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# A Mixtape for your Minivan: Writing the Line Between Fiction and Non

Emily Lohr

*Olivet Nazarene University*, [elohr24@gmail.com](mailto:elohr24@gmail.com)

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A Mixtape for your Minivan: Writing the Line Between Fiction and Non

Emily Lohr

Olivet Nazarene University

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To my mother, brother, and grandmother. You have all been the generous benefactors of this story. May you now become its beneficiaries as well.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The following paper is an overview of the creation of the novella, *A Mixtape for your Minivan*, a coming-of-age story set in Cleveland during the Great Recession. This paper features an overview on novellas as a genre, an in-depth look at the drafting and editing process the author undertook while writing this novella, and a summary of all historical research done in relation to the novella. The paper also features excerpts from the first draft of the work, and author reflections on the various drafts. The following paper was written to partially fulfill the requirements of Olivet Nazarene's Honors Program and has been revised for Digital Commons.

*Keywords: realistic fiction, young adult literature, novella, revision process, writing methods*

## INTRODUCTION

When I sat down to write the first draft of *A Mixtape for your Minivan*, I did so with the intention of challenging myself. Never before had I attempted to write something firmly grounded in the world of realism. Never before had I committed to diligently editing one of my manuscripts. Never before had I made any serious effort to incorporate scholarly research into a work of fiction.

In the end, all of these elements did indeed prove challenging: finding scholarly analyses of recent historical events proved more difficult than I first anticipated, and editing a book proved to be far more painful a process than I had previously thought possible. And yet, it was not until I finally sat down to reflect on the creative process that I realized it was neither the research, nor the editing, nor the genre that gave the most trouble. Certainly, there were days when I when I thought I would lose my mind if I had to look at one more minimum wage statistic. I even recall spending one night sobbing over my computer keyboard, having edited the same page for fifteen days in a row, too stubborn to move on, too prideful to admit defeat. And yet, that was not the low point of my journey.

No, the single most challenging part of writing this novella was the one aspect I thought would make the process a little easier: writing from my personal experiences. I quickly learned that, for me, there is nothing more agonizing than baring my soul and writing my own personal truth for others to see. And yet, whether or not I realized it at the onset, that was exactly what I set out to do when I wrote *A Mixtape for your*



*Minivan*: chronicle my experiences as a young teen living in Cleveland during the Great Recession.

## REVIEW OF GENRE

I began writing with the intention of crafting a novella. I had previously written novels, and I knew from experience that writing and polishing an entire novel would be much too ambitious of an undertaking for a two-year project. But I have always disliked short stories, and the idea of producing a portion of an uncompleted work left a bad taste in my mouth. So, it was by process of elimination and not any serious research that I decided I would write a novella. Looking back on the decision, I am thankful for the naiveté with which I approached the genre. A preliminary google search would have been enough to turn me off to the idea forever; as baffling as it may seem, the novella is a genre of ill-repute.

This reputation only becomes more bizarre the more research one does into the subject. The novella's most basic definition seems as benign as they come: "a work of fiction intermediate in length and complexity between a short story and a novel" (Merriam-Webster). And yet, it is here the novella's critics begin to take issue: if it is not a short story and not a full fledged novel, then what is it, and why does it exist? Literary agents do not know what to do with it, critics question the author's commitment to the work, and readers are apt to wonder whether they truly got their money's worth (McEwan). Worst of all, novellas are known as a hated genre amongst publishers, who would much rather rework a novella into a serialized format or string a few novellas together to form a respectably sized book. According to author Josh Weil, "publishers don't think people will read a novella. Or, more to the point, buy one".

Even proponents of the genre tend to dislike the rather vague definition most assign to the novella. Weil words the question precisely when he asks, “How short is a short story... and how many words must a story accrue before it morphs into a novel?”. Many people have tried to clarify the issue by adding numbers to the definitions: The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America count anything between 17,500 and 40,000 words as a novella, according to their Nebula award criteria. However, some books that have traditionally been classified as novellas, such as *The Crying Lot of 49* and *Turn of the Screw*, fall outside of this range, while other books (mostly children’s classics) such as *Old Yeller* and *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* are always regarded as novels, despite failing to hit the 40,000-word mark (Graham). Even after providing his own numbers as definition for the genre, novelist Ian McEwan admits the word count measure is “arbitrary” at best.

The common complaint among authors is that classifying novellas merely according their word counts glosses over the most defining characteristics of the genre. As Canadian poet and novelist George Fetherling famously put it, to call a novella a short novel is “like insisting that a pony is a baby horse”. Novellas are defined by more than their length; they are a distinct genre all their own, characterized by recognizable features and their adherence to genre conventions. Almost all writers will agree that because of its necessary brevity, a novella tends to feature a highly distilled plot, a tightly focused setting, and a small cast of characters. Because of these constraints, succinctness is key, and all elements in a well constructed novella end up pointing back to one central element, whether it be related to internal character development, social

commentary, or the setting itself (Gibaldi). As writer Tony Whedon puts it, a novella is necessarily “implosive, impacted, rather than explosive and expansive”. Though novellas span a wide array of disparate topics, they are united by their dedication to powerful, concise language, their unwavering focus, and their single-minded devotion to message (McEwan). Rarely does an author end up crafting a novella that pauses or rambles.

But as soon as one tries to extrapolate the novella’s definition beyond these basic features, consensus breaks down. While some writers like McEwan find that the novella’s brevity necessitates an economy of words that produces unparalleled “precision and clarity”, others, like Fetherling, believe the genre is by and large characterized by “lyricism that leads to accusations of artiness”. And where Gibaldi sees the genre as being preferably confined to the realm of realism, Whedon considers the novella an adept genre with which to explore topics of romance and fantasy.

In fact, if author’s accounts are to be believed, then the single most unifying characteristic of the novella is the industry’s staunch aversion to publishing them. Indeed, it was this characteristic of the genre and no other that was mentioned by every single source I encountered. All things considered, I would take any complaints lobbied at publishers by disgruntled writers with a grain of salt.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Choosing a Setting

If *A Mixtape for your Minivan* is unique in any sense, I would argue that its uniqueness stems from its conception. Before I had constructed a plot, before I had assembled a cast of characters, before I had even picked a theme, I had chosen my setting. As soon as I decided to write a novella, I knew I wanted to write it about my hometown Cleveland and about the Great Recession.

I had been wanting to write a book set in the greater Cleveland area for a long time. On the one hand, I longed to see more stories showcasing the industrial heartland of this nation, a part of the country I felt rarely saw much positive attention from the media at large. But more to the point, I wanted to tell the story of my childhood for the same reason any person writes a memoir: I wanted to see my version of the story told. Despite the fact that the entirety of America suffered through the same recession, I felt that in many ways, the story I ended up telling in *A Mixtape for your Minivan* was a story many Americans had not encounter firsthand. In short, the recession my community had lived through was not the same recession most Americans had weathered.

