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**More Than Skin Deep:  
The Writing Process of *Roadkill***

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**More Than Skin Deep:  
The Writing Process of *Roadkill***

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Abstract**

### **More Than Skin Deep: The Writing Process of *Roadkill***

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

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The following report describes the writing process of my feature screenplay *Roadkill*. By looking back on the process and all its stages—including inspiration, planning, first draft, feedback, revision, and rewriting—I attempt to communicate my creative process and show how my time spent in the MFA program has influenced that process.

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## Chapter 1: A Long Road to *Roadkill*

My junior year of college I took a class in Creative Non-Fiction. The professor was one of my favorites and I enjoyed many of the readings we did, but I struggled at times with the writing. I'd long thought of myself as primarily a fiction writer and only recently begun to dabble in screenwriting, so when it came to writing, my instinct was to make things up. Having to stick to the facts threw me. I'd start writing a personal essay about, say, the various times I've thrown up in public places (yes, that is a real thing I wrote) but when I'd reach a part of the story that I couldn't quite remember, I'd be torn. My mind would come up with possibilities of what might have happened in that moment or what would have been the funniest thing that could have happened but didn't. And while creative non-fiction certainly allows for some degree of wiggle room with the truth, including anything that I wasn't relatively sure happened felt like lying to me.

I worked my way through the class, trying to find a balance between fact and embellishment that I was comfortable with. I didn't leave the class with a sudden desire to write my memoirs (thank goodness... no one wants to read the memoir of a 21-year-old college student) but I think it did make me more comfortable with writing from my personal experience. I took this newfound strategy back to the world of make-believe where I was much happier. There I could use a kernel of my reality but twist it and exaggerate it and smooth it until it was something unrecognizable, yet still with that seed of truth at its center.

When I started to focus on screenwriting, I relished the structure it provided. If fiction writing was like painting on a canvas of indeterminate size, screenwriting was like painting a vase: I knew the general size and shape of it, but I could still use whatever colors I wanted. Even using screenwriting software for the first time was exciting to me:

having a designated place and format and tense for everything felt so organized and it let me save my brain power for crafting my story and characters, rather than worrying about whether my narrator was omniscient or if a story read better in past tense. It felt like I had finally found the right place for my writing, a form that satisfied not just my desire to write creatively, but also my tendency to think visually and logically. When I decided to pursue an MFA, there was no question that screenwriting was the craft I wanted to devote myself to.

I learned so much over the course of my workshops and other classes in grad school. I thought about structure more than ever before. I started to watch every movie or television show with the mind of a screenwriter. I learned how to use feedback to make my scripts better versions of themselves and to help my peers do the same with their work in return. It became ingrained in me to really take the time to brainstorm and outline and re-outline a script, to really work out as many of the kinks as possible before starting to write. When I wrote fiction, I don't think I ever once outlined a story before starting to write it. I grew to appreciate the process and while I can't pretend that I was never impatient to get to the writing part, I was always glad to have done the pre-work. It was abundantly clear how much easier that planning made the writing process once I finally got to move on to the "fun" part.

When I wrote the first draft of *Roadkill* (called *Stuffed* at the time), I think I put to use a great deal of what I'd learned in grad school: about structure, about storytelling, about movies in general. But with all the work I put into it, I ended up becoming a bit distant from the story. The characters became chess pieces instead of humans. The scenes felt like scenes, not like moments in these people's lives. The revision process for me was about trying to reconnect to my own characters, about discovering something personal in

a story distant from my own experience. I think in revising *Stuffed* into *Roadkill*, I took a big step towards doing that.



## Chapter 2: Adaptation as Inspiration

*Roadkill* began as an assignment for the Adaptation class I took with Beau Thorne in Fall 2015. For our final project, we were to choose a short piece of source material, pitch how we would adapt that material into a feature film, and then write the first act of that feature. Knowing that I wanted to choose something that I could continue working on after the class if I so chose (without having to worry about having the rights to the source material), I purposely looked for something that would inspire a story I wanted to tell, but that I could easily divorce from the source material if I chose to go forward with it.

I eventually landed on a short non-fiction essay by Susan Orlean called “Lifelike”—an essay I remembered reading in my Non-Fiction class in undergrad. The essay details her experience at a taxidermy competition, describing the culture, the characters, and the craftsmanship she encountered there. I was attracted to the essay primarily for the colorful world it conjured and the way her writing brought the reader into this unfamiliar space and made them feel like they were a part of it. The essay doesn’t really have a narrative quality and it doesn’t focus on any particular person she met there—which was exactly what I was looking for. It gave me the opportunity to create a story and characters that were entirely my own, while using the essay primarily as a jumping off point for the setting and the culture of taxidermy. I figured that anything that hewed too closely to Orlean’s essay I could extract or tweak later (little did I know how far from the essay I’d eventually end up).

Over the course of the semester in Adaptation we’d had to pitch takes for a number of adaptations and the strategy that I found worked best for me was to start with the structure. By breaking the movie down into manageable pieces—three acts, but

generally I went even further and broke it into eight reels—I was able to conceive of the arc of the movie, without getting too bogged down in minor plot movements or details that wouldn't be relevant to the short pitch I was working towards. I took this same tack when it came to the pitch for our final project. After deciding that I wanted the protagonist to be a teenage girl—both for story reasons (because who'd be more of an outsider at a taxidermy competition than a teenage girl?) and for personal reasons (because I make a point of almost always having female protagonists in my work because there are plenty of other people out there writing stories about men and I don't need to add to that noise)—I set out to plan my pitch, reel by reel (Appendices A and B).

### Chapter 3: *Stuffed* Model Films

When conceiving my pitch for and writing the first draft of *Roadkill*, there are a number of films I looked to as reference points. The main ones I thought about were Christopher Guest's *Best in Show* and Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

*Best in Show* has long been a favorite movie of mine and its dog show setting made it a natural point of comparison in my mind for a movie set at another unusual sort of competition featuring animals—a taxidermy competition. I liked how *Best in Show* featured a large ensemble of characters, showcasing such a variety of the types of people who might compete in a dog show, giving them all nuance and their own arcs (while also being extremely funny, obviously). I aspired to doing something similar with *Stuffed*. While Teeny was unquestionably my protagonist, I wanted to try and create a large cast of characters to orbit around her during her time at the taxidermy competition, from other taxidermists, to hotel employees, to her own family.

While it's entirely possible (likely even) that my mind went to Wes Anderson when considering model films because thinking about taxidermy made me think about the animal puppets in *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, I like to think I had other valid reasons to consider the two films of his that I did. *Moonrise Kingdom* contains some similar elements to *Best in Show*—a large, well-serviced ensemble whose various threads come together by the end of the film—but it brought some other things to the table that I saw as potential touchstones for my movie. It features teenage outsiders as its protagonists yet it never feels like an exclusively “teenager” movie. I wanted my protagonist Teeny to have the gravitas the teenagers in *Moonrise Kingdom* had: someone who is wise beyond their years, but still emotionally a teenager behind the façade of maturity.

