

January 1994: St. Lucia, Brisbane, Australia.

“Sometimes it is the people who no one imagines anything of who do the things no one can imagine.”

-Alan Turing, father of computer science, from *Imitation Game*.

Nicholas' first day of school. My family and I take the 'official' photo at the front of our house in St. Lucia. Nathanael, my 9-year-old and eldest son, wears a happy face. At five and a half, Nicholas is bloodless; his white face displays his inner terror. Isaac, my youngest at two, is just happy. I can feel the sweat dripping down my back. It is hot in Brisbane in January, even at 8:00 a.m.

As we wait for time to pass, I see a stick insect near the trees beside me.

“Look, Nicholas!” I say, pointing to (or picking up - you choose) the insect. “You can take this to school today.”

Nicholas nods his head.

“Yes,” I continue, “Show your teacher what you found.”

Maybe, just maybe, having something to hold will help him through today.

He nods again. Fear oozes from every pore in his body.

He completed his first day. He didn't get to show his teacher his stick insect.

Nicholas' reticence at going to school continues. My blond-headed little boy, in his grey school uniform, struggles each day to survive. In the morning, he stands frozen in the middle of his bedroom like an Easter Island statue, an observer to this world, looking lost. He does not smile or laugh. I dress him, without question, preparing him for the day. It's the least I can do. He does not want to fail, but he knows he cannot do what is expected. He leaves the house because he has to. That is the only reason he goes to school.

At school, all of the children know what to do – a part from him. He looks at the boy next to him, trying to understand the teacher's instructions. Nicholas' ashen face shrinks low to the desk. He

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| Comment [Z2]: You don't need to say Brisbane again here, since you've said it at the very top introduction. Redundant. You could say something like, "My husband, three sons, and I gather be ... [1] |
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does not want to be seen. He avoids eye contact with everyone, fearing his teacher's frustration, as once again he is the last to put his bag away, get out his pencils, or move into line.

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No more than a week passes before I'm asked to meet with the teacher.

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"How is he settling into school?" I ask with a heavy heart.

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His teacher shakes her head.

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"After 30 years of teaching, I thought I could teach almost anyone," she tells me, "But Nicholas lives in another world. He spends most of the day staring into space. I don't know whether I will live up to this challenge." She sighs, "I am not sure what he can do. He is so far behind. And he is being left further behind as the rest of the class settles in and is learning quickly."

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Comment [Z9]: "sighs" instead of "continues" creates a character for the teacher, even with just one word.

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"The preschool teacher thought he would be okay at school," I say nervously.

Comment [Z10]: Again, create a character for yourself. Pick expression to start developing that character, create tension, etc.

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"Well," she responds, "He's not!"

Comment [Z11]: Does she really say this? Seems unrealistic/harsh for a teacher. Don't teachers want to help? What is your reaction to this? You immediately shift into the next paragraph, but as a mother - and you must be a sensitive one at that - you must have some reaction to this! Create your character! You're the voice we (reader) are listening to, trusting, so we need to know who you are.

Over the following weeks, I keep an eye on Nicholas as he comes home from school with the smell of urine in his pants, his fingernails bitten-to-the-quick and no work completed in any book. He brings home early readers, which we read together.

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I visit the school one lunchtime. Many classes come together to eat their lunch under the building. Children have their lunch boxes out. They are chatting and laughing noisily while eating their lunches. I finally spot my Nicholas, sitting by himself on the concrete. He had set himself up a nice little barrier, his back to a central post. On his left, almost at arm's length, is his lunch box, opposite a little puddle of water. These objects form a nice triangle, just like a barrier. A triangle which ensures no one sits near him and discourages all communication.

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Comment [Z12]: What is that? I don't know what "early readers" are

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Comment [Z14]: What do you mean by under the building? Outside?

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And so the year continues, and my concerns for Nicholas rise. One morning I woke feeling particularly tired, exhausted by the constant awakenings caused by my youngest son, Isaac. "Can you take me to the classroom today?" Nicholas tugs at my leg during breakfast. Why today? I think. The thought of carrying my youngest son up and down the steps at school to take Nicholas to his classroom was draining. My own fatigue takes precedence over Nicholas' daily struggles.

