

The Year of the Dahlia

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Part 1: Harvest

Part 2: Rotten

Part 3: Dormant

Part 4: Spring

Epilogue: Bloom

(This excerpt includes the first 20 pages. Full book is 292 pages/76,000 words.)

Part 1: Harvest

Winnie Morin's Freewrite Workshop #1

Monthaven Continuing Education Center

Prompt: Describe a scene from your neighborhood.

They bloom at the very end of summer, when August has become tiresome and hot. Everything else in the garden is long gone. With autumn just around the corner, the last thing you expect is a field full of bright blossoms in every color. But that's the dahlias.

They grow on tall, strong stalks. The dirt beneath them is rich, dark, and heaped into rows. Some of the flowers are tiny pom-poms while others are the size of dinner plates. My neighbors make bouquets out of the pinks and purples or sometimes fall colors like yellow, orange, or burnt umber. My favorite is made entirely of white.

The flower petals are soft, like the cheeks of a young child. The smell is pure green. If color had a scent, it would be the smell of dahlia stalks.

My favorite thing about autumn is these plants. I love the shocking bright blooms that come almost too late and flower against a bright-blue sky as the days shorten, their colors bursting in sharp contrast to everything else around. In the woods, yellow leaves fall from deciduous trees. In the yard, the grass turns brown. When I step outside in the morning, the wind picks up and turns chilly.

Yet still, the dahlias bloom. They burst, untwist, show off. They explode.

The last flowers of the year.

Olive's Journal, September

It's my birthday. I should be happy, but I'm not.

We moved to this stupid house in the middle of a dumb town called Selkah, and worst of all, my mom rented a house at the end of a dirt road, near a river, with one of the pastures already full of mud. Our landlord says the front yard is going to be flooded all winter. There are no other houses nearby, and I hate the school. So yeah, it sucks.

This morning, I grabbed my winter coat off the porch—it's only September but already frickin' cold—and walked out to the horse barn to throw hay before school, and that's when I saw it. A tangle of balloons halfway up one of the huge evergreens that lives in this crappy place. One balloon was a pink heart. A silver one said *Happy Birthday*. I knew right away who they were from.

My sister, Sophie.

She's gone, but she leaves these signs everywhere. I turned and ran back into the house.

"Mom! Sophie's here again."

She smiled, not looking surprised, holding her coffee mug. Her fingers shook a little as she pulled on mud boots to follow me out. We walked down the gravel drive to the barn, and I pointed.

"Well... would you look at that," she said. "I guess she's wishing you a happy birthday. Now you can cheer up and get on with your goddamn day."

She put her arm around me. It's funny with my mom. Her frustration and swearing, then moments of forced love—totally surprising. I've gotten used to it the last six months. Since

Sophie died.

“Well, if you want me to get on with it, why don’t you take me to school?” I snapped back. I’m supposed to take the bus, but if she drives me it’s way faster.

Since it’s my birthday, she agreed. After the horses were fed—the three muddy, lonely horses from Grand Junction, Colorado, where we moved from—she sat in our navy truck waiting for me. Exhaust poured over the wet grass, and the bright tip of her cigarette poked out of her window. I walked toward the truck, then stopped and turned back to see the balloons one more time. “Thanks, Sophie,” I whispered. “I’ll try harder.”

Winnie's Journal, September

My goal: *write a novel*. There. I wrote it down.

And I like to think, when my book is done, that I'll be interviewed by Terry Gross on NPR. I just love her and how she always has famous writers or actors and asks them probing questions about their creative pursuits and process.

She'll say, *You're listening to Terry Gross. I'm here with debut author Winnie Morin, who has crafted a story that's so unbelievable and heartwarmin, it's been a New York Times bestseller for twelve weeks. It conquers topics that we all feel deeply, but it's original in a beautiful, unconventional way.* And then she'll turn the microphone to me (or do they do it all over the phone?), and I'll say, with my voice confident and clear, not shaky and hoarse and old-sounding, like it actually is, that the story was always inside me and I just needed the right time for it to come out.

But that's impossible. The truth is, I'm afraid there's no story inside me. Everything I write ends up being a thinly veiled story about my own experience, and most of it just annoys me when I actually find the motivation to dig my old work up and reread it.