*The Grand Budapest Hotel* yet again features a large ensemble, but I also considered it for its setting (like *Stuffed*, it takes place largely in a hotel), the elements of mystery and competition, and the unlikely friendship between Ralph Fiennes' character and the bellhop. I liked how completely the movie transported the audience to this unfamiliar world. I also thought about how that story starts in this contained environment of the hotel but then expands so far beyond that.

## Chapter 4: The Pitch

Once I had my source material, my protagonist, and my model films, it was time for me to come up with a story to pitch. Since the movie was to be set at a taxidermy competition, trying to win that competition seemed like the natural goal for my protagonist to have. However, given Teeny's age and the fact that I imagined her as something of an outsider in the taxidermy community, without the same resources most of the others would have, it was hard to imagine a world in which she'd have any kind of fighting chance to win a competition based purely on technical skill. This led to me trying to think of a way to twist the competition in such a way that it would level the playing field and I came up with the idea of the founder of the competition, Critter, dying and the the competition being changed to one in honor of him. I latched onto this idea for a number of reasons. One, it justified in my mind the idea that they'd be building new mounts while present at the competition, instead of competing simply with mounts they'd brought with them. Second, I liked the idea of this almost mythical figure being at the center of the competition, and his death throwing everything into disarray—especially for Teeny, who looked up to him greatly. Lastly, I felt like it gave me good momentum going into my second act, setting all the taxidermists into action to make these new mounts to try and win this competition.

Settling on this gave me my inciting incident (Critter's death) and act one break (Teeny setting out to win the competition), so then I looked forward to the other structural benchmarks. I knew I couldn't spend all of act two just watching Teeny and the other taxidermists learning about Critter and building their mounts, so I needed a midpoint that would throw a wrench in things and send the story in a new direction—which is how I decided that Critter was actually faking his own death and the midpoint

would be when Teeny finds that out. I liked the potential for intrigue created by this twist, the way it would test Teeny as a character, and the new push it would give the story through the rest of act two.

Things got a little vaguer from the midpoint on, something that worked fine for a pitch but would come back to haunt me once the time came to write that half of the movie. I knew Teeny would get roped into helping Critter stay in hiding and that Critter would eventually be revealed to be not as benevolent as he'd seemed, betraying Teeny's trust, but I didn't have a clear picture of the scenes in which these beats would play out. I knew I wanted the climax to have something to do with Teeny bringing together the other taxidermists and saving the competition in the face of Critter's deception, but I didn't know exactly how I was going to build to that moment.

These gaps were fine for the sake of a pitch that was just meant to convey the broad strokes of the story. But it left me with some work to do when it came to actually outlining and writing the story, something I don't think I fully appreciated until I was in the midst of working on completing a draft of the script.

## Chapter 5: Writing Act One

Once I had my pitch figured out, it was time to sit down and write the first act of the movie. Due to reasons I can no longer remember but I'm sure seemed very important at the time, I ended up having to write the whole thing in the two days before the assignment was due. While I wouldn't necessarily choose to put myself in such a situation again, luckily my pitch and the source material gave me enough to work with and I was able to get act one onto the page relatively smoothly in the limited time I had.

Writing act one, I quickly realized that I'd need to learn something about taxidermy beyond what I could glean from Susan Orlean's essay. I did just enough Googling to be able to fake it for the sake of the first act, but I knew that if I were to continue with the script, I'd have to dig a little deeper and be able to describe the craft in somewhat realistic detail.

I enjoyed the pace of the first act: jumping right into the world of the competition, getting to introduce the large cast of characters I'd created. I didn't have space to do much more than set a lot of them up in that first act, but I was excited about the potential contained in each of them, the possibilities of where they could go. I felt good about Teeny's arc as well. The pages set up a lot of what that version of the script would end up being about: her search for a place to fit in, her feeling of being an outsider because she doesn't do her taxidermy the "right" way, her hero worship of Critter. The pages felt like the beginning of a world I would enjoy living in for a while.

The feedback I got from the class on the first act and the pitch factored into my completion of the first draft and eventually colored some of the choices I made when conceiving my second draft. In the pitch I had Teeny discovering that Critter was alive because she visits a petting zoo that Critter worked at as a youth that none of the other

taxidermists thought would be important. I got questions about why Teeny would be the only one to go there, so when I actually wrote that part of the script, Teeny ended up finding Critter at a library instead. I got a lot of suggestions about what kind of character Critter could end up being—whether he'd be kind to Teeny, or mean because he doesn't want to be found, or manipulative—suggestions that helped me figure out his character going forward.

One of the biggest things I got questions about was Teeny's dad, which honestly surprised me. In my mind he was almost an afterthought, but people seemed to be fixated on him—they wanted to know what the point of him being dead was if I wasn't making use of it. I didn't really grapple with this feedback when writing the first draft, but I finally confronted it when it came to figuring out the second draft, as will be discussed below.

I set *Stuffed* aside after that semester, feeling pretty good about it. People seemed to like Teeny and the world I was crafting around her. I figured I'd come back to her story eventually; I just didn't know when.



## Chapter 6: Following the Map

Sometime during the spring of 2016, I decided that I wanted to complete a draft of *Stuffed* to use as my thesis script. In both semesters of screenwriting workshop my second year I had chosen to work on television scripts, and none of them felt like quite the right choice to work on as my thesis. One was an hour pilot that I wasn't convinced I was still interested in working on; one was a half-hour which presented complications because I would've had to have a second half-hour to work on alongside it; and one was another hour pilot that I felt like I had gotten enough feedback on it recently that I could work on it on my own, devoting the thesis to something instead that needed more work (a decision I naturally went on to question for all of June when it was far too late to do anything about it). All those reasons aside, there was a part of me that did want to finish drafting a second feature during grad school (having not written one since my first year), which led to my decision to write a full draft of *Stuffed*.

Once I decided on that plan of action, I knew I was taking on a pretty ambitious task: writing the second and third acts of a movie while still working on the things I was writing for workshop and keeping up with my other classes. As someone who doesn't always feel like the fastest writer and who has often depended on academic deadlines to drive progress on my writing, this felt like a somewhat imposing goal I had set for myself. Still, knowing that I could always choose another script if I didn't manage to finish it in time, I was determined to do my best to get a draft done.

When I returned to *Stuffed* after a couple months away from it, I started by outlining the second act. I ended up following my original pitch document pretty closely: it was comforting to have that as a road map for the vast unknown of the rest of the movie I was setting out to write. In retrospect, this might not have been the best strategy.