Comment [Z15]: Again, you just jump right into the next paragraph. What do you do? Reaction? Do you just watch him from a far? Does he see you? Do you go up to him? Do you cry? We need to hear what you're feeling or how you're reacting. And show us, don't tell us.

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Comment [Z16]: You need to create a setting here so we know where you are, what's going on.

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"Would you please take Nicholas to his classroom today?" I ask Nathanael.

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Nathanael steps up and takes Nicholas hand.

**Comment [Z17]:** Steps up literally or steps up metaphorically?  
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“Nick, come on. I will take you today,” Nathanael says.

Nathanael did what I failed to do. Nicholas survived. However, to this day I remember how I failed my child when he needed me. I can only assume he needed more support, as events of the previous day were more traumatizing than usual.

**Comment [Z18]:** But how did his day go? Was it normal? Why did you feel like a failure? You're only human with three kids!

Over the next weeks and months, nothing changes. I dress Nicholas for school every day. As winter comes, Nicholas' asthma grows worse. We give him medication and try to exercise.

**Comment [Z19]:** Are we in a memory here, or a reflection? Or present moment? A bit confusing and awkward. Remove, or simply say that you felt like failure. Straight to the point.

During one of our runs through the parks, he throws up. This puts an end to that particular effort.

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I decide on a different tactic. An artist neighbor offers to teach art to both Nathanael and Nicholas. She chats with my boys and tells them, “Boys, in art there is no right or wrong!

**Comment [Z20]:** This is our first introduction to Nicholas' asthma. We have no idea he has it. Is it very important? If so, you should mention it earlier on. You can even put it in the first paragraph where he's on his way to school - "He takes a breath his inhaler - a mix of nerves and the asthma he's had his entire life - as he heads to school." Create characters.

Whatever you do is meant to be.” This turns out to be a positive. Nicholas was happy doing something achievable.

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While school is still a struggle, Nicholas' Grade One teachers work together to present a drama of Aleksey Nikolayevich Tolstoy's *The Enormous Turnip*.

**Comment [Z21]:** Show don't tell. A lot of exposition. Can you describe this for the reader instead of telling?

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Some children act out the major characters, while the remainder sing in the chorus, repeating the words, "...and he pulled and he pulled and he pulled..."

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Picking up the boys from school, Nicholas says: “I've gotta tell you a story.”

**Comment [Z22]:** Passive voice

**Comment [Z23]:** Instead: One day, after picking up the boys from school, Nicholas stops and surprises me. "I've gotta tell you a story," he says, smiling. [You need to crate Nicholas as a character. Describe him!]

He is anxious but focused on telling his story.

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“Can you wait until we all get home?” I ask.

**Comment [Z24]:** Why do you want to wait until he gets home? We need to know more about your relationship. Wouldn't you be eager to know it right then and there, just in case he would hole up and not tell you later?

Nicholas nods his head, but he was very focused on 'his story'. I can see he can't wait. Concern is written all over his face. I might forget all about this story if I don't tell you quickly, it reads.

**Comment [Z25]:** Redundant from earlier

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I arrive home with all my boys, and get them out of the car. I throw the house keys to Nathanael,

“Would you take Isaac into the house, and get some afternoon tea? I will listen to Nicholas.”

“Yes,” says Nathanael. Nathanael takes Isaac inside, and I turn to Nicholas to give him my full attention. I get out of the car, and signal for him to follow.

He rushes after me to sit on a concrete garden ledge outside of our home. Slowly, deliberately, and meticulously, Nicholas starts to tell me the story of “The Enormous Turnip,” each word dropping out of his mouth and onto the concrete.