I first realized this during my freshman year studying at a small university in rural Illinois. I quickly learned that most of my peers had not grown up experiencing the same economic hardship and general instability that I had living in Cleveland. For the first time in my life, I found that the circumstances of my upbringing were suddenly factors that separated me from my peers. My divorced parents, our financial instability, our multigenerational living situation, and my mother's unemployment had been par for the

course in my previous community. Yet, each of these features individually made me an oddity in my new community. Collectively, they made me almost alien.

Of course, some of this disparity in life circumstances can be attributed to the fact that I was now attending a private, Christian institute of higher learning, where the majority of students came from relatively affluent families with white collar backgrounds. But I also quickly learned that geographic location had a lot to do with the differing experiences between my peers and me. I found I had much more in common with my friends from Gary, Erie, and Toledo than I did with my friends from rural Illinois.

Thanks to these observations, I was researching the disparate geographical affects of the Great Recession long before I decided to write a book on the topic. I quickly learned that, much like the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Great Recession affected regions unequally. In fact, many American communities experienced little to no effects of the Great Recession, while some areas of Texas and the Dakotas actually experienced a decrease in poverty rates, home vacancy, and unemployment between 2005 and 2011 (Owens and Sampson 3). On the other end of the spectrum, Cleveland was simultaneously one of the hardest hit and slowest to recover cities coming out of the Great Recession (*Distressed Communities Index* 19).

Upon arriving at my university, not only was I without a community who shared and understood my experience of the Great Recession, but aside from local newspaper columns, I was deprived of any media that would represent my experience to my peers. To this day, I have found no young adult literature, and very little fictional literature dealing with either the Great Recession, or the related financial and mortgage crises of

the late 2000s. This is presumably due to the fact that these events happened fairly recently. Still, this explanation did not diminish my desire to eventually write a story set in Cleveland during the Great Recession: a story that represented my experience and the experience of my community.

### **Outlining and Planning**

Once I had my setting pinned down, I set about outlining the plot. I knew from the outset that I would not be writing a memoir. Although the book draws heavily from my own personal experiences and memories, it is by and large a work of fiction. Most of the events in the book are completely fictitious, and those that are pulled from my own life are heavily embellished, though not necessarily exaggerated.

Rather than write out a hard and fast outline, I began by sketching out some basic scenes and beats that I knew I wanted to hit during the story (see Appendix A). Some of these beats were concrete moments. For example, I knew I wanted to have a scene where the protagonist has a panic attack during a father-daughter dance at a wedding. Other beats were not quite actual scenes at their conception, but emotional moments and ideas I wanted to capture. For example, I knew I wanted to have a moment where the protagonist encountered something from her upper middle class childhood that made her feel simultaneously nostalgic and ashamed of her privileged past. This morphed into the scene in chapter eight where Quinn visits Corey's house for the first time and notices the stark similarities between his house and her old home.

As I continued to work through the plot and story arcs, I combined and fleshed out the various beats until they comprised ten distinct episodes. These episodes laid the framework for the outline of my first draft, which I initially planned to be ten chapters long. Over the course of editing, these ten chapters were eventually expanded to twelve.

Once the basic framework for the plot was in place, I started fleshing out my cast of characters. At the forefront was the protagonist Quinn Koeth and her immediate family. Surrounding them were Quinn's various school friends. For each major character, I created a character sheet, which included information such as their age and grade (if applicable), their ethnicity, their family make-up and housing situation, what neighborhood they lived in, their hobbies, their occupation (or lack thereof), and what vehicles their family owned. Some of this information was solely for my own benefit and would never make it into the book explicitly, but it helped me flesh out the characters and consistently characterize them throughout the story. Other details, such as what part of town they lived in, who they lived with, and their grade were important to have written down so I could consult that information and keep those details consistent throughout the novella. I found that having a character sheet completed for the important people in the story helped me understand each individual character better and helped me to write them as dimensional and dynamic individuals (see Appendix B).



## Research

Before I began my novella, I knew I wanted the setting to be not merely believable, but realistic and tangible. I wanted my book grounded in facts so it might illuminate not only the human condition, but the human condition at a particular place and time. That is why I felt it was vitally important to present the historical details of Cleveland during the recession as accurately as possible over the course of my novella. It was not enough for me to give future readers a glimpse of what it had been like during the recession; I wanted fellow Clevelanders who had lived through the recession to feel as though my book accurately and truthfully represented their experience as well as my own. I wanted to craft a sense of realism.

Although my own life experience and memories served as my primary source of inspiration, I also consulted a number of sources (academic and otherwise) on my quest for realism. One of the best resources I had at my disposal were local Northeastern Ohio newspapers. Of those, the sources I primarily consulted were *The Plain Dealer* (which covers Cleveland, Parma, and Akron), the *News Sun* (which covers Berea and Brook Park), and their online aggregate, *Cleveland.com*. By using these sources, I was able to gather precise historical data on local housing foreclosures, layoffs, and factory closures. I was also able to read first-hand accounts and interviews conducted during the Great Recession, which helped me understand the sentiment of the time and public opinion concerning things like the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (informally referred to as the bailout), the rise in unemployment, and the financial crisis. While most of these articles provided me with an informational wellspring from which to draw

from, some particularly shocking events ended up inspiring specific scenes in the novella. For example, one *New York Times* article that covered help wanted ads discouraging unemployed candidates from applying inspired the opening scene of my novella (Rampell).

In addition to newspapers, I also consulted a number of magazine articles and public reports published on the Great Recession in order to grasp the wider scope of the issues plaguing the nation during this period. I sought a better understanding of the long-term effects and consequences associated with the Great Recession. Of particular interest to me were articles about public understanding and discussion of social class, discussions about minimum wage and the growth of the working poor, and the realities and long-term consequences of teen unemployment.

I found that Americans tend to shy away from making distinctions of social class, often going as far as outright denying the very existence of social classes in American society, with almost 50% of all Americans self-identifying as middle class (Shenker-Osorio). Yet, there is a huge disparity of status and opportunities among Americans, and the inequality between the rich and the poor, the advantaged and the distressed, has only widened during and since the Great Recession (*Distressed Communities Index* 11). Additionally, economic inequality is not just expressed between communities, but within them (*Distressed Communities Index* 33). In my novella, I explored the idea of diverging social classes through the social mobility of specific characters. For example, one of the biggest sources of interpersonal conflict in *A Mixtape for your Minivan* stems from the growing income inequality between the protagonist Quinn whose family is

experiencing downward social mobility, and her friend Jean, who comes from an upper-middle class background.

Another topic I researched was the working poor, a class of people who are employed at near or full-time levels, but still find themselves hovering at or below the poverty line. Once nonexistent, this percentage of the population reached an all time high during the recession thanks to the replacement of full time employees with part time workers who could be paid lower wages and denied benefits like health insurance and paid-leave (Gillespie). This is the position that my protagonist's mother, a former homemaker with a business degree, finds herself in upon re-entering the workforce—stuck in a dead-end job at a temp agency.