Now, I'm *so* over it. I want to write something that *isn't* real! I think I need to write fiction to break out of the constraints of my own mind. I want to *be* someone different, to see the world through new eyes. It's like... I want to be reborn.

Is that even possible?

I mean, I've been over and over myself, examining my thoughts and feelings from every angle. From all the maudlin nature poetry I wrote when I had my first job out of college (insert:

ferns and filtered sun, road trips with an old boyfriend, towns I'd like to forget) to the early morning writing, which mostly included crappy, scattered journaling when I had Evan and Violet, almost two decades ago (insert: diapers, lack of sleep, no time for myself, pity party, etc) to the *Start Eating for Good!* pieces (SEG for short)—my blog about healthy vegetarian eating. With a “Feeding Your Picky Toddler” emphasis, of course.

Add to that some miscellaneous personal reflections about college and experimental drugs at certain parties and a memoir about my short stint as a camp counselor and a crush on the camp director... *oh God*, it just goes on and on.

Looking back, I realize so much time has passed since I've written all those personal pieces. My kids, Evan and Violet, have moved out; they're living their own lives. Evan's at his cooking school in LA, and they keep him so busy. I feel like he hardly has time to call. Or maybe he just has other things on his mind. And Violet is starting her second year in Chicago at Northwestern, premed, so it seems like she's constantly studying, and when we do talk, I'm just talking her off the ledge. So much stress for her age!

My fiftieth birthday is coming up in just a few short years. How did time move so quickly? It all seems a little hopeless. Or somehow, just too late.

I need to get *unreal*. Away from my own thoughts. Into a new scene.

I need to practice, right? I'll practice every day. Maybe I should start small. Do I need an outline? Do I need to pick a genre? Maybe get into young adult fiction? That's hot right now, I've heard. Or murder and crime? Mystery? My mom... she's not with us anymore... but her genre was children's books. She wrote piles of them, and when she was in her sixties she finally got a few published. She was the one who always supported me. She said I was meant to write and to *just keep at it. It's not easy, Winnie, but keep trying.*

Sounds like a tall order. And I don't mean the size of my latte. Though I'll definitely be drinking a latte during most of my future writing sessions, if I can arrange that. My favorite drink right now isn't even a latte, it's called "London Fog"—Earl Grey with steamed milk and vanilla. Highly overpriced.

Terry Gross, I'll get there someday. I know you want me on your radio show, talking about my finished product—the amazing fictional narrative I somehow pulled out of myself. I have a feeling someone wants to hear what I have to say.

I just don't know how to begin.

Mike's Journal, September

I'm an eighth grader at Elliot Middle.

Part of our assignment this year in English is to keep a writing journal. Our teacher, Ms. Morin, explained it on the first day in her strange accent—she's Canadian, I think? She gave us all a spiral notebook, 300 pages. There were three colors: blue, green, and black. I got black. Then she said we'll be using them in class to freewrite every day for fifteen minutes but that we should also keep them with us all the time and write at home or whenever we feel like. It's called journaling, she said, but also that we could think of it as a diary. And it's private.

I've never had a diary before, and it's been a little weird. It's like talking to myself. I've also never had a teacher give me such an easy assignment. It's not hard to just write my thoughts and stuff. It's also cool because she said she won't even read what we write, she'll just call each student up every Friday and flip through our notebooks to make sure we're not repeating, like, the same word. Which made me think of that movie, *The Shining*, where Jack types over and over again: *all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy*. God, that's a great movie. And book. I read the book first, because the book is usually better than the movie.

There's one other person in my class who loves Stephen King.

Olive. She's new this year, and I've never met anyone like her. She's quiet and serious and I can already tell that she's like a totally straight-A student. When she gets called on, she always knows the answer, and she talks with this strange confidence. I also have math with her, and she's in the most advanced algebra group. She seems older than the rest of us, maybe because she's so quiet and keeps to herself? But she also looks pretty young. She wears black clothes every day and has blonde hair, which she keeps tucked under her hat. Her eyes are light

blue. So light that it's like that lightest-blue crayon in the pack. Or like the color of water in the river where it's shallow. I think she rides the same school bus as me. I'm going to look for her today. Maybe I watch which direction she walks after school.

