Narrative Structure: Macro Characteristics in Literary Stories

Aside from Gen Z's puppy-like attention span and the simple fact that we've lived long enough on this planet for all things to be derivative, AI is, in my opinion, the greatest threat to culture and art. That's because a formula does exist for good—not great—stories, and *great* is not a prerequisite for mass entertainment. In his lecture at Case Western Reserve, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. said, "Stories have very simple shapes, ones that computers can understand." At its most basic level, there's something familiar in story structure to us as people. We're hard-wired to have an appreciation for something that begins, escalates, pops, is over. Even as the details and intricacies and specifics of each event are different, they still have a certain formal constraint, one AI is capable of computing and executing.

But, at least for the moment, AI is limited to producing truly derivative products, and we, as sentient beings, are not. So, we must first understand what AI understands, which is the basic narrative structure underlying engaging stories. And from there, we can either eschew art and churn out supermarket sludge for mass profit a la James Patterson, or resign ourselves to near-poverty and push the envelope, endeavoring to make something deeply appreciated for its authenticity by a dwindling group of literati. The choice is yours. But first, this—

PART I: Introduction

1. THIS IS NOT a eulogy. Rather, this class aims to be a ventilator, offering structural insight that will allow your stories to breathe. It's also important to note up front that I have a dry sense of humor, and it's your responsibility to distill content and decide what is for consumption.
2. THIS IT NOT literary rocket science. Some of you, those who chose to be here, are maybe like me. You struggle with structure and pacing in your storytelling, and figured you'd spend the hour going back to the basics. Those who are here by necessity or mandate are sophisticated enough thinkers to tune out for an hour, or, perhaps, to think about a story you love that deviates hard from this formula, and does so successfully, so that you can walk away grumbling about how *that lecture was a steaming pile of shit*, and feel reassured by your pursuit of the indefinable qualities of literary art.
3. THIS IS NOT relevant to first drafts (i.e. story generation). Unless you're really lost, in which case, color between the lines, this lecture is about intentional revision. My objective is for you to think about how to achieve a baseline resonance for your stories.
4. THIS IS NOT relevant to stories without discernible plot. Bar-Thelm (or is it Bar-thel-me? Discuss amongst yourselves). Whatever his name, he's an author I respect for his originality and artistry. I have enjoyed reading some of his stories. But in this particular game of musical chairs, he has no seat.
5. THIS IS NOT a self-sufficient human. As objectively cute as she is, she is also the beginning, middle, and end of every one of my days, and absolutely to blame if this class ends up being a pile of objectionable crap. Am I a monster for blaming your wasted hour on a baby? Who's to say?
6. THIS IS NOT a hill I intend to die on. Throughout this lecture, you will undoubtedly find yourself saying, *but what about story X*, and I welcome you to do so in the same way you think about truly embarrassing things you don't want anyone to know, ever. If you feel compelled to vocalize your dissatisfaction, please send me a form rejection via email

acknowledging my effort, and apologizing for your inability to accept any of my ideas as valid.

In my first semester working with Boz, he said about one of my packet 4 stories—"If I'd picked up a magazine to read a story and found "Something to Talk About" [and I didn't notice your name as author], this is the point where I would quit reading." Of course, he was right, and I still love him for the straightforward way in which he told me my writing was trash. But part of the reason I was failing as a writer was because I was overwhelmed, like a toddler on a Ducati when what I really needed was a trike.

Now, as the graduating student, at least in theory, my job is to present information, while your job is to consider how said information pertains to your own work. Some of you are successfully doing miraculous and innovative things with your fiction and poetry, others are attempting to do so and failing. For those of you in the first bucket, I argue that it will benefit you to revisit the core of your storytelling technique, and to consider how these elements exist in your own work. For those in the latter, this lecture won't help you to bring your story from good to great—only artistry can do that, however you choose to define it. But it might help you to turn your trash into something usable. Because, as you will see, at the core of many esteemed stories is a basic structure. As above, your job is to evaluate this information and then use it to make your work *pop*. As Ezra Pound once said, "Old shit is like Play-Doh—mash and reform, mash and reform."