Finally, I did considerable amounts of research into teen unemployment during the Great Recession, since it was one of the main plot points in my novella. The fact that none of the teenagers in *Mixtape for your Minivan* can't find decent employment is mostly played for laughs in my book. In reality, teen unemployment during the Great Recession was no laughing matter, and its lingering effects continue to worry economists to this day. Teenagers, who are statistically speaking the hardest hit demographic when it comes to recession unemployment, saw a decrease in their employment to population ratio by about 25% (Sheirholz). Additionally, youth (16-24 year-olds) unemployment rates during the summer of 2009 were at 18.5% according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nearly double the national unemployment rate of 9.5%. This was the highest recorded youth unemployment rate since the bureau began recording the statistics in 1948 (Bureau of Labor Statistics). This level of sustained

unemployment, coupled with the loss of valuable entry level job experience means that Millennials can expect to see “repressed wages, decreased employment, and reduced productivity” in their near and continuing futures (Sullivan et al. 5). One economist put a tangible number to these bleak outlooks and estimated Millennials can collectively expect to miss out on \$20 billion dollars in earnings over the next ten years (Steinberg). Even though I tried to keep a light tone when dealing with this subject in my novella, I did not shy away from having my characters describe and discuss the potentially serious implications of their summer predicament.

Although I toyed with the idea of setting my novella in an actual city, I ultimately choose to set my story in a fictional suburb. I did this for two reasons: first, with so many aspects of my novella drawing heavily from my personal experiences, I wanted to leave myself a little room for deniability by creating some nominal distance between my fictional story and the actual events of my teen-hood. Second, since class distinctions are so often delineated by municipality borders, I wanted to create a place where families with many different economic and educational backgrounds could interact in an intimate way. With these goals in mind, I created the fictional town of Tabor.

Tabor was designed as an amalgamation of several western, first-ring suburbs, most notably Brook Park and Parma. By studying the 2000 census, I learned that Cleveland’s western suburbs were predominately made up of white, lower-middle class families, with a larger percentage of blue collar workers than the surrounding areas. There continued to be a high percentage of first and second generation immigrants living in these communities, most of whom had German, Polish, Slovakian, and other

Eastern European heritage. Some of the largest employers in these neighborhoods were manufacturing plants, with General Motors being the top employers in Parma (Zurick).

Although unemployment in Cleveland spiked during the recession, the hike in plant closures and factory layoffs was merely an accelerated dip in an ongoing trend. Manufacturing jobs of all types had been leaving Cleveland for decades, and the Great Recession only served to aggravate pre-existing problems (*Distressed Communities Index* 19). During my research, I was overwhelmed by the sheer scope and magnitude of job loss within the manufacturing sector, and it quickly became apparent that I would have to choose one particular industry to serve as a synecdoche for the problem as a whole. The automotive industry in Cleveland was hit particularly hard by the recession; Ford and General Motors both closed plants in western Cleveland suburbs, which resulted in the loss of thousands of jobs (Schoenberger). And Chrysler had pulled out of Northeast Ohio all together by 2010, despite the economic stimulus plans and the bailout (Grant). These factors made the automotive industry the obvious choice for a symbolic stand-in. After doing specific research into the GM Plant layoffs in Parma and the closure of the Brook Park Ford Casting Plant, I decided to focus on these events specifically in my novella. Rather than invent or speculate on what jobs were lost during the recession, I wanted to use actual plant closures and layoffs as a backdrop for my story. I thought it was important that the major events of my novella be grounded in reality, even if those events happened peripherally to the main plot. Although the references to the Ford and GM plants are limited, their inclusion adds depth and honesty to the story.

Perhaps the most difficult subject I found myself researching while writing was teenage slang. Language evolves at such a breakneck pace, and linguistic trends are short-lived, especially among teenage populations. However, incorporating slang and colloquialisms into character dialogue is a simple yet effective way to weave setting and historical accuracy into a book. By incorporating slang into my characters' speech, I attempted to saturate my story with the authentic teen culture of the late 2000s. It would be easy to assume that, since I was a teen myself during the late 2000s, this was a fairly easy task to accomplish, and on some level it was. One way I tried to achieve this stylistic dialogue was by including grammatically adverse contractions such as 'gonna' and 'ain't'. I also included vernacular terms like 'staycation' and 'McMansion' which characterize the period's thrifty, opulence-adverse mentality. Additionally, I made a point of incorporating some nonstandard, regional constructions into dialogue, specifically the "needs washed" construction, which is a typical grammatical construction unique to this region of the mid-west (Meher et al.).

In spite of the fact that I was familiar with the slang from this period, I still struggled with making sure I did not include any post 2009 slang. To try to prevent this from happening, I made liberal use of google trends and urban dictionary, which was a surprisingly helpful resource when it came to tracing back language trends and slang usage.

Even though the city of Tabor itself is fictional, I did make use of several actual Northeast Ohio locations, including Olmsted Falls, Ohio City, Bridal Veil Falls, Malley's Chocolates, the Cleveland Metroparks, and the Aut-O-Rama Twin Drive-in Theater.

Additionally, while they are not often explicitly stated, I tried to allow the various ethnicities of the protagonist and her peers to subtly color the story, which I felt helped add credibility to the world. Surnames like Malak, Belenko, and Mostar set the stage for the various ethnic identities at play in the respective families, while ethnic dishes like *halusky* and *asopoa* help establish a specific nationality, Slovenian and Puerto Rican, respectively.

Generally speaking, when writing this book, I tried to invent as little as possible. Whenever I could, I inserted facts and specifics into the story as opposed to inventions and vague references. I did not want any inaccuracy to pull native readers out of the story. I specifically went to great lengths in order to avoid anachronisms, going so far as to research box-office records and song chartings from *Billboard* in order to accurately recreate simple things like probable movie showings and radio playlists. It is my hope that the attention to detail shines through to future readers and contributes to the overall immersion and accuracy of my novella as a whole.

## EXCERPT FROM DRAFT ONE

A Mixtape for your Minivan, Draft One- Chapter 1

The thing about your last summer is you can't see it for what it is until it's over/You never know it's your last summer until it's over. June 5<sup>th</sup> 2009 was the first day of my last summer.

The last school bell of my junior year is still echoing in my ears as I sit in my van, my friend Bethany sitting beside me, my brother Caleb in the back. As always, we were waiting for Alex. Sometimes, my life seemed like an infinite montage of me, in my van, waiting for the Malak siblings.

"Caleb." I yell over my headrest. "You and Alex had the same gov final, right? Was she there? Did she say she was going to be late?"

"Yes she was there, and no, she didn't happen to mention her after school plans to me before she ran out of the classroom. Why don't you just text her and find out where she is?"

"Can't." I say, looking down at the flip phone in my lap. "I'm almost out of texts and mom says she'll ground me if I run out of anything before the month's up."