Because this idea started from such a different place than most things I'd written before—as an adaptation and as a pitch for a class—I think I ended up skipping over steps I normally try to take before writing a script and neglecting some important aspects of the planning process. Normally, I make a point of trying to have a strong sense of my characters before I start to write and really knowing what it was about them that made me want to tell their story. While I certainly had affection for Teeny and had ideas about who she was, I never really took the time to craft her as a character independent of the pages I was writing.

But the fact remained that if I wanted to use this as my thesis, I had to keep chugging along and finish some version of this story; I kept telling myself that I just had to get it out and I'd make it good later. This is not the greatest feeling to have while writing something. There was a nagging voice in the back of my head the whole time I was working on this draft saying, “Why are you even writing this movie? You don't care about taxidermy. You think it's kind of creepy and you prefer your animals living. You just thought taxidermy seemed like a quirky thing that would be fun to write a movie about, you have no investment in this!” While this voice in my head made some valid points, I didn't feel like I had time to address them and I hoped that if I kept writing I would discover again what had drawn me to this story in the first place.

This isn't to say I took no pleasure in writing that draft of *Stuffed* or that there was nothing I liked about it. I enjoyed the challenge of balancing a large cast of characters (certainly more than I'd ever dealt with before) and figuring out how their various threads would intertwine and affect Teeny's arc. I had fun plotting the almost mystery-like elements through which Teeny discovers that the competition's founder actually faked his own death. I took satisfaction in the fact that the story I had pitched so many months ago actually seemed to hold together upon actually writing it.

Still, simply completing the draft was probably my biggest accomplishment in my eyes. Obviously writing isn't a race and the act of being able to write something fast isn't on its own anything to be proud of. But as someone who has in the past had a tendency to agonize over scenes or luxuriate over ideas or drift away from projects, it was encouraging to know I was capable of working independently on something and completing it within a reasonable amount of time. This felt like an especially important achievement given the fact that my time in grad school was nearing its end and I knew I would soon no longer have the forward momentum provided for me through my classes and workshops. Writing this script felt like a trial run for me as a writer post-grad school: setting a goal and a deadline for myself and having to juggle my other responsibilities in order to meet that goal.

It was interesting to see what elements changed from my original pitch and outline as I wrote the first draft. As I worked my way through act two it became harder to make sure I was servicing every character, so Cal (Teeny's love interest) became more involved in certain things that I hadn't planned for him to be a part of, simply to keep him around and give him something to do. Characters took turns I hadn't expected but for the most part I think those changes were for the better. Wade, a taxidermist who's very competitive and dismissive of Teeny for most of the movie eventually comes to respect her, redeeming his character in a way I hadn't planned on. Almost inversely, I had planned to redeem Critter by the end of the movie, despite his deceptions, but he ended up being such a shady character that I decided he didn't deserve a happy ending or Teeny's forgiveness.

When I sent this draft to my committee in advance of our meeting, I felt unexpectedly anxious about it. I'm usually pretty comfortable with getting feedback on my work and I wasn't sure why this time felt different. Eventually, I chalked it up to a

combination of two things. One was that I had written 75% of this script in a vacuum; I'd gotten used to getting feedback periodically throughout writing a script, so this was the first time in a while where I had to think, "Maybe this went totally off the rails on page 45 and I had no one to tell me!" The second thing was that usually when I submitted something to workshop, I was sharing something that I felt I had put my best effort into. While I put plenty of effort into *Stuffed*, the fact was I completed it under a bit of a time crunch and I didn't like feeling like maybe I wasn't putting my best foot forward. Still, underneath the anxiety, I wanted to make the script better and I was ready for some feedback on how to start doing it.

## Chapter 7: The Reckoning

As I'm sure the preceding chapter made clear, I was under no illusions that my first draft was without problems. One reason I chose this script as my thesis was that I knew there would be a lot of room for improvement; I didn't see the point in devoting the process to something that I felt needed less work (a noble stance I came to question once I started to realize my summer was going to be much busier than I'd realized). I went into my meeting with my thesis committee aware of some of the aforementioned weaknesses of the script, but I welcomed their insight into my work. They helped me a great deal by pinpointing some of the big picture issues with my story, as well as by picking out elements that they were more interested in but weren't being used to their full advantage. I left the meeting with a lot to think about.

My first big takeaway was that while the script was well-structured, it was almost to a fault. The plot felt like plot for plot's sake; rather than stemming organically from the characters, events just unfolded because that's the way I had planned them to unfold. To some degree, I think this stemmed from the way I developed the script: because the plot was what I focused on when I was coming up with my pitch for the script, that's what became the focus when I was writing it, to the detriment of other elements of the writing. The concerns I had about my lack of personal connection to the story came across to some degree as well: there was something a bit distant or sterile about the characters.

I also got the feedback that the Critter-centric elements of the story weren't really working. By making the competition about him instead of just about taxidermy, it turned the first half of act two into more of a scavenger hunt than anything to do with taxidermy. Once he's revealed to be alive at the midpoint, that just made him even more of a presence through the rest of the movie. While I enjoyed the character of Critter and liked

some of what I was trying to do with his and Teeny's relationship by breaking down her hero worship of him, the fact was that his presence was turning the story into something other than what I wanted it to be. It took me some time to wrap my head around it, but I was perfectly willing to lose him if he wasn't helping tell Teeny's story—because the movie was meant to be hers not his.

Hearing this feedback definitely threw me a bit at first because I knew it meant I'd have to make some pretty big changes, but what helped me get myself back on track was the feedback I got concerning elements that were present in my script but that I wasn't using to their full potential. The biggest one of these was the taxidermy itself. For a movie that was ostensibly about taxidermy, I had very few scenes actually featuring it. By turning so much of act two into this scavenger hunt through Critter's past and then Teeny's efforts to keep his secret, I took the action of the story far away from the taxidermy competition, both physically and conceptually. The taxidermy element was such a big part of the premise of the movie and I was barely taking advantage of it at all; rectifying that was going to be one big thing to address in my second draft.

A related element of my story that I wasn't doing enough with was Teeny's interest in taxidermy. I made a point of making her my protagonist someone like her because I was interested in the idea of presenting one of the last people you'd expect to be doing taxidermy (a teenage girl) doing just that. But in actually writing my script, I didn't really explore that juxtaposition at all. I gave only the smallest hints about how Teeny ended up having taxidermy as a hobby; what was there didn't even begin to satisfy the question of how she took to something so far from the interests of your average high schooler. Exploring this huge part of my main character was a big priority for me going into my new draft.

Another element I wasn't taking full advantage of were the characters of Teeny's parents. Her mother, Marcia, was a big character in the first draft: her and Teeny are pretty close and she comes along for the ride for a lot of Teeny's adventures over the course of the movie. However, while there were a handful of moments where she and Teeny come into conflict over elements of the competition, I didn't really consider fully what it would be like to be the mother of a teenage girl who's obsessed with cutting up dead animals. While I'm sure there are mothers out there who would take this in stride, the majority would be at least somewhat concerned. Going to a conference where they'd be surrounded by taxidermy and the people who do it would likely exacerbate these worries, something I didn't fully take into account. I definitely wanted to keep this in mind while writing Marcia going forward.

