of popcorn. She was on three glasses by the time the second bowl was done. She wasn’t sure where Oliva was—doing something upstairs in her room, maybe. And, well, if Oliva is going to be taking her sweet time, so would she, and she poured herself another glass.

One of the few joys she found in this ungrateful town was the sight of herself on TV to a limited audience. She always knew she deserved better, but poor *Bella Glass* was never even second best. All that hard work and you end up in a small town because your (ex) husband insists it’d be good for the kid. Oliva wouldn’t end up like she did. She’d pick a good school, in a good town, *with a good audience*. That child, that lovely, golden child was her ticket out of here.

As the hours went on, Bella had finished much of the bottle. And the funny thing is that she found it hard to stay awake. She tried getting up from the couch, but she fell back down again on it. It was a dimly lit living room, far too big for just two people, and her, a woman with smeared makeup barely paying attention to herself on TV. Many nights ended up this way.

There were the sounds of footsteps coming downstairs soft, but Bella can still detect them, “*Oleeva?*” her unknowingly slurred voice called out. But the door shut, and Bella found

herself giving into unconsciousness. Her last thought, before she really passed out, was where her daughter might be.

## LEAVING: THORPES FALLS

Despite any and all hitches, Alena got on the ferry. Everything went as planned, and Alena couldn't help but feel strangely disappointed, like the snow day that never came. The ferry *really* couldn't have had any hiccups or anything, could it? Which is fine, exactly what she wants. She really needs this job.

She looks back on Thorpes Falls as the boat pulls out, the moon's reflection rippling on the water, and almost seeming to shine on the town, spotlighting it. She recalled seeing a picture of the aforementioned *falls* of Thorpes Falls—before it became fallsless—in a museum once. How huge and majestic it was, water cascading down. She wasn't sure what to feel—grief, maybe, for something you can never see in person. Did they hesitate? Knowing what they were going to destroy? No one else would have believed there was even a waterfall except for pictures in a museum to prove otherwise?

That's why she was always so worried about staying stuck there—how many things has she already missed by staying in one place? Life isn't always about compromises, sometimes, it's a hard choice, yes or no, and the ones that remain unchanging prove to be the hardest. And, besides, they really needed the dam, or, well, the damn place would have flooded over.

The ferry pulls into the next town, one meant for traveling. She can still see a vague glimpse of the town behind her. She can't make out where Malka's house might be from here. Things at sea inevitably tend to return to shore.

“Are you lost?” she hears someone ask her, mistaking her staring at sea for confusion.

She pauses, “I don't know.”

WRITING THORPES FALLS: A CRAFT ESSAY

While an arduous process with many twists and turns, both physically and mentally, I've found writing Thorpes Falls to be extremely rewarding, and it's taught me immensely about my own writing process. What I would say surprised me the most is how much my own piece took shape before my eyes as I was writing it... I would compare it to sculpting with clay. I have the raw material in front of me—the outlines—but as I spin the wheel, I let my impulse and instinct take over, and change things as necessary for what the characters will want to do. The start was unclear, but as I continued working, my vision became more apparent.

I was initially very excited. However, what also came was the hardest part: *Starting*. There are always those nerves of how to grab your reader, how to intrigue them. I've found that once I *can* start, then I can also get going, and not stop until I finish. Before that point, however, is the agonizing process of what sentence I should begin with. The advice given in *Several Short Sentences about Writing*, "How do you begin to write? Look for a sentence that interests you" (100 Klinkenborg). I agree with this advice; it's like planting. Once you have a seed, then something can begin to truly sprout.

Once I was finally off, that's when I started to learn more about my characters. I find that writing, especially in the first draft process, is much like a conversation: the more I write, the more I find out about these characters, as they go from ideas to fully realized people with their own habits, gestures, dreams, motivations... and other necessary things. The flip side to this, is what to show the reader of this. You tell too much, and it goes against the classic advice of *show don't tell*, a cardinal sin in the writing world (for the most part, everything has its exceptions), but you write too little, and the reader is confused, wondering why they should even care about them. As King states in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, "I had four problems with what I'd

## Writing Thorpes Falls

written. First and least important was the fact that the story didn't move me emotionally. Second and slightly more important was the fact that I didn't much like the lead character." (76 King). Alena is very much an unlikable character, but unlike King, I found that I liked her precisely because she wasn't one. Then again, I find that I strive to make at least *one* thing the reader would be annoyed about in every character I make. Perhaps this may turn some readers off, but, to me, it should make the reader so frustrated that they should 'get over yourself! That problem is so easily fixed if you talk to them!', or something to that equivalent. So then, they look at their own problems perhaps, and realize that... if they're yelling at a character to fix their problems, then perhaps their own aren't that unfixable. I'm likely just over-speculating, however. I do find immense value in a properly crafted unlikable character. There's a fine art to it, as there is in everything regarding writing.