Bethany, who is leaning out of the open van door, filing her nails, sighs dramatically. "It's fine, I'll do it." She says, pulling a pepto pink phone out of her back pack.

"Whoa, is that new?" I ask, leaning over to tap the gleaming black screen.

"Yup. It's the new 3GS. You likey?" She asks, her eyebrows wiggling around like woolly bears.



"I'll like it a lot more when it's finding out where the heck Alex is."

"I'm right here."

The van's side door is yanked open to reveal one ticked Alex Malak, dragging one drenched Eric Malak behind her.

Eric wrenches his arm out of his sister's killer grip. "I told you, I would have been fine if you had just..."

Alex turns to him with a glare so focused, it could cut steel. "I said, we are *not* discussing this." She says through clenched teeth.

When she turns back around, she's got a pseudo-smile plastered on her face.

"Hi, sorry I'm late. Is it okay if Eric tags along? He'll sit on his backpack. Or in the trunk if you prefer."

I take a deep breath through my nose, which is how I get the first whiff spoiled milk and rotten fish, a stench that can only be emanating from the dripping middle-schooler, now freshman. I close my eyes and sigh.

"Get in." I finally tell him, trying not to gag.

Alex shoves Eric into the van, forcing him into the way back. "Grab a seat." I clarify. "No one is sitting in the trunk." I can barely hear Eric murmur his thanks before sitting down.

"Alright everyone, buckle up." I say before starting the van and beginning our slow journey out of the high school parking lot.

Driving to school was a rare privilege for me, one that I had only been afforded because of the shiny row of A's I was guaranteeing on this semester's report card. I was already beginning to regret accepting my reward.

"Oh my god, Quinn, roll down the windows!"

"I'm not rolling down the windows Caleb, so knock it off!"

It might have only been eighty degrees out, but even after propping the doors open for a few minutes, the interior of the van still had to be close to a hundred. Such a feat was a regular occurrence for our 1999 Mercury Villager. Thanks to her jet black exterior, the temperatures she could incubate after a full day in direct sunlight would make a kiln jealous. To make matters worse, the air conditioner in the van was not only broken, it was inexplicitly incapable of blowing anything other than hot air. Normally, the windows would be down, no questions asked. However, we were having a late spring, so the Callery Pears were in full bloom. Their corpse-like scent mingled with the burning diesel of the school buses to form an exquisite bouquet. And to put the rotting cherry on a three-week old Sunday, the school district had picked today of all days to mulch.

Needless to say, I was not going to open the windows before we were at least 500 yards away from the school, which, judging from the frozen line of buses in front of us, wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

"I swear to God, I will throw myself from this moving car..."

"Do it, I dare you."

"I will, and I'll probably end up paralyzed! Do you want that on your conscious?"

"I'd love nothing more than to explain to the EMTs how my wuss of a brother managed to injure himself jumping out of a stationary vehicle."

Our conversation was rapidly devolving into a screaming match, in part because that's just how my brother and I communicate, but also due to the fact that a lapse in judgment on my part had left Bethany in charge of the music.

Bethany had a very developed, very particular taste in music that just so happened to align perfectly with the top forty billboard. Any time a song she liked came on the radio, she'd turn it up a few notches, which would have been fine, if she only turned the stereo back down every once in a while. But rather than return the volume to an acceptable level once a song she didn't fancy came on, she'd simply switch stations until she found another song she loved, at which point she'd proceed to turn the stereo up some more. Her current favorite song was Boom Boom Pow by the Black Eyed Peas, and by surfing stations, she'd just managed to get it to play three times in a row. Needless to say, the subwoofers were currently out woofing low flying aircraft

I'm just about to reach over and turn the volume down myself when I finally hear the tell-tale *hiss* of the bus in front of us letting off it's brakes. Finally.

"Beth, do you mind if I drop the Malaks off first? For... obvious reasons?"

"Whatever." She says as she continues to flip through radio stations.

"Okay, we've left school." My brother says. "Can we *please* roll the windows down now?"

"Fine." I say, smashing all four power window buttons. A cool breeze trickles into the van. "You happy now?"

"Sweet mother of god, yes." Caleb says, ~~his face already mashed against the slight crack our van's rear windows are just barely capable of producing.~~

I'm looking in the rear view mirror, getting ready to yell at him for greasing up the glass when the van hits what has to be the largest pot hole in North East Ohio.

For a split second, everything in the van goes into slow motion. Backpacks bounce into the air as Bethany's open bottle of polish flies, end over end, toward the van windshield. Everyone lurches like we're filming an episode of star trek, corny flailing included. We all pitch forward, then slam back into our seats. The van keeps hurtling down the road.

"Jesus, Quinn, watch where you're going." Caleb shouts.

"Maybe I could if you weren't distracting me with your sophomoric antics." I say.

Bethany rolls her eyes. "Someone's been hitting the SAT flashcards." She grabs a wad of tissues to wipe the OPI off the dash.

"Oh my God, is the music finally off? Praise the Lord." Eric says from the way back, his hands as heavenwards as the claustrophobic van roof will allow.

Bethany leans against her seatbelt to squint at the stereo. "Um, Quinn, I didn't touch the radio." She says, nervously twisting the volume dial.

"Let me see." I say. I swat her hand away from the counsel and begin mashing buttons.

"Does this mean the top forty beast has been permanently neutralized?" Eric asks.

"Eric?" Alex turns around to face her brother. "Shut up."

“Guys,” I say, taking my hand away from the unresponsive dials. “I think it’s broke.”

“No!” Caleb is practically wailing in the back seat. “First the CD player and now this?”

“At least the cassette player still works.” I say, sarcastic cheerfulness dripping from my voice.

Caleb huffs.

“You know what?” I continue. “This is actually a good thing, now that I think about it. Don’t forget mom gave you some homework to do, Caleb, and I know Dr. Ruthboard is always saying how important it is for you to have absolute silence when you work.”

“Okay, that is the exact opposite of what she is always saying. Also, it’s the first day of summer. There’s no way I’m doing homework for mom or anyone else.”

I lean over Bethany to grab the pen and paper pad sticking out of the open dash. “Fine then.” I say, hoisting them both in the air and waving them around. “Who wants to be on look out duty? Anyone? Any takers?” I pause for a minute and wait for someone to speak up. “Just kidding.” I say, chucking the pad at my brother. “Caleb, do it.”

“No way, I just took three finals. My hands are talons.” He holds his gnarled fingers up to the rear view mirror.

“Stop complaining and write or you can’t borrow the Malak’s practice cones.”

“You can’t threaten me with other people’s stuff.”

I give Alex a pleading look through the rear view mirror.

“Caleb, you can’t use our cones until you make your mom’s list.” Alex looks back at me. “Was that good?”

“Perfect.” I say with a Cheshire grin.

Caleb groans, but he uncaps the pen.