The character of Teeny's father was dead in the first draft of *Stuffed*. He's mentioned pretty sparingly, mostly in reference to Marcia being a single mother and the financial struggles they faced because of that. In an early version of the first act, Teeny's dad is mentioned as the person who introduced her to taxidermy but I think that was removed by the time I finished the first draft. Even from when I pitched the movie in the Adaptation class there were questions about the function of Teeny's dead dad. Some felt that him being dead didn't add anything to the story or was distracting from other things that were going on. At first I was resistant to this feedback: in my mind, Teeny's dad was so minor, almost irrelevant to the story and I didn't understand why people were fixating on him. I eventually came to understand that what they were really responding to was the fact that I had the looming presence of this dead dad, something that is thematically tied to Teeny's interest in taxidermy, but I wasn't using that fact at all. I wanted to find a way to bring the connection between the death Teeny had experienced in her life and her obsession with dead things more to the surface in the new draft.

Another piece of feedback I got that seems almost too obvious but really opened things up for me was the reminder that the entire script didn't necessarily need to be confined to the physical and temporal setting of the competition. The first draft of the script opened with Teeny and Marcia already at the hotel where the competition is taking place and ends before they leave it. I'd never really stopped to think about whether starting this way was the best choice or not because that's how my act one had been when I wrote it for Adaptation class and it had been relatively well received, so I stuck with it. Once it was pointed out to me that I could start Teeny's story earlier and have the set up in act one take place before Teeny's arrival at the competition, I realized how many doors that would open up for me. I ended up taking that suggestion to the extreme, as will become clear below.



## Chapter 8: Reconceiving, or *Stuffed* Becomes *Roadkill*

As I started to brainstorm what changes I wanted to make in my second draft, it became rather quickly to me that I'd be writing a very different story the second time around. It started with thinking about the character of Teeny and what I wanted her arc to be. The more I thought about what kind of teenage girl would become interested in taxidermy and what that would mean for her day to day life, the less interested I became in the taxidermy competition as a setting. There she'd be surrounded by other taxidermists and while she'd still be an outsider to some degree, by virtue of her age and her gender, she'd still be around a group of people who could relate to her and her unusual interest. I wanted to see this girl in her regular life, to learn how she got into this somewhat gruesome hobby, to see how the world reacted to her and how she reacted to them in return.

Because the first draft was set almost entirely at the taxidermy competition, coming to this conclusion meant that I was choosing to write essentially an entirely new movie, preserving only a few characters, some themes, and the through line of taxidermy. It's possible I overreacted to some of the feedback I got and some of the problems I saw and that I went too far in the other direction by making such sweeping changes, but this version of the movie felt like the version I needed to write next to really understand my main character and to make the story much more personal. Perhaps future drafts will bring back a little more of the competition setting, but I think I made the right choice in mostly sidelining it this time around.

When I sat down to think about how Teeny got into taxidermy and what prompted her preoccupation with death in general, I landed on a tweaked version of something from the first draft: instead of having a dead dad, I gave her a dead sister. I made this

switch for a number of reasons. First, bringing the dad back to life gave me the opportunity to show Teeny's two parents dealing differently with her eccentricities and coming into conflict over her behavior. Second, while losing a parent is surely traumatic, I thought losing an older sister who Teeny was extremely close to would throw her world out of whack even more and really push her into a place of trying to make sense of the randomness of death. This decision was part of what started me down the road of setting the movie much more in Teeny's hometown. To take advantage of this awful thing in Teeny's past, I wanted her to be stuck spending time around people who see her as the freaky girl with the dead sister and see how she deals with that. Letting her escape to a place where everyone is stuffing animals felt like it made things too easy for her.

Another aspect of Teeny's character that helped unlock the second draft for me was deciding that, unlike most taxidermists, Teeny starts the movie having never killed an animal. She gets her start stuffing her older sister's dead hamster and from there on out only mounts animals that she can find (such as roadkill, hence the new title of the second draft). In the first draft, I never really considered where Teeny got the animals she mounted. Making this choice about her character helped me understand her by framing her as something as an outsider even amongst taxidermists: instead of mounting animals as trophies of their hunting prowess, she's taking animals that died of natural causes (or unnatural causes out of her control) and making an effort to reconstruct and honor them. Knowing that she'd never killed an animal also presented me with a big story opportunity: what would happen if Teeny became desperate enough to cross that line? I knew pretty early on that I wanted to build to a moment where Teeny decides to kill an animal; I just had to figure out what would drive her to do that and whether or not she'd go through with it.

I think when I first considered this question, I was a little too precious about my character and thought, “No, Teeny could never do that!” There might have been one version of a treatment where Teeny comes to the brink of killing a deer yet doesn’t go through with it. But it didn’t take me too long to get over my protectiveness of my character and realize that her going through with killing the deer would be wildly more dramatically interesting. I had an opportunity to make my protagonist do one of the worst things she could do—a true low point. As long as I thought the audience would forgive her for it, why not put her through that?

Once I knew the majority of this version of the script would be taking place within the confines of Teeny’s hometown and her normal life, I wanted to play with some typical elements of high school and high school movies, but twisting those elements a little bit because of the way Teeny herself is a little twisted. I tried to incorporate familiar high school moments and tropes, but show how Teeny experiences them differently, starting with the inciting incident I eventually landed on: of Teeny finding out her mom applied to college for her behind her back. While her classmates are celebrating their college acceptances, Teeny is raging against hers. The climax takes place on the day of Teeny’s graduation and while it still ends up being a joyful day for her and her family, they encounter a very Teeny-specific obstacle when Teeny insists on helping an injured deer they come across on their way there. I wanted to use prom as a point of juxtaposition as well and I sort of ended up doing it: the night Teeny kills the deer is the night all her classmates are at the prom. I tried to figure out a way to show Teeny at prom, but I couldn’t figure out a way to make it work to my liking in this draft.

Another big new element in this version of the script is the character of Cameron, Teeny’s former best friend. While it was important to me to show ways in which Teeny is something of an outcast at school and freaks out a lot of her peers, I didn’t want those

feelings to be universal. I created the character of Cameron to show that Teeny's isolation is partially self-imposed. Yes, she has some unusual interests, but that alone isn't the reason she's a loner when the movie starts. Her sister's death changed her life in a number of ways, and one of the ripple effects was her shutting herself off emotionally from her friends, even her best friend Cameron. Cameron couldn't care less about Teeny's interest in taxidermy; her problem is that Teeny's been kind of a jerk to her since her sister died. Over the course of the movie as Teeny gradually starts to reengage with life post-Sophie, part of that process is rebuilding her friendship with Cameron. Cameron sort of ended up taking the place of Cal from the first draft (though there is a Cal in this draft too)—instead of it being a love interest, however, to show that Teeny's not as alone in the world as she thinks, it's her once and future friend.