Anyway, she doesn't even know who I am, I don't think, except for this thing that happened last week. We had an assignment in class where we had to write down one of our favorite books and a few notes about why, and me and Olive both had Stephen King books. We were the *only* ones. I had *The Shining*, and she had *Carrie*. After class we walked out together and talked. It went like this:

Me: Oh, so, hi. Are you new here?

Olive: Yeah. Should I read The Shining?

Me: What?

Olive: Is it good? Should I read it?

Me: Uh, yeah.

And that was it. It wasn't the most eloquent (that word is from my vocab list) talk in eighth grade so far, but she looked at me for a second. And she's going to read *The Shining*. At least she asked me about it, so I think she will. I decided I definitely need to get a copy of *Carrie*. And then next time we talk I can tell her I'm reading it.

The problem is, I haven't gotten to the town library yet cause my dad never has time to take me. Our school library doesn't have *any* Stephen King. So, when I finally get the book I'm gonna have to totally plow through it. Maybe I could pull a few all-nighters. It'll be worth it, probably. It's so crazy that old books are still so good. I mean, these books are from, like, the '80s, and now it's almost the year 2000 (well, 1996). Everyone else in class is reading stuff like Judy Blume and *The Baby-Sitters Club*. Kids' books. Stephen King is the real deal.

But I'm not scared. I can totally handle it...

Okay, class writing time's up. More soon.

The Hunter

He's ready to bleach the doe's skull.

He'll boil it for hours in his big, cast-iron pot. It's the last piece of the animal. He's skinned and butchered the carcass, taking what he can use for summer sausage or jerky and a few steaks, then he'll bury the rest behind the shed under heavy flagstones so the dogs can't get at it.

This feels different. He's never killed a doe before. The bucks, with their long, graceful antlers (two, three, four, or even once, a five-point) are stark white and hang perfectly in the big showcase room downstairs. This one is markedly different. Every bone is more feminine, every step of putting the animal to rest has felt more intimate. He looks down at his hands, which were covered in her blood just a few hours ago, and he feels sadness. The doe was a mother with a fawn; he saw it off in the brush before the shot that did her in. Maxy's shot. But he didn't have a choice. He had to protect his crop, protect his own family.

He sends a brief prayer to God or the universe or maybe his wife's dead mother, really to whomever or whatever's listening. He says sorry. And thank you. For the meat of the doe, for the land he owns, for the next breath he'll take.

And then he places the skull into the pot of boiling water.

Afterward, he scrubs it, dries it, and hangs it in the trophy room with the others. He chooses a spot in the middle of the east-facing wall, moving the three-point into the opposite corner. But the skull looks naked and petite, so his teenage daughter, Maxine, adds a rainbow-colored lei from a costume party, draping it from the jaw to the holes where the ears would have been, then over the bare crown without antlers.

"Now you're the queen deer," he tells the skull. And even as he promises to never shoot

another mother, he looks forward to the next hunt.

Winnie's Journal, September

Maybe they'll make my book into a movie. I took a writing class in the city once, and they said that you should think of your scenes the way a director does. So, you start in real close, maybe zoomed into a scene around a kitchen table. There's fresh orange juice in a glass pitcher and some childhood artwork around, clutter on the counters and syrup stains on the tablecloth. A couple is arguing. He's dressed for work—a tidy, gray, checkered shirt tucked in; hair cut so short it's almost not there. She's in a green bathrobe and has just done the morning routine—gotten the kids to school after feeding them, dressing them, packing their lunches.

We're so microscopic, so zoomed in, that we see a blueberry stain on the sleeve of her green robe. We notice the crumbs of dried toothpaste on the corner of his mouth or maybe a tiny drop of blood from the shaving cut on his chin. We hear their sharp, angry words. Sunlight comes in through the triple-pane window, beaming right from their beautifully manicured front yard. But from within this classic family scene we need to learn about the tension, we *need* to see action, probably through some dialogue.

But then, that's always been my issue. The dialogue.

I need to make them real in my mind. I need to know them, feel them.

And they can't be my friends. That's too intimate. It comes back to writing about my own life. I'm trying to make something up, goddammit. Why does it always come back to me?