“I don’t see why you’re complaining. There’s not going to be anything to write down anyways.” Bethany says.

“It’s the principle of the matter. No one should have to work on the first day of summer break.”

“Which is technically tomorrow, so you have nothing to worry about.” I say.

“There! I see something in Schafer’s window. A white and blue sign, what’s that say?” Bethany asks.

“It says no shoes, no shirt, no service.” Alex says, her lip curled in disgust. “Beth, you really need to get your eyes checked out. You know it’s the 21<sup>st</sup> century, right? They do have contacts.”

Eric pokes his head over the seats. “I think I heard the water treatment plant’s hiring again.”

“Yeah, and Ford’s looking for some live crash dummies. We’re looking for part time jobs Eric, not full time worker’s comp. Besides, they only want engineers. What a bunch of menial labor snobs.”

"That's nothing," Alex says. "Destiny told me she went into Quick's Pizza because they're hiring drivers, and they told her they're only taking applicants with 5 years of experience."

"Experience with what? Driving?" I ask.

"No, delivering Pizza."

"Margie's Diner just announced that because of all the steel mill lay-offs, they're only hiring adults. So good luck working there." Caleb says. "What's next? McDonald's only hiring college grads?"

"That's already happening." I say "When there's only one position to fill, a hundred applicants, and ten are college grads who can't find work, you know who's not getting the job? The kid who has to quit in August when school starts again. They're not hiring college students, let alone us high school plebeians."

"Plebeians?" Alex raises her eyebrows. "Seriously, lay off the flashcards."

"Whatever; I say let them have the work." Bethany says, peeling the Elephantastic off her nails. "Give the jobs to people have families to support."

"That's easy for you to say. Not all of us have grandmas willing to buy our makeup." Alex says.

I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to break up the impending cat fight while still staying on the road when Caleb saves me the trouble.

"There! A help wanted sign, right there in the Kmart window."

"Are you sure?" Bethany squints at the sign. "That's some fine print."

“That’s it, out of my way.” Alex unbuckles and leans over the counsel, her hands planted squarely on the dash. She stares at the sign for a few moments before she reads it out loud.

“It says ‘Unemployed Need Not Apply’.”

Slowly, she sinks back into her seat. We all sit in silence for a minute.

“No, I think they’re the ones who need to apply.” Bethany says, breaking the silence with a voice so small, I’m not sure she wants to be heard.

“Should I write it down?” Caleb asks.

“I don’t think that counts.” Alex says. “That’s pretty much the opposite of a help wanted sign.”

Between the Kmart sign and the broken radio, the rest of the ride is uncharacteristically quiet. Bethany does her best to make light conversation after that, but even her recap of the SNL finale fails to distract us from the blank paper in Caleb’s lap. Nothing kills a good mood like a strong dose of rust belt reality.

A Mixtape for your Minivan, Draft One- Chapter 8 excerpt

I arrive at Corey’s house right on time, but for once, Corey isn’t waiting on his drive way. I don’t see a need to ring the doorbell. Corey knows when I pick him up— the time hasn’t changed once in the two months I’ve been doing this, so I resolve to wait it out.

I’m listening to a song that I’ve decided is either about about kelpies or corned beef when I see the front door open just a crack. Not sure I’m seeing what I think I’m



seeing, I lean forward to get a better look. Suddenly, there is a small hand poking out from the door, making 'come hither' motions.

Thing has always given me the heebiegeebees, so the last thing I want to do is come hither. Not even the hand doing double makes me want to leave my van. It's not until an exasperated eleven year old pokes his head out of the door and starts pointing to the ground like an angry dog owner that I finally unbuckle my seat belt and slouch up to the front door.

"And who are you?" I ask, peering down at the disgruntled middle-schooler currently hanging off of the wine colored door.

"Is that how your mother taught you to treat your host?" He asks, crinkling up his nose as he speaks. I think this is the kind of sass my grandma is referring to when she calls one of us *fresh*.

"You can't be my host if you don't invite me in." I point out, eyebrows raised expectantly.

He throws the door open wide. "Milady." He says with a bow. I follow the brat inside.

The first thing that hits me is how beautiful the house is. Every surface I can see features what have to be top of the line finishes. The wood is dark and rich, the tiles all veined and glitters, and the carpets are all a plush cream. A fake fireplace greets me like a phony friend, throwing its designer flames across the entranceway.

My house has a fireplace too, but unlike this one, it's full of very real soot, seeing as it's designed to actually warm a house. Not that we use it anymore, that would kill all the chimney swifts living in it.

The second thing that hits me is how familiar the house is. Everything from it's soaring, sloped ceilings to it's granite covered island and useless recessed shelves reminds me of the house we used to own in Canada. The walls are even the same shade of factory original beige.

The nostalgia is already threatening to kill me, and I'm only just starting to stumble upon the real similarities, but as soon as I do, I realize, I have never wanted to leave a house this badly before.

Although I'm several rooms away from the epicenter, it's painfully obvious that I have just interrupted a marital dispute.

"Mom, Quinn's here."

There is no screaming. No name calling. No broken glass. Mrs. Davis isn't even sporting any running mascara when she appears. But I know. The smell of impending divorce is a scent not easily forgotten.

"Hello Quinn, sorry to make you wait. Corey will be down any second." She glances down at her watch, a deep crease etched between her brows. "I guess we're all just running a little late today."

I mean to say hello, but before I can, she grabs the doorknob of the coat closet I'm leaning against as if I'm not even there. I have to quickly choose whether I want to scamper out of the way or get leveled by slab of pure mahogany.

“Imani, can we talk about this?” Corey’s dad appears in the door frame at the end of the hall.

Mrs. Davis slips into a pair of mary janes before grabbing a set of car keys off a table that’s almost too ornamental to be functional.

“Imani.”

Mrs. Davis spins to face her husband. “I’m already late for work, Charles. We’ll have to finish this later.”

I can tell Mr. Davis wants to say something else, but then he looks at me, the stranger standing uninvited in his house.

His moment of hesitation is brief, but Mrs. Davis manages to slip out. It’s a move that’s perfect execution suggests lots of practice.

It’s like someone’s pulled Mr. Davis’ plug, and I suddenly feel really sorry for the guy. It’s a new feeling, I realize with no small amount of disgust, feeling sorry for someone else for a change. But I can’t help it. I’ve seen this look on my own mom a hundred times.

But look at Corey’s brother confirms that this is all very new to him.

Mr. Davis recovers quickly.

“You must be Quinn. Thanks so much for driving Corey for us. We know how much of an inconvenience this must be. From what Corey tells us, you’re a very busy girl.”

“Oh, not really.” I say.

“Baby sitting for four different families every week; that’s nothing to sneeze at.”

I'd forgotten I'd even told Corey that. "I guess not."

"Let me guess, you had trouble finding part time work, so you decided to create your own job. Babysitting shows that you have entrepreneurial spirit. You know how to take the initiative."