A number of other smaller changes helped the second draft take shape. I changed the setting from the Midwest to Virginia. Now that I was so far removed from Susan Orlean's story, it no longer mattered where the World Taxidermy Championships actually took place, so I figured I might as well make the setting an area I'm more familiar with, my home state. I also took out the idea that Teeny's dad was the one who introduced her to taxidermy. Back when I first pitched the movie, someone pointed out that it tells us a lot more about Teeny's character if she came to taxidermy on her own rather than being put onto it by her father. Once I knew the interest would come in the wake of her sister's (and her sister's hamster's) death, there was even less reason for her dad to be involved in the discovery, so Dad was removed from that equation.

## Chapter 9: *Roadkill* Model Films

Given the changes made to the direction of the script, I had a different set of movies in mind as models as I wrote the new draft. This time around I thought more about smaller movies that dealt with heavy emotional stakes. Two movies in particular that I considered were *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* and *Safety Not Guaranteed*. Both movies are very grounded and deal with death, but contain unusual elements that heighten them somewhat. In the case of *Me and Earl*, that comes from the home movies the main character and his friend make; in *Safety Not Guaranteed* it comes from the idea of time travel. I sought to emulate how both these movies dealt very honestly with the emotions of its characters and using these quirky elements to elevate those emotions instead of distracting from them.

I also thought a bit about high school movies like *10 Things I Hate About You*, *Napoleon Dynamite*, and to some degree *Juno*. I partly looked to these movies just for typical high school moments that occurred in them that I might be able to repurpose in a Teeny-specific way, like the scene in *10 Things I Hate About You* where Kat helps Patrick sneak out of detention or the prom in *Napoleon Dynamite*. But looking at those movies also reminded of the mindset of high schoolers: how every conflict feels like a life or death situation; how hard it is to see too far into the future, for better or for worse. I wanted to try and imbue my script with some of that same sensibility.

## Chapter 10: Second First Draft

Having come to terms with the fact that I was essentially committing myself to writing an entirely new movie, I set out writing a treatment for the new direction I was taking. My priority was to incorporate the changes outlined in Chapter 8 but I had to figure out how to make this new version of the story work structurally as well.

I knew I wanted act one to end with Teeny deciding to enter the taxidermy competition, so I had to figure out my new inciting incident: what would drive Teeny to enter this competition? I went through a few different options. One version of the treatment made the inciting incident the moment when Teeny finds out her parents are splitting up (Appendix C). In that version, she enters the competition due to some misguided idea that her parents split up over financial stress and winning the prize money will make her parents get back together. I liked that this version made her the taxidermy competition tied closely to something very personal to Teeny, something my first draft was lacking. But the logic of Teeny thinking money would fix her parents' marriage didn't really hold together under any scrutiny, so I went back to the drawing board.

The next version of the treatment (Appendix D) moved her parents' breakup to the midpoint and made the inciting incident Teeny finding out that her mother applied to college on her behalf and she's forcing her to go. The act one break remained the same, except in this scenario she needs the prize money to pay her mom back for the deposit she already paid to the school so she won't be forced to attend. Right away it felt like this version held together better: the prospect of being forced to go to college conflicted directly with Teeny's desire to continue hiding away in the garage with her taxidermy. Once I actually started writing it got tweaked a little more. Instead of Teeny needing the prize money from the competition, Teeny instead enters the competition to prove to her

mother that there's a future for her in taxidermy. It's not until later when she finds out about her parents' divorce and wants to move out that the prize money becomes important to her.

From the first scene of the script, I made a point of trying to show a lot more taxidermy than I had in the first draft. The first scene ends with Teeny's sister's hamster dying, which we learn goes on to become the first animal that Teeny stuffs. Much of act one is devoted to showing how Teeny's obsession with taxidermy pervades her day to day life: she wakes up early before school to work on her projects; she's so distracted by her work that she accidentally brings knives to school; she searches for animals she can stuff, resorting to roadkill when she can't find anything better. Everyone at school knows her reputation. I made a point of being more specific about what Teeny's craft entails as well. I became a frequent visitor to the wikiHow page for "How to Do Taxidermy," much to the confusion of my roommate when she looked over at my computer and warily asked me why I had a browser window open about how to preserve skin. In act two we start to see Teeny's work in a new light when she goes to the competition and sees what she's up against. But as we watch Teeny work on her deer mount for the competition, we get to see even more how resourceful and creative she is in her craft. Removing all the second act distraction of hunting for clues about Critter's past and whatnot gave me a lot more room to show the work of taxidermy itself.

Alongside all the taxidermy stuff is Teeny struggling through her last month as a high school student. I enjoyed getting to explore this new angle that wasn't part of the first draft at all. Seeing Teeny contend with the realities of high school, from teachers who don't get her to bullies to simply not feeling like she belongs helped her character come into focus for me. I tried to use Teeny's behavior at school to paint some shades of grey into her character as well. While yes, some of the treatment she gets is undeserved

(namely Kendra's bullying) and some people are freaked out by her, the fact is that she's not as much of an outcast as she likes to paint herself to be. At some point she is choosing to isolate herself by pushing away people who might otherwise be her friends, and that's something she's going to have to get over.

The recurrence of Teeny's issues with cars emerged organically over the course of writing the draft. I avoided for a while deciding exactly how Sophie had died, but eventually decided on a car accident, figuring it was at once something very ordinary and something random and unexpected enough to really throw Teeny's life into turmoil. Once I decided that, I had already started writing act one and had Teeny riding her bike everywhere and figured it made sense that Teeny would wary of cars and driving after what happened to her sister. Refusing to learn how to drive became yet another way in which Teeny had put her life on hold since Sophie's death. I used that over the course of the movie by having her take steps forwards (and backwards) with her comfort level with cars that aligned to some degree with her general state of mind at that point. Early in the movie she'll only ride in a car if one of her parents is driving. This ends up holding her back when she chooses not to hang out with her new detention friends in order to avoid riding in a car with them. Her mother gives her a kick in the butt forward when she pushes her to let Cameron drive them to the camping trip and it's during that car ride that she and Cameron hash out their issues. When she's at her most desperate, she steals her mom's car and drives it herself. When she's being selfless trying to save the fawn's life, she makes the potentially dangerous choice to ride in the bed of the pickup truck with the deer. And finally, but the end of the movie, she's letting her mom give her a real driving lesson. Car travel became something of a barometer for Teeny's inability to move on from her sister's death.