The couple is standing in a kitchen I've never seen—I made that up. Although now that I think about it, I believe it takes cues from a babysitting gig I had in college. But the couple themselves, they aren't made up. They're most definitely Becca and Christopher, our good friends who moved out to the Midwest for his job four years ago. They're the only ones I can

picture, and now that I saw them there, I just can't imagine anyone else.

I don't know if they argue in the morning. I don't even know if they see each other in the morning. I'm also not sure if she owns a bathrobe.

And, I just wrote "*our* good friends," but I can't say that anymore.

My divorce was finalized just last week.

This house, the real house that I *actually* sit in, is empty. There's no sun streaming. There's no mess of child artwork or syrup on the table or a stack of dishes. The children are grown. Larry is gone.

I'm alone with my mind—memories swarming and mixed with something I want to write, a feeling I want to get on paper, because I want to write myself out of this. I want to, but I can't write myself out of this mess. Because I've never been able to write a damn piece of anything that isn't based on my own experiences, my own situations. And the reality is, my life is somewhat derailed. I've made a bunch of mistakes, and I know I can't go back in time to fix them. I don't know where I went wrong. I'm lonely, and I feel completely lost, even though I'm almost fifty, and I'm too scared to start working on something I really want to do. I can't even tell anyone. I don't even know how to begin. What I really want is write a story.

Instead, I'm sitting here fantasizing about how, once my novel is written, maybe someone could make a movie out of it. I'll just skip ahead to the part where I've finally accomplished something.

Will that fix things? Will I feel better?

Whatever, I'm so totally sick of thinking about myself. I'm just so *over* it.

That couple, the imaginary couple in the sunny kitchen—what are they arguing about? His plans that night or their son's private school and the expense of it or whether to have another

child or not or whose responsibility it should be to feed the dog? No, deeper. Why she never hugs him anymore? Why she won't get a job? Why he stays late at work every night? Why he talks in a condescending tone to their children, reminding her of her own father?

But if it's going to be a movie, it can't just zoom in. It also needs to zoom out—the camera has to pull back. We need a larger scene. A manicured neighborhood, two matching yet slightly different SUVs in the driveway. One black, one gray. Or maybe they should both be gray, just slightly different shades. People walking dogs, maybe a lone jogger. A mountain range in the background, the top half white with the first snow. I see a street sign, but I can't make out the letters. A lone oak tree with leaves turned colors for fall perches on the corner.

A small, rural town parked right up in the Northwest. Or maybe the Northeast, for a change. No, it should probably be the Northwest. I know nothing about the East.

But I know the rainy season—when everything turns dark and wet—is about to begin.

Olive's Journal, September

After school I always take care of the horses.

The house was empty when I got home, so I threw my stuff down in our entryway and headed back to the barn. Sometimes I hate all the chores, but I'm also glad about them, because it gives me an excuse not to make friends. It gives me time to think about Colorado, where we lived before we ended up in this terrible place.

In Grand Junction the horses were turned out all the time in our big field. Even in the winter, it was sunny. They had acres to run and play. All we had to do was throw them hay and fill their water troughs every day. And Mom usually did that. When we moved here, we brought the horses with us, since the house we're renting has a barn and a pasture, but it's totally different.

It's *tons* more work.

I walked down the wet gravel road to the barn and noticed that the horses were standing together in their paddock on one high spot out of the mud. It's already so muddy here, and it's barely even fall. The leaves are turning brown fast and making the ground soggy.

I went through the gate and walked over to the horses. I touched Stormy's nose—our paint gelding, the one Mom got first. I noticed he looks a little skinny and hasn't been brushed in a long time. Next, I went into the barn to grab the wheelbarrow and pitchfork. The smell hit me—horse pee and not enough bedding. The horses can go in and out of their stalls any time, but they always find a way to shit and piss inside, even though Mom never seems to buy enough shavings.

When I pushed the wheelbarrow through the gate to clean the paddock, the horses

followed me. Rosie nudged my arm and looked for treats, but I shooed her away. I wasn't in the mood. She's a stout palomino pony, technically mine. We used to trail ride together all the time—there was a trail right off our property in Colorado that was amazing during spring and summer. It's so dry there, you can ride almost all year, except when there's a lot of snow.