Yet another struggle I had in doing the writing was transitions—horrible, horrible, *transitions*. There are so many scenes in my head that I wanted to translate to the page—and I did, don't you worry, but the problem comes in how to transfer a character from point A to point B. If you use your best scenes without buildup, then why even have them there? The reader needs to get invested, and that process can be agonizing—did I do enough? Did I *not* do enough? Will the reader care enough? Is it a slog? Does it feel too fast? The process is so much that someone might question why I didn't just take the 'easier' path of an academic paper, that, at least, deals in absolutes—how things connect. Writing, while similar, is such a gut instinct that, even in this craft essay, I find it hard to explain the exact method in how I do it. I can lay it out, but even following my 'instructions', someone will likely come to a different conclusion. That's the exciting—and troubling—thing about art. As King also states, "But you can overdo the speed thing. Move too fast and you risk leaving the reader behind, either by confusion or wearing

## Writing Thorpes Falls

him/her out” (221 King). Pacing feels like a constant catch-22 in free fall, and only when you hit the ground do you know if you pulled out your parachute at the right time (thankfully, unlike most skydivers who make such a fatal mistake, writers can usually try again and again. But failing in that process feels like you still broke a bone regardless).

Characters also often change more than you’d really *like*, or they’ll do things you didn’t really *want* them to do, but you find that forcing them to do what you originally wanted them to do is as easy as getting a toddler to calm down when they’re having a tantrum. I’ve never gotten the perspective of if a story isn’t going how you want it to, you stop writing. I find that’s the best part, despite how distressing it may be. If you find the road changes as you drive, you don’t just turn back, you keep driving. The story’s intentions may change, and I’m completely fine with that... granted, I acknowledge it may be a problem if I’m writing for a specific audience, but as of now, my audience is still who I’m trying to find. As said in “When Daughters Leave: Essay writing and the fugitive subject” by Gunn and Low, “This is how and what a writer realizes about language and essays – how that one subject is already elusive, already gone, and the other, in flight behind her, in a state of perpetual question as she searches and mourns. Writing here as a pursuit played out in the infinitive clause: to hunt down, to fill the space the subject has left in her wake.... Always just out of reach. As we are finding now in this essay. And beautifully so”” (Gunn and Low). Writing, for me, is chasing a goal that may always be out of my reach. I know that I will never write exactly what is in my head—but it’s not perfection that I’m after, but rather, hoping to craft something out of parts that I create, and things that I take from others.

Speaking of parts, the more I write, the more I also revise as I go—there’s an infamous scene in Tom and Jerry, where Tom is on a train and is hurriedly putting down tracks in front of a train as it moves—that’s how writing feels. Partially planning, but really, I’m just putting down

## Writing Thorpes Falls

these tracks as I go. And as I write, I'll find that, of course, my plans are disrupted. Sometimes, parts will still work, and I won't have to throw them out—but I will have to place them elsewhere or reuse them in another way. One part that I found myself retooling was the *Trouble* section, wherein I initially thought I would reuse my original story titled, well, *Trouble*, with its unique prose (use of second person and dialogue without tags) and all. However, what I realized is that having an entirely new character give their take of events—while interesting—was completely unnecessary with how long this story was getting. Perhaps in a novel, but here? I needed to utilize my space better. Thus, it became a part focused on Alena as she interacts with Nicholas and Oliva, almost changing completely, but some core of it remained. Again, taking a note from *When Daughters Leave*, ““And it shouldn't be so hard... should it? Writing an essay isn't necessarily hard, compositional skills are deeply embedded within the academy's activities after all – but these two writers here want to write differently. Two “I”s who are not a “we” or an “us”” (Gunn and Low). While talking about essay writing, I still find this immensely compelling and applicable to fiction writing. Perspective can affect so much in writing. Two characters can express their ‘I’s *so* differently.