Aside from the aforementioned inciting incident tweak, a handful of other elements changed from my original plan over the course of writing this draft. A ripple effect of making the inciting incident no longer money focused was that the act one sequence of Teeny looking for a job no longer made sense. I ended up turning it into a series of scenes where Teeny tries different ways to make money off her taxidermy skills. This ended up working much better than the job hunting scenes did anyway because it gave me an opportunity to reinforce both Teeny's commitment to taxidermy as a craft and the way the public in general perceived her because of that.

Act three ended up changing a lot from the treatment. I had planned to feature a lot more of Cameron before getting to the climax, but many of those beats seemed irrelevant or unnecessary by the time I got to writing act three. It ended up being a lot more about Teeny and her parents and Teeny atoning for and coming to terms with her actions. I simplified everything leading up to the climax of Teeny saving the baby deer's life and I think it worked much better. Another change in act three was whether or not Teeny ends up deciding to get to college. In the treatment I planned for Teeny to end up deciding to put off college for a year so she could apply to schools of her own choice that fit her interests. When I reached that point in the script, I ended up writing it so that Teeny decides to go to college in the fall after all. While I wrote it that way in this draft, I'm not sure that was the right choice, as I'll discuss more below.

## Chapter 11: What Comes Next?

While I'm happy with the progress I've made in writing this new version of Teeny's story, I feel like there's a lot of work yet to be done with it.

One of the biggest things I'd want to work on in a future draft would be the presence of Sophie throughout the story. So much of Teeny's character stems from this traumatic thing in her past, her sister's death, but I feel like there are long stretches of the script where that gets lost. Sophie's death is so central to so many elements from the story, starting with Teeny's interest in taxidermy but also the dissolution of Marcia and Rick's marriage, Teeny's anti-social tendencies, and her relationships with each of her parents. While I did my best to have this ghost of Sophie linger throughout the script, I think there's room to keep working on that. One specific detail I set up but then didn't really use is the idea that Teeny skipped her own sister's funeral. I had plans for that moment to factor in again later in the script that fell through, so now it feels like a bit of a dangling thread. In a future draft I'd either use it or lose it.

Another big part of what I'd work on in a future draft are the arcs of the various important relationships in the film, specifically the relationships between Teeny and Marcia, Teeny and Rick, and Teeny and Cameron. I tried to make these various relationships ebb and flow naturally over the course of the script, but I definitely felt like there were times when I just needed a relationship to be in a certain place that I hadn't necessarily earned so I could keep the story moving. I think this is particularly noticeable in Teeny and Cameron's friendship. Once Marcia forces Teeny to hang out with Cameron, they basically have one big fight, make up immediately, then get along for the most part for the rest of the movie. I think their relationship could be a lot more complicated, especially given the pretty horrible way Teeny cut Cameron out of her life.

In a future draft, I'd want to put a little more conflict into that relationship and really force them to work to rebuild their friendship.

I think this draft was a big step up from the first one in terms of the amount of taxidermy in my movie about taxidermy but there's probably room for a bit more of it even in act two. While I like the high school stuff, I think the balance between that and Teeny's taxidermy is a little off at points. The camping trip in particular feels like something that's not working as well as it could be right now (especially because I went to the trouble of putting Teeny out in nature... where there are animals... but then didn't do anything with that).

As mentioned earlier, I also wanted to try and do something with prom as a set piece but I couldn't figure out how to fit it into this draft. I thought about doing something like Teeny sneaks out of prom to go kill the deer, but the idea of her going hunting at night really didn't make any sense. I could replace the camping trip with prom as the event where Teeny almost feels like she's fitting in with her peers until something goes wrong. On the other hand, part of me likes the way it is right now, with Teeny missing prom to go hunting; perhaps in a future draft I'd show some of Cameron at prom to make that juxtaposition more prominent. Clearly, this is something I'm still up in the air about.

One other element that I've gone back and forth on a few times is the question of whether or not Teeny decides to go to college at the end of the movie. The way I wrote the treatment, after Teeny saves the baby deer she decides to take a year off and apply to colleges of her own choice that will best allow her to pursue her interests. Once I started writing the post-climax scenes, however, I became torn. The movie felt like it was ready to wrap up and adding that beat of Teeny changing her mind again about college felt like it was dragging things out too much. However, the way I ended up writing, with Teeny

deciding to go to the school her mom got her into in the fall feels a little too much like Teeny just giving in to what's expected of her and doing what everyone else is doing. That's another question I'll have to continue pondering until I figure out what best serves her character.

While revision will never be my favorite part of writing, I can look at the past few pages with a lot less trepidation than I would have two years ago. When I finished writing my first feature in undergrad, I always planned to revise it but I never knew where to start. The prospect of tearing apart something I'd worked so hard to create daunted me, so I never really tackled it. After two years in grad school, I feel much more prepared to continue my writing independently, including revision. The skills I learned, the confidence I gained, and the peers I met whose feedback I respect will all be invaluable as I go off into the world as a writer.

## Appendix A – *Stuffed Pitch*

Why I chose to adapt this:

- world, visuals
- opportunity for colorful characters
- tone: dark and humorous

Things I had to overcome:

- lack of narrative

Pitch:

Sixteen-year-old Teeny Markowski doesn't look like someone who spends a lot of time with dead animals. But ever since her late father got her hooked on the art of taxidermy, it's become her biggest passion in life. So when her mother Marcia scrimps and saves and agrees to take her to Springfield, Illinois for the World Taxidermy Championships, she's ecstatic. Instead of being the weirdo girl with rabbit blood in her fingernails, for once she'll be surrounded by people who get her. She'll get to learn about taxidermy from the best of the best. And maybe she'll even get to meet her taxidermy hero: Critter DuPaul, founder of the world championships and author of her favorite book.

Things don't quite turn out as she'd hoped: the other taxidermists seem to look down on her craftier techniques, everyone seems so focused on buying the fancy materials that she can't afford rather than the creativity/skill involved and oh yeah: Critter DuPaul is dead. They announce a special competition: whoever makes the mount that best honors Critter's legacy will win that year's \$20,000 prize. Teeny is dejected and ready to give up on the whole event when she has a stroke of inspiration — she's read

Critter's book hundreds of times and knows everything there is to know about him. If she can use that knowledge to delve even deeper into his life, she can make the best mount for him and win that prize.

Teeny takes her mom and they find Critter's childhood home in a nearby town. They succeed in annoying the heck of the house's current residents but their persistence pays off when they meet a next door neighbor who knew Critter as a young boy. The neighbor tells them of a few of Critter favorite spots as a kid. But as Teeny and her mom are heading to explore some of those spots, they see a few other competitors arriving in his old neighborhood: Teeny's not the only one who had this idea and the others are hot on her tail.

Teeny and Marcia pass through various haunts of Critter's, looking for inspiration and collecting little souvenirs that could be helpful — when one of the other taxidermists doesn't snatch them up first. For their last stop, Teeny insists on going to a small local petting zoo that Critter worked at as a teen — none of the others are bothering with it because they can't imagine it would be important, but Teeny wants to go. And it's there that Teeny makes her biggest discovery about Critter yet: that he's not dead after all.