Standing farther away was the dapple-gray mare, Molly. She's been moody and depressed since we moved. She was Sophie's horse. *I know, girl, I miss her too.* I imagined Molly could hear my thoughts as I walked over to give her a pat. That's the nice thing about the horses. They don't talk or ask questions like the counselor my mom made me see last week, some lady named Linda. She's supposed to help me process my grief. I feel like it's a waste of time. I want to deal with it in my own way. Sometimes, I just want to forget.

But the teachers at school always ask me where I moved from. Whenever anyone asks that, it makes my stomach tighten and my breathing get fast, because I just think of Sophie and how much everything has changed and how much I miss her. But in the barn, with the horses, I can just be alone with my chores.

I walked around with the pitchfork, picking up piles. The mud was deep in places, and I wondered what it's gonna be like in a few months when we get more rain. The days are getting shorter, and the air is already chilly. Halloween is coming up next month. That was Sophie's favorite holiday.

I think about last year, when she wanted to be a French maid. Her and Mom screamed at each other and slammed doors. Mom swore she'd never let her out of the house wearing that outfit, and Sophie picked up a razor blade and threatened to cut herself if Mom didn't let her. Dad was long gone by then. I wasn't worried; I always thought Sophie could handle herself. If she was the wild one, I guess I was the smart, quiet one. And Mom was totally obsessed with

Sophie and always worried about her.

Sophie went out that night in her slutty costume, then later snuck into my room through the window. Her makeup was streaked, and she smelled like cigarettes. I asked her where she was. She brushed her hair out of her eyes, and for the first time in a while, it looked like she was actually going to open up. Instead, she said “nowhere” and told me to go to sleep.

Stormy walked over. He was restless since he knew it was almost dinnertime. I pushed the wheelbarrow around the back of the barn and into our huge manure pile. *Why did we even bring these horses*, I wondered for the millionth time. Nobody’s ever gonna ride again. Dead weight. Like me. I feel like dead weight. All anyone does is talk about my sister. I’m basically invisible.

I threw flakes of the dinner hay, then rubbed my cold hands together to shake off prickly alfalfa stalks. I looked at our horses one more time. All three were muddy, with burrs in their tails and long scraggly manes. Their hooves looked long.

When the chores were done, I headed back to our rental house. It’s pretty small, with three little bedrooms, and it’s made from old red bricks. Some of them are covered in dirty looking moss. After taking my mud boots off, I went up the stairs to my room and closed the door. I already did my other homework at school, so after journaling I’m going to read my latest book, an early Stephen King. It’s from when he wrote under his pen name, Richard Bachman. Funny, since his name sounds so cool—why would he need a fake one? Anyway, the book is called *The Long Walk*, and it’s scary and dark—I love it. When I read this kind of stuff it’s basically the only time I can forget about Sophie and Grand Junction and the last few terrible months.

In the book, almost everyone is dying. It makes my situation seem less weird and tragic.

I'm halfway through and already sad about the day I'll finish it.

Mike's Journal, September

Today in class Ms. Morin changed seats. Instead of having us in clusters of four desks, she had us put them all into a U-shape so we would have more of a “roundtable discussion” for our next assignments. If we sit in a circle like this, she said, we could see and get to know everyone in class better.

I don't know if Ms. Morin read my mind or what, but she put me right next to Olive.

I told her “hi” after we had moved everything and took our notebooks out again. She just nodded, barely showing a smile. She's definitely kind of shy.

I wanted to say more, so I went, “Well, looks like we're sitting next to each other.” As soon as it was out of my mouth I was like, *God, what a dumb thing to say*. I felt my neck turning red and my ears getting hot. I looked down at the blank page in my notebook and picked up my pencil. I pretended to take notes from the board at the front of class.

She didn't say anything.

I had just about given up when she tapped me on the shoulder. “Look,” she said and pulled a thick paperback copy of *The Shining* out of her backpack. She pointed to the folded corner of an inside page, marking her place. She was already more than halfway way done!

“It's really good,” she said. “Thanks.”

We made eye contact for a second. Then Ms. Morin clapped her hands from the front of the room and told us to start journaling.