"I guess I never thought about it like that."

Mr. Davis flashes me a grin. "That's how you have to start thinking if you want to earn salary one day. Name your skills, leverage your accomplishments."

"Dad's been taking an online job hunting class."

I'd almost forgotten about the child standing next to me. His arms are folded over his chest. "Hey dad, what's for dinner?"

"Quinn, this is Devin, our youngest."

"You say that like there's more than two of us." Devin says as he pushes past his father into the kitchen. I realize that he might be older than I first imagined him to be.

"We're having hot dog for dinner." Mr. Davis calls after his youngest son.

"Again?" He whines from the kitchen.

"Yes. Now get out of the pantry and find out what's taking your brother so long."

"I'm ready."

I turn around just in time to Corey land on the tile entry way with a thud, his gym bag already slung over his shoulder.

"Sorry I'm late." He says.

"Quinn and I were just chatting about resume diction."

"Then I'm really sorry I'm late." Corey says, side stepping around me just so he can open the door for me.

I roll my eyes. "I didn't realize the Davis's were all such gentlemen."

Corey gives me a inquiring look, but is silent as usual.

Until we get to the van that is.

"Sorry you had to see that." He says as he buckles in. "Dev was kind of freaking out, so I guess he thought a house guest would put an end to the quarreling real quick."

I have to laugh. "He's a smart kid alright. A snot, but a smart snot."

"Tell me about it." Corey says as he reaches down to move his seat back.

"Someone told him he was gifted a few years back, and we've been paying the price ever since."

This is the most wpm Corey's managed since our Santa conversation, so when he falls silent, I assume he's done for the day. I'm about to introduce him to the serenading swedes when he starts talking again.

"Was my dad really lecturing you on resumes?"

"Yeah. Apparently he's taking a class?"

"It's a webinar. That's probably what they were fighting about. Either that or the nutritional content of our dinners. Or the electricity bill."

"I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry you had to see my parents like that."

"You know I love your mom. And your dad's really nice actually. He complimented me on my babysitting abilities."

Corey smirks at that.

“At least now we’re even. I got to attend your hospital themed sweet sixteen, you got to see the trailer to my parent’s impending divorce.”

“I’m seventeen, thank you very much.”

And we both laugh, him about the argument he knows will resume when his mom gets back, me about the ominous canary paper laying at the bottom of a work bag.

#### A Mixtape for your Minivan, Draft One- Chapter 10

Summer birthdays can be hit or miss. If you’re an extrovert, they’re kind of lousy because you never get to have cupcakes at school, but if you’re an introvert, they’re great because you never have to announce to the class via cupcakes when your birthday is.

For as long as I’ve known her, Nadia has never had a birthday party. When I was a kid, I just assumed I wasn’t invited to them, but now that we’re friends, I realize her parents have never thrown her one.

My birthday party in the hospital might have been less than ideal, but at least I have family who cares enough to try, even if the end result ends up a little screwy. But Nadia? Sometimes it seems like she has no one.

The plan at the beginning of the summer was to throw Nadia a surprise party at our house. Obviously, I didn’t know how our summer would unfold when I made that plan.

Since then, the plan has morphed from having a potluck in the yard to just taking Nadia out to Mally's for ice cream.

I sat down and planned it out the other day, even with gas prices bottoming out, I realized that with my babysitting change, I can either afford to drive us to and from North Olmstead, or I can purchase ice cream.

I know my mom would give me the money if I asked for it, especially if I told her it was for Nadia's birthday, and that's exactly why I don't ask.

"Hey, I'm biking to Nadia's."

For once my mom is sitting in the dinning room. My grandmother hates it when we turn the "nice" room into a work space, but at some point this summer, my mom's job hunting efforts and couponing crusade consumed the whole downstairs floor. Our cherry wood table is currently buried under enough newspaper clippings to papier-mâché a one to one model of the liberty bell.

She set the pen she's writing with down. "Hey, Quinn, sit down for a second."

It's only then that I notice the canary form in front of her.

I sit, and instantly, my fingers begin tying and untying the fraying lace fringe of the tablecloth, in time with the anxiety knotting and unknotting my intestines.

"I thought a lot about about it, and I decided that you were right. This is something that concerns you."

She slips the official looking form across the table to me, parting the sea of weekly flyers and job applications along the way. I pick the form up and quickly scan it, my eyes darting back and forth across the ink so quickly I barely read it.

“It’ll probably turn out to be nothing. Honestly, I don’t even think we’ll qualify but you never know.”

“Free and Reduced Priced School Meals?” I can see the horror in my face reflected by the mirrored china cabinet. I try to rearrange my features as best I can, but it’s too little too late.

My mom snatches the application out of my hand. “And you wonder why I don’t tell you things.” She carefully smooths the now wrinkled form. “I knew you’d react like this.”

“React like what? Like we’re another lousy paycheck away from the other side of the poverty line?”

“Quinn,” my mom’s eyes flash. “Pull yourself together.”

It’s only then that I realize not only am I standing, I’m breathing so heavy I might as well be foaming at the mouth. Slowly, I sit back down.

“There are plenty people in Tabor who get free lunches. The Belenko’s for instance...”

“Oh my god, you’re comparing us to Nadia’s family. Is that supposed to make me feel better.”

My mom continues, ignoring my rant completely. “And plenty more of your friends could probably qualify for food stamps if they applied. According to this, any child with a parent receiving unemployment likely to qualify. Think about that, the Malaks could have been getting free lunch all last year, all twelve of them. And the Davis boys probably qualify too.”



“The Davis’ are nowhere near being bad off enough to get free *or* reduced price lunches.”

“All I’m trying to say is that everyone hits a rough patch now and again, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

She’s half right; I am comparing our family to someone else’s in my head. She’s just confused about which one, and understandably so. It’s a family that she’s still trying to forget ever existed and I’m still having to convince myself is really gone.

“Mom, I don’t care what the Joneses can and can’t afford. I’m just a little concerned that apparently, our family can’t even afford food anymore.”

I see my mother’s lips parting to say something else, but I can’t take one more second of this debate, so I hold up my hand to stop her.

“I’m just need... I just...” I falter. I have no idea what I should tell her, only what I can’t tell her. That I’m angry, that I’m terrified, that I feel like my world is falling to pieces every day and I’m running around with an Elmer’s glue stick.

I blink away the tears threatening to form and I steady my breath. “I’m sorry. I’m glad you told me. Can we talk about this later? I can’t...” I falter again.

My mom nods.

Relieved, I grab my water bottle off the kitchen counter and throw it into my bike basket.