Teeny is flabbergasted — that he's alive of course, but also that she's really and truly face to face with her idol. Critter is as friendly and jolly as she ever could have hoped. But he explains that the pressure of being the great Critter DuPaul became more than he could handle, so he and his wife concocted a scheme to fake his death so he could live a quieter life. He tells Teeny that he'll help her win the competition if she promises to keep his secret.

Teeny's honored to do anything to help this man she's idolized for so long — and if it means she has a better chance of winning the grand prize, well that's a cherry on top. She helps run interference when some other taxidermists show up looking for inspiration

and she manages to send them on a wild goose chase. But she's less successful at putting off a reporter, Susan O., who's been sniffing around the competition all weekend. Susan isn't quite sure yet that Critter's alive but she smells something rotten and she knows Teeny knows something. So she tells Teeny something that SHE knows: the competition is bankrupt and there is no \$20,000 prize.

Teeny is crushed. Partly about the money, yeah, because she wanted to help out her mom, but also because Critter lied to her. There was never a chance of her going home with that prize. Angry at the betrayal, Teeny impulsively tells Susan O. that Critter is alive and gives her proof. She quickly regrets this choice, but it's too late: Susan has written her story and it's running in the paper the next day. All she can do is give Critter some warning.

The next day, the taxidermy competitors are in an uproar: they've all read Susan's article and know the truth — that Lucinda and Critter faked his death for the life insurance, that the organization has no money, that the competition was rigged for a plant to win so they wouldn't have to give out the \$20,000 prize. Critter himself shows up hoping to calm the masses, but it backfires. Angry taxidermists are packing up their mounts, storming out of the hotel, but Teeny stops them. She stands on the hotel's front desk and makes a passionate speech: "If this was really all about the money for you, feel free to go. But if you came here to celebrate the work we do, there's no reason we can't still do that. We don't need Critter or Lucinda to tell us who or what we can celebrate." Then Teeny starts picking people out of the crowd and giving them hyperspecific superlative type awards — "Moose You'd Want to Take Home to Meet Your Parents," "Fastest Looking Duck," "Best Use of Lunch Meat." The crowd gets into it and everyone starts giving each other awards and compliments and hugs.

Most people end up staying for the last day of the conference. The atmosphere is totally changed: it is light hearted and supportive and just a lot more fun. Teeny walks through the hall with Critter and he tells her this is what it was like in the early days and thanks her for everything she's done. Teeny's like, "Um even when I outed the fact that you faked your own death?" and Critter is like "Yes, even that." Teeny asks what's going to happen to the competition going forward; Critter says he doesn't know. Teeny is like "Well... my mom's pretty good with managing our money... maybe she could help you out." Critter responds, "Only if the Markowskis are a package deal: we need someone like you around here too." And then Critter and Teeny stand on the stage and survey their territory like Simba and Mufasa, THE END.



## Appendix B – *Stuffed* Reel Breakdown

Structure:

Reel 1:

—**setting up the world, characters**

—introduce: Teeny, Marcia, Cal, Critter, Lucinda, Brontley brothers, Prudence, Susan O.

**Inciting incident:** Critter is dead, new competition

Reel 2:

—**Teeny's disillusionment, conflict**, Critter was her hero

—Brontley's are pissed about competition being changed

—Susan O. is snooping

**End of Act I:** Teeny decides to enter the competition

Reel 3:

—**Teeny delves into Critter's past**

—cut back to competition and see other characters trying other things first and then having the same idea

**End of Reel 3:** The others are on her tail

Reel 4:

—**race against other competitors to learn more about Critter**

**Midpoint:** Critter is alive!!!

Reel 5:

—**Teeny keeping Critter's secret** if he helps to win the competition

**End of Reel 5:** There's no prize money

Reel 6:

—Teeny turns on Critter when she learns that there is no prize money: they have a plant who was always supposed to win

—dishes to Susan O. and then regrets it but can't stop what she did

**End of Act II:** Susan O.'s article is published revealing that Critter is alive

Reel 7:

—Uproar, Teeny figuring out how to save the competition

**Climax:** Teeny saves the competition (organizes people to come together to create something that saves it?)

Reel 8:

—wrap up

## **Appendix C – *Roadkill Treatment, Version 1***

Act 1: Meet sixteen-year-old TEENY MARKOWSKI. She's kind and quiet but a bit of an outcast at school due to her tendency to show up with animal blood on her clothing and knives she forgot were in her pockets. Despite what her classmates might think, she's not some animal-killing sociopath: she's simply a taxidermy enthusiast, has been for a couple years now--ever since her older sister SOPHIE died, quickly followed by her older sister's hamster. They buried her sister, but Teeny stuffed the hamster, put it on her shelf, and then kept looking for more dead things to stuff. If she can give them this new kind of life, it's like they never died at all. Her father RICK indulges this hobby, thinking it's just a phase, but it worries her mother MARCIA a bit more. They fight about this a lot--actually they just fight a lot in general. One day, Teeny's dad up and leaves them. Teeny is devastated and confused, and when her mom tries to explain, Teeny latches onto just one part of what her mom said: they would fight about money. Convinced that if she can fix that part of the problem that everything will be okay again, Teeny tries to figure out how to help the family financially--which is when she comes across word of a taxidermy competition taking place in the nearby city--with a \$10,000 prize.

Act 2: Teeny convinces her mom to take her to the competition, but Marcia only agrees when Teeny promises to try some "normal" teenage things too. They arrive at the event and Teeny scopes out her competition, rebuffing anyone who tries to get to know her (including some people from her own hometown?): she's here to win and everyone else is just in her way. The attendees are then told the terms of the competition: they'll each be given a deer to work with and they have one week to make the most lifelike mount possible. Teeny takes her animal home and sets to work obsessively, skipping

classes and getting into trouble while looking for other animals and parts for her mount. Marcia reminds Teeny of their deal and invites over CAMERON, Teeny's best friend from before her sister died who she'd drifted apart from. Cameron drags Teeny to something normal and teenager-y and it's actually going okay and they're starting to reconnect, but then Teeny's facade slips and she does something that freaks out everyone around them. Teeny retreats back into her work but Cameron comes after her and convinces Teeny to show her around her new world instead. Teeny teaches Cameron how to stuff a squirrel and while Cameron doesn't necessarily love it, she enjoys learning from Teeny and they bond over the experience. Teeny's dad comes back to town and gets his own place--it's clearly a step forward in the dissolution of her parents' marriage, but Teeny takes it to mean that he wants to come home. She shows her dad her progress on her mount for the competition and he's basically like, "Oh, that's cute, you're still doing that?" This infuriates Teeny, making her even more determined to win to prove that this isn't just some silly hobby of hers. She realizes she needs to do something extreme to make her mount stand out: she's going to get a second deer and pose them locking antlers mid-fight. It doesn't take long for her to figure out that the only way she's going to get another deer to mount is to kill one herself, something she's never done before and never wanted to. She comes up with a plan for tracking one (roping Cameron into it against Cameron's wishes), gets a weapon (gun? bow and arrow?), and sets it into motion. Her plan works perfectly, but when the time comes to pull the trigger, she can't do it. But when she gets back home and finds her parents signing divorce papers, she goes right back out and shoots the deer dead in one shot. She immediately and powerfully regrets it. She buries the deer and then goes home and throws away all her taxidermy tools and supplies, vowing to never do it again.