PART II: Inspiration
A History Lesson

Aristotle, a highly literate Greek, is often credited with initiating this conversation about dramatic structure in his book, *Poetics*. In it, he wrote about story plot as an "arrangement of incidents" structured logically around a beginning (*pro-tis-sis*), middle (*epit-asis*), and end *(catastophe)*. The visual representation of this idea is a basic triangle, wherein the base indicates time and the height tension. Following the introduction in the lower left corner, we ascend the left arm of the triangle, increasing tension through conflict. At the apex, a crisis occurs to reverse our heroine's fortune and initiate our descent towards resolution, where she meets her fate and a release of tension offers the audience catharsis.

A couple millennia later, Gustav Freytag, 18th century German novelist and critic, updated Aristotle's idea of plot similarities by constructing a visual pattern in the form of a pyramid. In it, he explicitly added what already implicitly existed in Aristotle's vision, namely Rising Action between the intro and crisis and Falling Action between the Crisis and Resolution.

Then, two centuries after Freytag, Syd Field, popped on training wheels for neophyte screenwriters with his Three-Act Structure. Despite being focused on film, he described a dramatic narrative as being broken into three parts divided by two major plot points, or reversals of direction. Aided by his strict 25-50-25 percentage allowance, writers benefited from structured timelines that provided a clear and effective framework for narrative development. For any screenwriter worth their snuff, the form of their narrative remained paramount, but now they could use page numbers as signposts for when to incorporate certain elements. Ultimately,

Freytag and Field are offering wildly similar advice, which is a strong indicator of a universal structure for basic consumption.

And, lest we forget the person who most influenced this lecture, let's invite Kurt Vonnegut Jr. to weigh in on story shape.

[VIDEO – Vonnegut Story Arcs – Lecture @ 20sec.]

If you're interested, you can find a few different versions of this full lecture on YouTube.

PART III: Acknowledging the Counterargument

To consider where and how to break up a plot is an unnecessary constraint that might stifle the writing process and create a story that is formulaic and fails to account for the needs of the characters and conflict. Numerical divisions are a legacy from the theatre, an artificial superimposition intended to intrigue the audience before a break. A much better way to create a story is by inhabiting the story and allowing it to grow organically.

I completely agree with this sentiment, and am not here to argue it. To put on any constraint whatsoever outside of entertaining oneself while writing is, in my opinion, counterproductive. But the principals of dramatic action are artistically treated reflections of real-life problem solving. In both real life and fiction, a *threat*—e.g. a character flaw or a sharknado—creates a problem, which leads to an inciting action that sets the wheels of plot in motion. The plot requires complexity if it is to become a story worth telling.

For instance—I was in Chicago visiting my partner's family over the holidays and I went out one morning to remove the baby seat docking station from the car so that the car could be used to transport people and not babies, and found that the door directly leading to the dock was frozen shut. I pulled on it twice, and not wanting to break my father-in-law's car door, stopped and went around to the other side.

Now, at this juncture in the would-be story, perhaps you're intrigued. *Oh, boy.* You're thinking, *I wonder what happens next*! Well, what happened is this: the driver's side door opened without a problem and I retrieved the dock and returned inside.

Technically, by Aristotelian structural standards, this is a story. I have an introduction: I journeyed to retrieve the dock. I have a conflict: the door was iced shut. I have a resolution: I found another means of retrieving the dock. It's just not a very interesting one. Instead, I would call it more of a factoid.

If, on the other hand, I was not alone, but rather had the baby in hand when I found the door iced over, we have a more interesting premise, one that lends itself to complication. The story could go a couple different ways. Say I slip on the ice, perhaps the baby slides into a nearby stormdrain letting out into the Chicago River, where it's puffy snowsuit bouoys it around ice patches a quarter mile downstream where it is then picked up and raised by the pack of coyotes we heard disemboweling a housecat the night before, only to return some years later to found a new microbrewery. Alternatively, for a more Carverian slant, the baby falls from the carrier because I failed to strap her in properly and cracks her skull and (right now you're all saying *Ohh, boy. That's no bueno*) which leads to a hospital visit and (regardless of the outcome re: the baby's health) a prolonged period of fighting at home that may or may not dissolve the marriage, the near-end of which is the only part of the story Carver would include in his text.