## REFLECTIONS- DRAFT ONE

I wrote the first draft of this novella over the course of two months. I then spent the next six months editing on an almost daily basis. Before I began the revision process in earnest, I read through my first draft several times. While reading, I took notes about internal inconsistencies and wrote down any questions I had. I also typed some comments about voice, tone, and style directly in the word document. After I had finished reading the draft, I compiled a list of problems that existed in the first draft and ways I planned on improving these issues in the second draft. Once I had finished brainstorming and compiling my own list of suggestions, I sent the first draft of my novella to my advisor Ian Matthews so I could get his feedback. Once I received his feedback, I began crafting the second draft of my novella, incorporating my own edits and the suggestions of my advisor.

The parts of my draft that I've chosen to showcase here represent areas of the novella that underwent some of the most significant changes between the first and final draft. Besides being littered with general spelling, grammar, and formatting issues, my first draft was rife with pacing issues, inconsistent characterization, and continuity errors. Beyond pacing issues related to timing, my first draft suffered from blocking issues, passages that contained huge portions of dialogue, followed by blocks of exposition or description. This made for a very choppy reading experience and, overall, contributed to a sense of imbalance in the first draft. But perhaps more telling than what the first draft contained was what it lacked, namely descriptive sections. The first draft was so extremely dialogue driven that it resembles a screen play more than a

novella manuscript, which is probably the result of my script-writing background. I also cut large portions of the dialogue between the first and second draft. I also spliced dialogue with descriptive tags, exposition, and internal dialogue to try and break up the chunky organization of the chapters.

One thing I grappled with in the second draft of my novella was tense. Specifically, I debated whether I should tell the story in present or past tense. Ultimately, I decided to write in present tense to maintain a sense of immediacy and urgency. That meant switching the sections of the first draft that I had written in past tense into present tense. I also struggled with pinning down Quinn's inner voice in my first draft, so one of my goals for the second draft was to establish a consistent inner voice for Quinn while she narrated the story. Part of my strategy for establishing Quinn's character included incorporating conversational language, slang, and contractions into passages of narration and exposition, which was a somewhat unconventional choice. Other changes I made during the second draft include adding more exposition and descriptive passages to the beginning of the novella and fleshing out the chapter transitions.

That being said, while much of the dialogue would be cut and changed in the third draft, I do feel like I managed to capture the feel and style I was going for with the dialogue early on in the drafting process. Already, a strong tone is beginning to emerge in the protagonist's narration, and the dialogue is stylistically similar to what appears in the final draft.

## EXCERPT FROM DRAFT THREE

Pages Excised

## REFLECTIONS- DRAFT THREE

Between the second and third draft, much of the dialogue and awkward description was cut. Many of these passages were removed because they explained or narrated something that had already happened or was about to happen in action. For example, the passage explaining how Quinn and her brother fight all the time was cut because the chapter clearly shows the two of them fighting constantly. Additionally, the sentence about the van's air conditioner being broken was replaced with a scene where Quinn accidentally gets a face full of hot air blown her way. Not only does this scene give the audience the same information, but it does so in a humorous way that establishes character and relationship dynamics.

Many scenes were also restructured. Exposition in chapter one was shortened and moved towards the beginning of the scene. Allusions and metaphors were tightened up, and grammar, spelling, and tense errors were corrected. Also, a major punctuation error involving the use of final commas in dialogue quotations was fixed.

Another big change between the first and final draft is the amount of internal dialogue and narration. The initial draft contained almost no internal narration from Quinn. This was actually intentional on my part; I wanted to see how much I could get away with not telling the audience about Quinn. Instead, I wanted readers to deduce Quinn's thoughts, feelings, and motivations simply by analyzing her dialogue and actions. Again, this technique is somewhat filmic and more reminiscent of a screenplay. Although this technique works in some places, I decided that by not explicitly divulging Quinn's thoughts and motivations from time to time, I was failing to take advantage of

one of the unique strengths of the medium. For example, in chapter one, I went back in and added a few sentences before Quinn reminds her brother about his homework. These sentence give the readers hints as to Quinn's motivation for doing so in a way that dialogue and action alone could not convey. The excerpt from chapter ten was also completely reworked to change the escalation of the conflict and reveal more of Quinn's internal struggle. Looking back on the two versions, I really feel that the second version benefits from the improved pacing and the clearer emotions. Overall, it fits better with the rest of the book in terms of tone and characterization.

Another thing I focused on between the first and final draft was brevity. As the saying goes, less is more, and nowhere is that truer than in a novella where every word counts. One great example of this is the end of chapter one where I cut several lines of dialogue, which shortened the scene up significantly, allowing readers to reach the punchline quicker. This uptick in pacing helped make the scene more impactful, while decreasing the amount of repetitive, unnecessary chatter in a chapter that is already dialogue heavy.

The scene between Quinn and Imani in chapter eight was also cut significantly. I reduced their interaction to a single physical confrontation rather than a drawn out conversation. Again, by distilling this interaction to the bare minimum, it gives the scene more impact while allowing Quinn time to interact with Corey's father later in the scene. Most importantly, in the new version of chapter eight, Quinn is an active participant in the scene, reacting to things like the house's familiarity and the kindness of Corey's father. Quinn goes from being an extremely passive observer in the first draft, to

someone who is reacting and processing what is going on around her, even if those reactions happen internally.

One thing that did not change from the first to the third draft was the large cast of characters. Five characters are introduced in chapter one alone; four of them are supporting characters. I initially thought I would decrease the number of secondary characters in order to keep this work more in line with the traditional novella genre. Specifically, I toyed with the idea of thinning Quinn's troupe of friends. However, I did not end up cutting any of the characters in this story. The main reason I decided against downsizing was because I crafted each of Quinn's friends with the intention of representing a distinct economic, ethnic, and social experience, and I thought my efforts were ultimately successful. By cutting characters, I felt Quinn's community would lose some of its rich and chaotic diversity. Still, this solution is a tradeoff, as the final work occasionally comes off as crowded with characters.

Besides receiving suggestions from my advisor, I also sought out the opinions of my fellow writers at a weekly on-campus writing club. Over the course of several months, I shared the entirety of the second draft of my novella with fellow writers and literary enthusiasts. Each week I would read one chapter of my novella and receive feedback from fellow writers about my work, which I would then incorporate into the final draft of the novella. Reading and editing with my writing club not only provided me with invaluable feedback, it also provided me with a tremendous source of encouragement that helped me persevere in my writing.

Finally, I submitted one chapter of my novella to Sigma Tau Delta (the international English honor society) for consideration in their annual convention. My chapter was selected, and I was able to present an excerpt from the final draft of my novella at the 2017 Sigma Tau Delta convention. While attending workshops and learning from others in my field was a joy in its own right, the most exciting part of the conference was presenting my work to fellow writers and educators at a creative fiction panel. I received many thought provoking questions, including one about the representation of broken families in modern media and one about my inspiration in writing this piece. I also received a lot of positive feedback from the audience. At the end of the panel, the moderator told everyone who had presented that hour, myself included, that he was surprised and impressed with the caliber of work we presented. He encouraged us all to submit our works to Sigma Tau Delta's annual journal, *The Rectangle*. Because of his encouragement, I plan on submitting part of this novella for publication in May.