Act 3: Teeny tries to throw herself into “normal” teenage life. She joins the track team, starts eating with others at lunch, sticks to the accepted topics of conversation. Cameron knows something is off but Teeny insists everything is fine. She’s just growing up, moving on. In reality, Teeny is haunted by her actions. At track practice, she hears deer hooves following her. She has nightmares of shooting her sister like she shot the deer, so she stops sleeping. Her mother is more worried about her than ever. She overhears her parents arguing one night about what to do about her. She storms in, saying she thought the whole point of them getting divorced was that they wouldn’t have to argue with each other anymore, then leaves to stay at Cameron’s house. Teeny opens up to Cameron for the first time about her sister’s death--how much she misses her, how doing anything normal just makes her think about her sister never getting to do those things. Cameron’s like all the more reason to try as many new things as you can for her. Teeny’s like “uh like killing a deer” and Cameron’s like “well part of trying new things is making mistakes.” Then Teeny gets AN IDEA! Teeny organizes a funeral for the deer she killed, invites everyone: her parents, Cameron, her classmates, the whole town. She stuff the deer but then goes over the top with it, giving it like a crown and one of her sister’s old dresses. The funeral serves as a de facto funeral for her sister that she missed and a coming out party for Teeny’s weirdness: she’s not going to hide it any more. After the funeral Teeny focuses less on taxidermy and more on trying as many new things as she possibly can, the weirder the better, often with her mother or Cameron by her side.

## **Appendix D – Roadkill Treatment, Version 2**

Act 1: Meet seventeen-year-old TEENY MARKOWSKI. She's kind and quiet but a bit of an outcast at school due to her tendency to show up with animal blood on her clothing and knives she forgot were in her pockets. Despite what her classmates might think, she's not some animal-killing sociopath: she's simply a taxidermy enthusiast, has been for a couple years now--ever since her older sister SOPHIE died, quickly followed by her older sister's hamster. They buried her sister, but Teeny stuffed the hamster, put it on her shelf, and then kept looking for more dead things to stuff. If she can give them this new kind of life, it's like they never died at all. Her father RICK indulges this hobby, thinking it's just a phase, but it worries her mother MARCIA a bit more.

- Teeny gets into college (mom secretly applied for her?), doesn't want to go
  - Scared of leaving home because of sister's death (did sister die at college?)
  - Also has no idea what she would do in college -- the only thing she likes is taxidermy
- Mom relents says she doesn't have to go but she has to pay them back for the deposit she already paid
- Looks into getting a job but can't/doesn't like any of her options
- Learns of taxidermy competition, decides to enter

Act 2: Teeny convinces her mom to take her to the competition, but Marcia only agrees when Teeny promises to try some "normal" teenage things too (or maybe she specifically makes Teeny promise to go to prom?). They arrive at the event and Teeny quickly realizes her skills and resources pale in comparison to most of the others there.

She's going to have to get very creative to even have a chance to compete. The attendees are then told the terms of the competition: they'll each be given a deer to work with and they have two weeks (?) to make the most lifelike mount possible. Teeny takes her animal home and sets to work obsessively, skipping classes and getting into trouble while looking for other animals and parts for her mount. Marcia reminds Teeny of their deal and invites over CAMERON, Teeny's best friend from before her sister died who she'd drifted apart from. Cameron drags Teeny to something normal and teenager-y and it's actually going okay and they're starting to reconnect, but then Teeny's facade slips and she does something that freaks out everyone around them. Teeny retreats back into her work but Cameron comes after her and convinces Teeny to show her around her new world instead. Teeny teaches Cameron how to stuff a squirrel and while Cameron doesn't necessarily love it, she enjoys learning from Teeny and they bond over the experience. Cameron's going to the school Teeny got into and as they reconnect Teeny starts to soften towards the idea of going to college.

Teeny finds out her parents are getting a divorce (maybe they were trying to hide it until she was in a better place to hear it but she finds out by accident?) This pushes her to refocus on the competition so she can use the money to move out and live on her own.

She realizes she needs to do something extreme to make her mount stand out: she's going to get a second deer and pose them locking antlers mid-fight. It doesn't take long for her to figure out that the only way she's going to get another deer to mount is to kill one herself, something she's never done before and never wanted to. She comes up with a plan for tracking one (roping Cameron into it against Cameron's wishes), gets a weapon (gun? bow and arrow?), and sets it into motion. Her plan works perfectly, but when the time comes to pull the trigger, she can't do it. But when she gets back home and finds her parents signing divorce papers, she goes right back out and shoots the deer dead

in one shot. She immediately and powerfully regrets it. She buries the deer and then goes home and throws away all her taxidermy tools and supplies, vowing to never do it again.

Act 3: Teeny tries to throw herself into “normal” teenage life. She agrees to go to college in the fall, starts eating with others at lunch, sticks to the accepted topics of conversation. Cameron knows something is off but Teeny insists everything is fine. She’s just growing up, moving on. In reality, Teeny is haunted by her actions. When she bikes to school, she hears deer hooves following her. She has nightmares of shooting her sister like she shot the deer, so she stops sleeping. Her mother is more worried about her than ever. She overhears her parents arguing one night about what to do about her. She storms in, saying she thought the whole point of them getting divorced was that they wouldn’t have to argue with each other anymore, then leaves to stay at Cameron’s house. Teeny opens up to Cameron for the first time about her sister’s death--how much she misses her, how doing anything normal just makes her think about her sister never getting to do those things. Cameron’s like all the more reason to try as many new things as you can for her. Teeny’s like “uh like killing a deer” and Cameron’s like “well part of trying new things is making mistakes.” Teeny organizes a funeral for the deer she killed (invites Cameron, maybe her parents?). A young deer shows up, injured, and Teeny realizes/guess that this is the child of the deer she killed. [A beat where maybe it seems like she’s going to kill that deer too? Someone tells her it can’t be saved, to put it out of its misery.] Teeny manages to save the deer somehow (& she has to drive a car to do it), making her realize she likes working with live animals. Her mother agrees to let her take a gap year so she can apply to schools where she can work towards becoming a vet.



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