

Year of the Dahlia

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Prologue

May 22nd, 1995. 6:35pm.

Grand Junction, CO police department, private conference room

The tall, grey-haired police officer sat down across from James.

“Son, I know this is hard. But I need you to tell me what happened last night.”

James looked down at the stark white table. He blinked his eyes hard. Then he mumbled, “we... we were having a party. You know, up the forest service road.” He sniffed and wiped his eyes. “And, well, a few people decided to go swimming.”

The officer sat back in his chair. “You know it’s illegal to swim in the canal, right?”

“I know, I know. But we do it every year. And nothing like this has ever... happened. I mean, of course it hasn’t. This is crazy. What am I even doing here? This all just feels like a bad dream. I want to wake up.” James shuddered and put his face in his hands. His father, looking tired, reached over and put a hand on his son’s shoulder.

“Sir, do we have to do this? Is there any other way my son can give a statement? His girlfriend drowned, just last night. It’s barely been twenty-four hours. This is... inhumane. He’s only a kid for Christsakes!”

The officer nodded. “I understand. But when a death occurs, even if it’s accidental, you know we need to get all the facts straight. The sooner the better, so we can close the case and let the family know what happened. It is important. For the community, and especially for Sophie’s family. I’m sure you understand that. If James would rather, he can give a written statement. Son, would that be easier? Just explain everything that happened last night.”

James nodded and took the lined paper and ballpoint pen that the policeman slid over to

him. He bent his head down and started writing.

We had a party. We've hung out up there, at the end of the road, a lot. Last night was really no different than the other times. A few kids brought beer but nobody was getting wasted or anything. I think Sophie had like two beers, tops. There was a bonfire. A few kids went swimming, but they were in and out quick. For some reason, even though it was cold as hell, and getting colder, Sophie decided to go. She swung off the rope swing. I've seen her do it a million times. I mean, we went to that same canal all last summer. Last night, though, when she went in the water, she didn't come up. Then I went in the water, and Garret and Mason too. We kept yelling for her and swimming around, diving deeper and deeper, but we couldn't find her. It was so dark.

He slid the paper back across the table. "Ok. Can I go now?"

Part 1: Harvest

Cutting the Flowers by Winnie Morin

Creative Writing Center: Scene Workshop

They bloom at the 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 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—yellow, orange, or burnt umber. My favorite is a bouquet made entirely of white.

The flower petals are soft, like the cheeks of a young child. The smell of the stalks is pure green.

My favorite thing about autumn is these plants. I love the shocking bright blooms that come almost too late, flowering against a blue sky as the days shorten, their colors bursting in sharp contrast to everything else around. In the woods, dead leaves fall from trees. In the yard, grass turns brown. When I step outside in the morning, the breeze feels cold. Yet still, the dahlias bloom.

They burst, untwist, show off. They explode.

The last flower of the year.

Olive's Journal, September

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

We moved from Grand Junction to 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 barn to feed the horses before school, and that's when I saw it. A tangle of balloons halfway up one of the huge evergreen trees in this crappy place. One balloon was a pink heart. The other one was silver with the words *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 at all surprised, and stood up 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 awkwardly. It's funny with my mom. Her frustration and swearing, then moments of forced love—totally unexpected. 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 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 the 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

Every year when I set up my classroom and get ready for school to begin, since I can remember, I start a new journal. But this year, it feels different. I feel... a little stale. Maybe I've written so much about my own thoughts and feelings that I'm just burned out. Not to mention, there are piles of short story and essay ideas that I just never seem to get around to starting. Or finishing.

I've got stacks and stacks of journals at home—boxed up and stored on the top shelf of my closet. I guess for years, it's been my therapy. I probably need to journal more than ever now, after the divorce. Larry has already been gone for a few months.

I'm lonely. I didn't think I would be—I thought it would be a refreshing change. Or that I would feel relief once the legal process was behind us. I guess I was wrong.

When classes start next week and I'm with the students... I think that will be a good distraction. I can throw myself into my work. Reading, discussion, grading papers. It won't matter how much I'm writing, or what I write about, this year.

Instead, I'll read the kids' work.

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 slightly different accent—she's from Canada, 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 of course, 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. Maxine'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, 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 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

Since Larry left, I've been watching a lot of movies. The one I finished tonight—it reminded me of a writing class I took in the city years ago.

The teacher told us that we should think of our writing the way a film director shoots scenes. So, I'll try it. I'm going to start in real close, maybe zoomed in around a kitchen table. There's fresh orange juice in a glass pitcher and some childhood artwork around. Clutter covers the counters and there are crumbs on the tablecloth. A couple is arguing. He's dressed for work—a tidy 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 stain on the sleeve of her green robe. We notice a tiny spot of dried toothpaste on the corner of his mouth or maybe a drop of blood from a shaving cut on his chin. We hear sharp, angry words. Sunlight comes in through the triple-pane window, beaming right from their beautifully manicured front yard. But now, within this scene we need to learn about the tension. We *need* to see action, or maybe some dialogue.

Who are these people? Did I really just make them up? I've never been good at creating characters. I probably know them. Maybe it's our good friends, Becca and Christopher. We used to have dinner with them all the time, until they moved to the Midwest for Becca's new job.

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

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

The divorce was legally finalized just last week.

This house, the 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 both away at school. Larry is gone.

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 hasn't said *I love you* in months? Why he stays late at work every night? The way it makes her feel when he talks in a condescending tone to their son, 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 should pull back. A larger scene. Maybe it's a manicured neighborhood, and two SUVs are parked in the driveway. People are walking dogs, there's a lone jogger. A mountain range lies 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 in fall colors sits on the corner.

It's a small, rural town where 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 crappy 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 short 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. Usually, 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. In the barn, with the horses, I can just be alone with my chores and my thoughts.

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 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. I wondered if they were homesick, too.

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 gonna 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 could have more of a “roundtable discussion” for our next assignment. If we sit in a circle like this, she said, we could see who’s talking, 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.

She’s sitting so close to me that I can see the texture of her hat. It looks like soft, old yarn. It’s cool. And she has no idea I’m writing about her right now.