The point is, in many stories, we have a threat that creates a problem. We have an inciting action that introduces a series of events to complicate said problem and increase tension. And we have an anti-threat (say, a lesson that addresses the aforementioned character flaw, or an explosive device tossed into the eye of the sharknado, which is, according to Google, what stops a sharknado, though that seems pretty obvious and reinforces my reasoning for not watching the movie in the first place). Regardless, this anti-threat resolves the problem in some fashion.

Anyway, even now, as AI threatens not just to take our jobs, but to literally be evolution's next stop, writers declare their work to be inimitable. To break stories down in this way, to create buckets for them, is to sap the life from them. And yet, many well-regarded stories do fit into one mold or another, and are made great simply by the artistry involved in the telling itself. So, obstinately returning to my point, to understand traditional principles of structure will help writers of all levels to consider what has been done, and how to either recreate it in a new, compelling form, or to subvert it entirely and do something none of us have seen before.

PART IV: The Work – The Science Behind it All

I focused on one story for each of my six journal entries, limiting my selection to those with a discernible plot while trying to include a reasonable range of styles. These include: Edward P. Jones's "Old Boys, Old Girls," Lorrie Moore's "What is Seized," Sam Lipsyte's "The Dungeon Master," Anton Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog," Robert Stone's "Helping," and Kelly Link's "Two Houses," which is a fantastic story and unquestionably literary, though it verges on genre, specifically a mix of horror and science fiction, and thus is a little bit of a curveball thrown in to test the soundness of my structural theory. I found that even with this outlier, the theory holds water.

As previously stated, I examined story structure in my final semester to understand what similarities exist in those I admire, and to use that insight to offer my audience a more gratifying and resonant reading experience. I focused this inquiry around EVENTS, which I define as anything that has a profound impact on the present action (an external consideration) or on the identity of the protagonist (and internal consideration. These events are required for the story to function—or, in other words, the story could not occur as it does without each EVENT (or another event with a similar consequence) transpiring. I found that for an average story around 20 pages in length, roughly 6 events transpire, though they do not directly correspond with transitions between sections, and no event occurred in the introductory section (i.e. prior to the inciting incident).

With respect to the "science" behind all of this, my percentages are loosely calculated from each story's respective page count. I did not break out the percentages of summary and scene, as consistent shifting between the two makes this inquiry arduous, if not entirely meaningless, though I have tried to distinguish between them to see where events occur, how they are connected, and how authors treat certain material given the breakout of these distinct sections. The upper-case SCENE is a section of writing almost entirely rooted in the present moment, while its lower-case counterpart is less rigid, allowing for narrative movement in time and space through introspection, memory, etc. What I refer to as *SCummary*, a mix of scene and summary, is where the balance veers more toward summary narrative, but moments of present action, especially through dialogue, keep the reader rooted in time and space. This hybrid came

about while reading Jones's "Old Boys, Old Girls," where in the penultimate scene, our hero cleans the late Yvonne's room. It's entirely narrative, and effectively a summary of actions taken, but we are there in the room with him as he interacts with his surroundings and with Yvonne, though she is dead. Given the duration of our time in one place, not to mention its intimacy, I believe this could be categorized—for the purpose of this exercise—as both scene and summary. Finally, summary is, of course, summary.

PART V: The Upshot

Wanting to one-up Freytag, I divided my structure into *six* distinct sections, all clearly defined and arranged in the same linear order. The point here is that a logic exists in storytelling defined by the way we receive information and the way that information excites in us an emotional response. Aristotle knew it, Freytag and Field knew it, and our best writers know it. Some of this information will be review, so keep that mental sifting tray out and find the nuggets.

Section 1: Introduction ~4%
First, an author must orient her readers by providing essential background information, situating the story in its present circumstance, and establishing tone or atmosphere. This is necessary in order to invite the reader into the writer's imagined world—into the dream. It's essential to reader *engagement*. If certain expectations are set and the course of the story deviates, there better be a reason, otherwise the reader will be forced outside the story, into a position of observer and evaluator instead of participant.