“Once upon a time an old man planted a little turnip and said, ‘Grow, grow little turnip, grow.’ And the turnip grew up sweet and strong, and big and enormous. One day, an old man went to pull it up. He pulled and he pulled, but he could not pull it up.” Nicholas begins to shake his head, “He called an old woman, ‘Old Woman! Old Woman! Help me pull up the enormous turnip.’ The old woman put her arms around the man’s waist and pulled the man. The old man pulled the turnip. They pulled and pulled, and they pulled, but they could not pull it up. The old woman called to her granddaughter. ‘Granddaughter! Granddaughter! Help us pull the enormous turnip!’ The granddaughter put her arms around the waist of the old woman. She pulled the old woman. The old woman pulled the old man. The old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and pulled, but they could not pull it up. Nicholas shakes his again.

“The granddaughter called the black dog. ‘Black Dog! Black Dog! Help us pull the enormous turnip!’ The black dog took the granddaughter’s skirt. He pulled the granddaughter. The granddaughter pulled the old woman, and the old woman pulled the old man. The old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and pulled, but they could not pull it up.” I watch Nicholas with fascination, his head shaking, his eyes widening.

**Comment [Z26]:** Is Isaac there with you too? Mention earlier that he’s also in the car.

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**Comment [Z27]:** I would say something like, “ Nicholas and I will be right there.” Instead of “I will listen to Nicholas.” Would you actually say that? It seems like an awkward thing to say. Dialogue can be difficult to make sound realistic.

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**Comment [Z28]:** Trying to set the scene here, create a setting

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**Comment [Z29]:** You can change that, obviously, but just trying to create your reaction

... [Z3]

“The black dog called the cat. ‘Cat! Cat! Help us pull the enormous turnip!’ The cat pulled the dog’s tail. The dog pulled the granddaughter. The granddaughter pulled the old woman, and the old woman pulled the old man, and the old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and they pulled, but they could not pull it up. The cat called the mouse. ‘Mouse! Mouse! Help us pull the enormous turnip!’ The mouse pulled the cat. The cat pulled the dog. The dog pulled the granddaughter. The granddaughter pulled the old woman, and the old woman pulled the old man, and the old man pulled the turnip. And they pulled and they pulled and UP CAME THE TURNIP AT LAST!” Nicholas smiles, the most elated I had ever seen him.

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“This is fantastic, Nicholas! I love your story!”

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Comment [Z30]: Give me something here! What does he look like as he’s telling you this story? Is he excited? Is Nicholas in the chorus? How does he feel about being in the play?

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In his story, all the characters are there, in order. He retells the complete story of the Enormous Turnip, slowly and meticulously.

Comment [Z31]: Confusing? What do you mean? Why does that matter to mention?

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Comment [Z32]: Again? Or are you just referring to what just happened? If so we don’t need that, we just read it

The end of the school year comes quickly. The school suggests Nicholas to be re-evaluated to give additional information for where he stands.

Comment [Z33]: I look at my son in amazement... I need something from you, some response.

Comment [Z34]: Was he initially evaluated?

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The test results are devastating.

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You don't need to say Brisbane again here, since you've said it at the very top introduction. Redundant. You could say something like, "My husband, three sons, and I gather before our home in St. Lucia for our official first-day-of school family photo."

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The sentence about going to school because the law requires him to is a bit strange - we all know this. You're not telling the reader anything new they don't already know.

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He was going to school, not by choice, but because the law requires children to go to school. M

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So I know there are lot of changes in this first paragraph, but I'm trying to set the scene. This is the opening paragraph to your story, and you want to interest the reader, bring them in, want to know about your family and this book. I also am trying to create a more solid voice for you. Right now there seems to be a lot of exposition - which is necessary - but you have to do it in a way that creates a voice the reader can follow, not just facts.

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We need some sort of transitional sentence here, where you're not just jumping from the beginning of the day to the end. Again, scene, voice. Someththing like: "Hours later, Nicholas is back home." And then I'm confused here about the insect stick. Is he still holding it when he gets home? Why isn't he able to show the teacher the stick? "He never gets to show his teacher his stick insect." Why is this relevant to the reader? Will it come up later?

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