Speaking of revisions, they can be both tedious and hard. Tedious because, often, I won't catch grammatical errors that I've made within the text. It's never been my strong suit—dialogue is my lifeblood, for example, yet even now I get stuck on how dialogue tags work. I have the hang of it, perhaps. That's what proofreaders are for, you would think. And hard because, when looking at the bigger picture among smaller parts, you start to see what cogs don't work—and it becomes maddening, it becomes hell, to want to fix every single piece. Even things I have decided are their ‘final’ version I find myself agonizing over, because why, god, I could have done something so much different here. But I learn to pick myself up and move on, as we

## Writing Thorpes Falls

all do. I've found that part of being a writer—a good writer—is getting over this absolutely agonizing process. Margaret Atwood in *Negotiating with the Dead* relates, “However, as time passed, my initial grandiose but cloudy visions dispersed, leaving a kind of daunted blankness. It was like finding yourself in a great library as a young writer and gazing around at the thousands of books in it, and wondering if you really have anything of value to add.” (xvi, Atwood).

Revision partially proves to be so daunting because, as you're fixing your previous mistakes, the sinking paranoia forms that perhaps you're making it worse, or, you may be running a lost race in trying to fix something that was doomed from the beginning—and it's so funny that you usually only realize a bad idea is really *bad* when you're in the deepest throes of it.

Something I also didn't do as much as I perhaps *should* have is expanding on the town more—my own adviser suggested that, in describing more of the environment; where they live, what the town is like, how it's weathered... the various characteristics of what makes a place special. And I agree, since an environment can be a character itself—especially in relation to how a character is changed by it, and how a character can change it. It's one of my biggest weak points. Sometimes I get to the point of where *I'm* able to visualize where a character is, but I forget that the reader isn't the sort that can read minds as well as they can text and thus, the character is presumably either in a white void or somewhere else just as generic. I love exploring characters, but I need to remind myself that part of that is showing where—and how—they live. To take a scene from *The Thing Around Your Neck*, “Neil took the card from Josh. “You know, Josh,” he said, giving the card back, “it's very sweet of you to give this to Kamara, but Kamara is your nanny and your friend, and this was for family” (Adichie 91). These sentences are such wonderful displays of character that I can't help but find myself inspired by them—a well described environment is wonderful, but so are character gestures, and the myriad of ways you

## Writing Thorpes Falls

can interpret them. While a bad interpretation is the bane of every writer, I'm sure, that's also part of the fun of it. Extrapolating from a text, to the meat, to the bone, to the marrow—and then re-constructing it into a new Frankenstein creature altogether.

Something else that I've had to, unfortunately, teach myself, is to write more in bits rather than chunks—I am ever the procrastinator, as most writers are. The problem *isn't* just getting myself to write—often I just need to make myself do it, and then it becomes a process of not stopping until the job is done. It's also that as a stress reaction, I tend to... shut down. I won't do anything for days—and as the pressure and work piles on, so does the procrastination, until I'm staring at a blank page at two A.M. and furiously writing until at least six. Given that I was able to write at least sixty pages within around six to seven weeks, not including all the pre-writing I did to get to that point, I believe I've since gotten much better in writing large chunks at once. Of course, I'm still somewhat bad at pacing myself, but I'll get better with more experience and confidence. Atwood herself contemplates just *what* defines a writer:

And are their views of any comfort? And has the concept of the writer qua writer, as expounded by (of course) writers, changed at all over the years? And what exactly do we mean when we say a writer? What sort of creature do we have in mind? Is the writer the unacknowledged legislator of the world, as Shelley so graciously proclaimed, or is he one of Carlyle's blimp-like Great Men, or is he the sniveling neurotic wreck and ineffectual weenie so beloved of his contemporary biographers? (xviii Atwood)

The writer is a word tossed with such confidence that it makes other writers despair at what they (think) they will never be, and then also said with such derision that they curse the gift they've chosen to make a career out of—is it any wonder that the procrastination happens?

