

*Missing*

A Prose and Short Story Writing Example

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The horse came back alone.

No one knew what time the gelding started eating from his hay trough, persistently flicking away the horseflies with his long, mangled tail. The saddle strapped snugly to his stomach, the reigns dragging the ground. The hand-made blue bandana, her lucky charm, no longer tied to the saddle horn. His chestnut coat two shades darker than normal. His white hooves and stockings covered in river silt were the only clue to where he had been running. It was about six hours after she had gone riding that he was finally found. At first there were only lighthearted jokes about how she claimed to be a cowgirl, but they soon stopped after several attempts to call her was left unanswered.

Trucks were cranked up and more horses were saddled. Her name echoed all around the trees and meadow. The shaky beams of the four-wheeler headlights became brighter and brighter, and finally red and blue lights replaced the sun's golden rays in the sky.

The cold steel flashlight burned me more than the briars in my skin, more than the acid churning in my stomach. I stared down into the river, my voice raw from screaming, and blood trickling down my arm from all the cuts. The river roared so loud I couldn't even hear my own voice over it, much less anyone else trying to call back to me. It screamed back at me just as I did to it.

“Where are you?!”

People try to force you back into normal routine, even when there is nothing routine about this newfound hellscape you find yourself in. It will help they say. Cling to some pitiful delusion that life is fine. That nothing is actually wrong. But it's hard to believe that when news crews are camped out in your backyard.

They brought in the hounds and helicopters. It became difficult to sleep. I couldn't lie on my stomach, close my eyes, and pretend she was safe in her room. The constant baying shattered that illusion. It was hard to tell when I was awake and asleep because no matter what state I was actually in, I always riding my blue roan. The reigns loose in my grip because we had walked this path so long, she knew exactly where I wanted to go. My phone constantly vibrated in my pocket; my mama's name lighting up the shadows in the trees.

*"Text me the instant you're in the house."*

*"Don't go looking tonight. I'm at work until late."*

*"Go in as soon as you're done in the barn."*

*"Are you in yet?"*

*"I love you."*

*"Be safe."*

*"Are you okay?"*

*"Call me when you're done."*

My roan would eventually turn around as the sun started to dip on the horizon, heading back to the safety of the porch light. She would walk us back to the barn and stand before her stall. The fall from my feet to the floor jarred me more and more every night. Another day gone by that she was still out there. My thoughts bled into each other as much as my skin had the night she went missing.

The oats caused a vapor of dust to fly around my roan's nose. I filled the trough a little more than usual. Hay rained down onto the stall floor as I shook it loose from the bales. I didn't want her to be hungry.

I threw the thickest horse blanket we had over the roan's back. The temperatures were beginning to settle well below freezing. They were even expecting the river to fully freeze over. The stubborn water finally going still and dead, after being reduced from a large powerful stream to a mere trickle.

My forehead pressed against the roan's neck. Closing my eyes, I took in a deep breath. The smell of saddle oil and horsehair overpowering, it burned the back of my throat in a familiar way. The roan nickered softly as I untangled her mane and brushed her all over.

The firm closing sound of the roan's stall was reassuring. She was home safe for the night. The gelding called out to me from his corner. A spider had made a home in his trough. If only it had been empty that day. Then he wouldn't have just returned to the barn to fatten his swollen belly. The glutton would have alerted us. Told us he was home, that he had returned without her. It might have been enough time to do something. Enough to find her. I ignored the gelding's calls following me across the yard to the house. The spider remained safe and undisturbed in the feed trough.

Mama never slept any more. The smell of coffee perpetuated our house. It was a new sensory here. It was trapped in my hair, in our clothes. The stars would be dimming and she was still printing out flyers, clutching at her cup with an ever-thinning hand. She now wore band aids over most of her knuckles to help with the cracking. Tubes of Vaseline littered the bathroom cabinet. My sister's face was everywhere. On every bulletin board, electrical poles, Wal-Mart's advertising boards, and even on the shirts Mama wore. The only time she would change would be on Sunday mornings.

Church became suffocating after that night. The pew beneath me felt hard and cold under my legs, no matter how long I sat there. The pastor ran his hands through his hair as he tried to

find what to say. His Bible, faded and cracked along the spine, rested on the pulpit unopened, unused. The choir rose to sing in the absence of his words.

“A hymn is a prayer to the Lord,” my mama whispered through her tear-stained lips. Her voice was no longer bright and rich. It was as desolate as the wilderness.

I went along for support. Panic attacks would fall over my mama anytime I wasn't in her sight. No matter how much bowing my head caused my anger to rise, I would keep my lips squeezed shut along with my eyes. The Lord was the only thing keeping Mama from losing her mind. Pride became the price for sanity.