## CONCLUSION

As I reflect upon the final draft of *A Mixtape for your Minivan*, I find myself considering this book's place in the literary world. I wonder how a caffeine-buzzed literary agent, a novella-jaded critic, or a curious reader will see my book. As a scrap of young adult fiction? As a unique bit of historical literature? As an unpublishable novella? I would like to believe that, above all else, this novella fills a narrative gap in our collective history; that it tells an untold story, a story worthy of being told.

When it comes to assessing this work's genre, I am less certain of what I have created. I do believe my novella epitomizes the genre's focused use of setting. I am also very happy with the tone and style that emerged in the final draft of this book. In many ways, *A Mixtape for your Minivan* manages to exist in a liminal space: in the moment between adolescent and adulthood, in a place caught between creation and collapse. Tension and uncertainty are sustained from chapter to chapter without becoming exhausting or numbing. But when I consider my novella's inordinate cast of characters, its meandering plot, and its multifaceted theme, I can not help but feel as though I have fundamentally missed out on some of the best qualities the genre has to offer.

In his defense of the genre, author Ian McEwan calls the novella "the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated, ill-shaven giant", that giant being the modern novel. He describes novellas as "the perfect form of prose fiction", capable of demanding unparalleled precision and clarity from writers. According to him, novels, even great novels, are frequently long-winded and littered with flaws:

“Great” novels are not perfect novels. You might improve “Anna Karenina” by altering the clumsiness of the description of the station master’s peaked cap—a much-discussed example. And I always want to take a blue pencil to Emma Bovary’s overextended death throes (it makes me suspicious that Flaubert wept over her), though I never doubt the novel’s greatness. But I could at least conceive of the perfect novella. Or, rather, imagine one approaching perfection like an asymptotic line in coördinate geometry.

When I look at my book, I do not see a perfect novella. But I do see a novella that could eventually approach perfection, and that is a small miracle in itself. Back when this book was nothing more than an outline hidden in a handful of bleak newspaper articles, I could not begin to envision perfection. And so, in spite of its flaws, I am immensely satisfied with this work. After all, I did not set out to write the prefect novella. In some ways, I did not even set out to write a novella. I set out to write a story: a story about one particular girl, in one particular community, living one particular experience. My only goal was to do so with honesty and integrity, and I feel as though I have achieved that goal.

## Appendix A

### *A Summary of A Mixtape for your Minivan*

*A Mixtape for your Minivan* is a coming of age story about high school junior Quinn Koeth. Set in the rusting shadow of Cleveland, Ohio in 2009, the story follows Quinn as she and her family grapple with the realities of unemployment, divorce, multigenerational living, instability, and downward mobility during the height of the Great Recession. The story progresses through a series of vignettes, each giving a snapshot of Quinn during the last summer of her childhood.

The novella opens on Quinn driving home from her last day of school in her family's dilapidated minivan. Because Quinn is the only one in her friend group with access to a vehicle, she has offered to drive her rambunctious group of friends home. The ride, which starts off rowdy enough, becomes serious when Quinn hits a pothole head-on and the radio in her minivan breaks, revealing the realities of Quinn's family's financial insecurity. Quinn knows there is no money to fix the van's broken air conditioning unit, let alone the stereo. The group, all of whom are hoping to find summer work, spends the rest of the ride quietly looking for help wanted signs. Their hopes are dashed when, on the first day of their job hunt, they come across an "unemployed need not apply" sign.

Quinn's first day of summer gets off to an equally rocky start when she wakes up to find there is no food in the house. Quinn's mother, who is late to her temp job, tells Quinn and her brother they will have to eat at the graduation parties they are attending that day. When Quinn asks her mother if she can drive her friends to the graduation

parties, Quinn's grandmother (whose house they all live in) accuses Quinn's friends of freeloading and tells Quinn she needs to be more money conscious. Grandma Anne demands Quinn's friends begin paying gas money. Quinn argues that her friends, none of whom are working and most of whom are experiencing financial hardship themselves, could not afford to go anywhere if they were forced to pay gas money. Quinn's mother finally has to break up the argument, assuring Quinn it is okay to drive her friends to the party. As Quinn is picking up her friends, she decides she will ask them for payment, but in the form of mixtapes, since the only apparatus still working in her stereo is the cassette deck. All of her friends excitedly agree to the arrangement except for Quinn's friend Jean, the only one in the group with a two-car garage in front of her McMansion in Shale Run. As Quinn is dropping Jean home, Jean tries to give Quinn some gas money. Although Quinn is hesitant, she is open to Jean's offer until she realizes Jean has given her enough money to fill the van's gas tank five times over. Insulted, Quinn and Jean get into a heated argument.

Still angry with Jean, Quinn returns home to find her mother on the phone arguing with Quinn's wealthy father, who has not spoken to Quinn in months. Quinn finds out that her father has not been paying child support. When her mother demands he send money, Quinn's father insists that Quinn and her brother get jobs and start "pulling their weight". He then threatens to move Quinn and her brother out to Dubai to live with him for the summer if their mother is unable to provide for them. Quinn goes to bed that night, angry and conflicted, wondering whether she should have accepted Jean's money.

Although she tries her best, Quinn is still jobless a week later when her mother approaches her with a job offer: a boy from church needs a ride to his lacrosse practice across town. Quinn begrudgingly accepts the offer and begins driving her classmate Corey Davis three times a week. Although she knows this commitment will only worsen her chances of finding a real job, she is smart enough to earn money where she can. So far, the only person from her friend group who has found work is her underage friend Alex, who is washing dishes under-the-table.

Despite Quinn's initial reservations about a boy from Shale Run, Quinn and Corey become close as the summer goes on. After he accidentally crashes her impromptu birthday party at the local hospital cafeteria, she invites him to accompany her to a summer wedding. Likewise, he opens up to her after she accidentally witnesses one of his parents' marital disputes. As time goes on, Quinn begins to see herself and her family's journey reflected in Corey's own life as his parents deal with the stresses of new found financial insecurity and impending divorce.

Quinn manages to have an enjoyable summer in spite of her family's financial crisis. Still, things only become tighter around her grandmother's house as the summer progresses. Eventually, Quinn's mother finds herself enrolling her children in the free school lunch program. When she is still unable to find more lucrative work, Quinn's mother announces they must sell the minivan.

On the last night of summer, Quinn and her friends gather together for one final hurrah in the minivan. For the first time, Quinn invites Corey to hang out with the rest of her friends. Together, Corey and Quinn manage to sneak seven people into the local

drive-in. Their victory is short-lived, however, when the minivan's battery dies fifteen minutes into the movie. Quinn's friends make the best of the situation by dubbing the movie themselves. Meanwhile, Quinn finds Corey stargazing on top of her soon-to-be sold minivan. They spend the last night of their last summer together, discussing the instability and uncertainty that comes with adulthood.

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