## Writing Thorpes Falls

I am very proud of myself for the simple, yet magnificent advancement that I've recently made with my writing: outlines. Dear god, where have they been all my life. Why did I go so, so long in just writing what came to mind? 'But don't most writers do that?' In a sense, yes, maybe, perhaps that's their process, but I find that outlining lets me see problems *as* they're happening. By the time I get it down on the page, I've worked out at least half of the kinks. If you were to see my outlining process, you'd see that I have several sections (that I never fill out, usually, even though I swear that I will), but the majority of what's there is bullet points of events. A general guideline for how it *should* be. And it's always funny to me, like how a big dog will unexpectedly be sweet and yet a small dog will think it's the biggest of wolves, that what I believe will be a short scene suddenly demands that it move from the small containment of a drinking glass to the berth of an ocean, but then what I thought would be a community swimming pool actually only has enough water to fill a kiddie pool. And always, I never feel the need to unnecessarily fluff anything out—perhaps, maybe, cut out things if they're not working, but unless it causes a major problem, I usually never anything bigger than a sentence or two (that I tend to put elsewhere anyway). Once I have the ideas down, the plot beats that I want, and I feel absolutely *need* to be expressed at *all* costs, the writing itself will be as big as it needs to be. As stated in *When Daughters Leave*:

Go after a thing that's barely delineated, that has already left the room and find another kind of writing in its wake. I can do that. Find a way of writing an essay uncoupled from "opinion" or "argument" or "belief" or "reading" – ideas that are integral to so many conventional essays on literature – and find instead another modus operandi that will let a new subject rise up in its place. Perhaps I can do this in this very text written by two teachers of the essay, two "I"s, who

## Writing Thorpes Falls

fashion or find the shape within it, to follow a thread... Going after the subject, their subjects in this instance, their daughters, who have gone. (Gunn and Low)

Again, while mainly about essays, this too is applicable to the art of writing. Perhaps, after all, all writing is just ideas constrained by the containers we give them. How many times have you seen a child's writing, in all its indelicate, rough form, but the ideas are still there? How many stories are better written by a child because they have no idea what restrictions even are, until we tell them, and they're forever bound to them like a contract? It's like a see-saw—freedom, but for lack of skill to express it, and by the time they have skill, they have eaten the apple of knowing what 'bad art' is, and thus, that ruins their confidence forever.

Finally, there was the horrid, horrid, *absolutely horrid* agony of worrying over deadlines, and then if I had enough material, and then the realization that I was suddenly over fifty pages, and I'm going to sixty, and I will scream if I find myself propelled towards seventy and past eighty (thankfully, that didn't happen. It's around sixty pages). I find working within page numbers difficult. Many of my average pieces of late can range from ten to twenty pages—but I can't just *promise* that I'll produce something exactly ten pages. I had a professor once who made us do that. I'm sure the lesson was valuable, but I found the constraints awful. Deadlines are more understandable—in a perfect world we'd have endless time, but we are *so* far from that,

There's an absence too of the concrete subject, the narrating persona – a question about agency in writing? What does this "I" signify? Absent presence or present absence. To write with an "I" is to use that vertical stroke that cancels and restitutes, that suggests not certainty of belief or position, or point of view but a fracturing present, slipping away at the same time. Not erased but under erasure,

## Writing Thorpes Falls

yet full of passion and desire still... “Yes, I can do that”, I said... “And I can do that”, I said. (Gunn and Low)

Overall, maybe the reason why a narrator can seem bossy sometimes, is that they’re under just as many constraints as the characters are. I’m very happy to have this done with—as are all writers when they finish a project—but proud to have something finished. It’s not perfect, no piece of writing is, but regardless, it’s my child, and I love it for what it is, flaws and all. I’ve written things nearly of this length before, but never actually published in such a professional setting before. It’s surreal to think that this comes so easy to me, yet the hard part is putting it all on paper. I see *Thorpes Falls* as an invaluable steppingstone on my journey as a writer.

## Bibliography

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Thing around Your Neck*. Fourth Estate, 2009.

Adichie's book is a collection of short stories that focuses on the relationships of people, and how they live in Africa and the United States. As someone who mainly focuses on characters within their writing, I find how Adichie writes characters reacting off one another fascinating. How a character feels about another can be just as, if not more, telling than how the character views themselves. It reveals hidden depths that may not have been seen by the characters themselves.

Adjei-Brenyah, Nana Kwame. *Friday Black*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.

Adjei-Brenyah's book has several surreal, yet true to life stories focusing on black protagonists. Within my own writing, I've found myself thinking about the diversity of my own protagonists, and how I can broaden them—so that I might represent more than just myself and connect with more readers and their experiences. I also want my stories to resonate with readers, no matter how farcical the situations may become; if a reader has identified a part of themselves in something I've written, then I know I've written a good piece.

Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New ed.]. ed., Viking Press, 1960.

Anderson's book is a tale of several individuals connected by several elements, primarily the town that they all live within. For my project, I attempted to do something similar, writing about a small town where the characters, one way or another, are at least all vaguely connected to one another. As someone who's grown up in a small town, I've always found it fascinating how the town itself can begin to become character on own, perhaps even independent of its citizens. I also find that a small town is an excellent setting to world build in—it's far more contained than, say, a city would be.

Atwood, Margaret. *Moral Disorder: and Other Stories*. First Anchor Books ed., Anchor Books, 2008.

Atwood's book focuses on short stories detailing moments in the life of a woman—from her experiences as a girl to those of when she's an adult. The transitions from the past to the future and vice versa are seamless, with exactly the tone that easily indicates whether the narrator is focusing on an event from her past or talking about it in the far future with her sister. This is also another book that influenced me to make the short stories within my thesis far more closely connected than just in theme.

Atwood, Margaret. *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Atwood's book on writing comes across as extremely personal and relatable to me, as someone who's a developing writer herself. I find it inspiring that, even someone as renowned as Atwood still has nerves, the ever-common fear that someone will see you as

a ‘fraud’ and strike you where you stand. Her advice comes off as a story in itself—one of growth, and finding not just how *to* write a story, but how *you* will write a story.

Atwood, Margaret. *Stone Mattress: Nine Tales*. First American ed., Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2014.

Atwood’s book is both mundane and fantastical—the situations may have elements of the fantastical, but the way that the characters are grounded and true to life gives them a realistic quality. My writing has been influenced in that I also want my characters to ‘come to life’ in the same sense, no matter how unrealistic the situation becomes. The stories are also perfect in terms of how they get the message across with their length—enough to leave the reader imagining more, but not *needing* more in order to get what the story was attempting to tell.

Atwood, Margaret. *Wilderness Tips*. 1st ed., Doubleday, 1991.

This is another collection of Atwood’s that has stories within it that show some of her best qualities—such as her attention to detail about the characteristics of characters without necessarily spelling out for the reader what their intentions are. In my own writing, I always seek to try and strike a balance between showing the reader what a character is like and giving them enough hints to come to their own conclusions.

Berlin, Lucia, et al. *A Manual for Cleaning Women: Selected Stories*. First ed., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Berlin’s stories mainly focus on the people who slip through the cracks—the cleaning women and others who we don’t think of when we go about our life. There are many people who take care of things, and then we never take care to think of how they live their lives after they’re gone. I find the way Berlin switches narratives seamlessly to be fascinating—in every story that I’ve read, it always felt like a different character was talking to the reader. The way in which she plays with prose is also interesting, in that all stories use first person narration.

Díaz, Junot. *This Is How You Lose Her*. Riverhead Books, 2012.

Díaz’s short stories focus on the protagonist’s failing relationships with various women. What I find interesting is how deep the book is with the current narrator’s perspective—and, for a moment, I feel compelled to take what they’re saying at face value, before remembering that they, like most people, are also biased in their own ways towards their mistakes. In a sense, I feel that it is harder to make a character who genuinely believes what they’re saying because it’s what’s in their head, rather than what’s from the narrative itself.

Drake, Monica. *The Folly of Loving Life: Stories*. Future Tense Books, 2016.

All of Drake’s stories have intricate details within them that bring the characters to life—details that could easily be taken out and still have the story be understood, but without them, they would be irrevocably changed. As I was reading, I found myself

contemplating what details I should insert within my own stories. Details that, seemingly, have no point, but everyone has little things about them that seem to serve no purpose other than they're part of what makes us human—and that's what I strive to do, make my characters have the illusion of being human.

Gun, Kirsty and Low, Gaol. "When Daughters Leave: Essay writing and the fugitive subject." *Writing in Practice The Journal of Creative Writing Research*, vol. 5, 2019.

Gun and Low's essay focuses about daughters leaving home in literature, particularly in mythology and their own experiences, and in how the "I" pronoun tends to be used in essay writing and literature. This essay made me think on how I use third person in my own work, and how a transition from third to second or first would change the entire impact that it has on the reader, intentionally and unintentionally. I also found it profound in how, in of itself, writing—both fiction and nonfiction—tends to be a sort of confessional for the author.

Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22, a Novel*. Simon and Schuster, 1961.

Heller's book is one of two extremes: showcasing ridiculously humorous situations that grow to highlight the sobering reality of war-time horror, and the absurdity of bureaucratic systems. With my own writing, I have grown to use humor and farcical situations as a sort of light to contrast against the dark scenarios my characters find themselves in. After all, humor and tragedy are the same coin—a situation that's 'funny' in how absurd it is can quickly become horrifying once the light is shown in another place.

Klinkenborg, Verlyn. *Several Short Sentences about Writing*. 1st ed., Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

Klinkenborg's book contains several pieces of writing advice that serve to help a writer make their writing more concise and analyze why they use certain sentences the way they do. I've personally found this book very helpful in that Klinkenborg encourages questioning what you've learned about writing—I value much of the advice that I've gotten with my classes, but to really internalize it, one must ask how it *helps* their writing, rather than just blindly applying it.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: a Memoir of the Craft*. Scribner, 2000.

King's book is both a memoir and a book on the craft of writing, and how it intertwines with his own life. I personally find that his advice is magnified with his own experience—this isn't just an advice book on how you should exactly be a writer, but rather, his own telling of how his writing career has developed. I find it to be realistic, but not overly cynical or cruel in how he tells his own experiences within the industry. There's something admirable in how vulnerable he let himself be in showing some of his harsher experiences, and I think that's an extremely important part of a writer: their ability to be vulnerable to the reader, so that the reader too can feel like they can let their walls down within the story.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999.

Lahiri's stories are heavily character focused, much of the events propelled by how the characters react—and create—the situations that they find themselves in. In my own writing, I mainly focus on my characters for a source of where the story should go—and I've found inspiration within this book in terms of how I can make that compelling and engaging to the reader. Lahiri's book also showed me that you can make a conflict interesting without making it extremely explosive, as many other western stories tend to do.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. 1st Anchor books ed., Anchor Books, 1995.

Lamott's book is partially writing advice, and a memoir on her life as it's influenced her writing. Admittedly, I don't agree with everything in this book, but it's important to have differing viewpoints on writing, so that even if something doesn't work for you, what does resonates so much more strongly. I also found myself relating to her various experiences; I've found that as I've continued to write, I've had to get bolder in putting my soul onto the page. Trying to write something that I'm not has never worked out.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories*. Graywolf Press, 2017.

Machado's book is a series of short stories that focus on magical realism. What's fascinating is that, despite each of the stories being very fantastical, there's also a relatable human element to every one of them that keeps them grounded. The way that this influences my stories is that, while comparatively more mundane, it's these human elements that I want to incorporate into my own stories. No matter how different the characters might be from the reader, that they can still relate to them regardless.

Saunders, George. *Tenth of December: Stories*. Random House trade paperback ed., Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2013.

Saunders's book is a collection of his stories from several places in which they were originally published. The bulk of the narrative of these stories is spent within characters heads as they process what's happening around them—not entirely stream of consciousness, but it would be impossible to separate the way the story is told from these characters' perspectives. It made me contemplate how my own characters' feelings, experiences, and biases might affect how a closed narrative story is told.

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five, or, The Children's Crusade: a Duty-Dance with Death*. Twenty fifth anniversary ed., Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1994.

Vonnegut's book is about a man who becomes 'unstuck in time' and experiences his life in unsynchronized order. Initially when I had first read it, the book hadn't clicked with me, until I started experimenting with how characters experience time myself, and it all came together—I believe that on some level, this book has been influential in terms of how I view a character's timestream. There is the linear way you understand a character

in your notes, the simple A to B, and then there's how the reader will experience them—what portions you want to come first, and what comes last, usually never best from first to last.

Yamashita, Karen Tei, and Foster, Sesshu. *Tropic of Orange*. Coffee House Press, 2017.

Yamashita's book takes place in the urban environment of L.A. as the real and the fantastical blend together. This is another book that inspired me to write my characters within more urban settings—a city can be a character in of itself, shaped by the people that live there, and vice versa. I've also found it fascinating in how the book plays with space and time—The way Yamashita has mastered it has made me want to also experiment with showing characters in different time periods in their life; more often than not, the same character can prove to be a different one in even just a short time span.