In "The Dungeon Master," for instance, Lypsite's ostensibly straightforward, punchy, declarative opening line: "The Dungeon Master has detention" efficiently sets the underlying tone of the story and introduces its significance. Humor exists in the ironic juxtaposition of Dungeon Master and detention, while the interplay between the real and DnD worlds function as the core of Lypsite's story. Shortly thereafter, our heroic RPG players—Role Playing Gamers, to the uninitiated—are situated in an alternate reality wherein it's possible for them to "keep the borders of their mind realm well patrolled." This type of excerpt is what I call a hinge moment, where a line jumps out at you as important, even on a first read when at the time you don't know why. As it turns out, DnD exists as an escape for each boy—their avatars are a means of repression and compartmentalization, and the maintenance of this illusion as reality is what, according to The Dungeon Master himself in the story's resolution, "postpones" suicides, despite "the world giv[ing] you many reasons to snuff it."

Section 2: Character ~21%
Once the world itself is firmly established, it's time to populate it. Here, the author situates the heroine in the story's *initial* circumstance, informing us how she navigates her world and its challenges. Getting to know this character is essential to reader *investment*, which I think of as similar to but distinct from *engagement* above. *Engagement* is a sensorial connection, whereas *investment* deals in the psychological, emotional, and spiritual realm where literary fiction exists as distinct from non-literary or genre fiction. This establishes a baseline for change in the protagonist, which will ultimately inform the story's substance.

Lorrie Moore's "What is Seized," is an episodic narrative ripe with pathos. (Note how the sections are relatively balanced, which is indicative of the fact that she is doing work on multiple levels throughout the story.) In the time leading up to and immediately following her mother's death, Lynnie processes her mother's experience of life married to an emotionally abusive man. After a first section of summary narrative in which Moore illuminates the contrast between Lynnie's father's public and private personas, Moore transports us back to Lynnie's childhood, living in a lakeside house with book-lined shelves and rooms "like songs," "small, likeable, functional." A lesser writer would have started the story with *this* section, and perhaps continued in a linear fashion through the years, but Moore's opening ensures that we consume all of this sugary stuff with a stomach already upset by a rotten marriage and tragic death.

We then learn how her mother "liked to sing," but would wait until her father was out of earshot, as he once likened her to a "disembodied mule." The children are the ones to breathe life back into her, applauding her "crooning imitations" at bedtime. We see in light of the father's abusiveness how the mother wants to be playful and silly, to enjoy life, but can't while also protecting and providing for her children. The effect is brutal, as we already know the outcome—but this all important second section shows how and why Lynnie is largely ignorant of her mother's suffering until very late in the game.

Section 3: Complication ~23%

Once we feel comfortable in the initial circumstance, we expect things to be shaken up, and if they aren't, our disappointment metastasizes into boredom—I think we can all agree there is no swifter death for a story than boredom. So, it follows that an author would need to disrupt and complicate the initial circumstance with a series of events that increase tension and momentum. The story becomes more thematically focused as a consequence of the way these events are linked, and like a narrowing river fed by tributaries, the pressure—us literary folk call it tension—builds.

In "The Lady with the Little Dog," Chekhov situates us in Gurov's day-to-day Yalta existence, sipping drinks and ogling women, before connecting him with Anna, who is considered a prospect for a "fleeting liaison," despite Gurov noting "something pathetic in her." The third section, wherein Chekhov complicates the initial circumstance, begins when Anna's husband fails to show up on a steamer, allowing our adulterers the opportunity to spend the night together. In the morning, Anna is justifiably upset. She refers to herself as a "fallen woman," but admits nonetheless that she has been "deceiving herself for a long time" by marrying young to a "lackey." Her outburst bores and frustrates Gurov, but he manages to show tenderness and calm her down—whatever his intentions at this juncture, there appears to be a seed of something respectable planted here, something that causes an "involuntary deceit" at the section's end. Though Gurov does not yet recognize his emotional entanglement, the reader acknowledges some change in him. Chekhov offers his hero a chance at a substantive romance, and he takes it. Gurov recognizes that Anna will change, that things will become increasingly difficult as their private and public lives intersect, and yet he calls it "beautiful."

Note here how Chekhov spends less time on the resolution, as this ending is not a reversal, but a surprising and gratifying continuation of everything that has led us to this point.

Section 4: Reframing ~19%
While all other phases in this defined story structure felt logical and somewhat expected, the one truly interesting finding is this fourth phase, where the writers reframed the setting or circumstance in order to challenge the protagonist in a new way and add dimension to our (and the character's own) understanding of their identity and place in the world.

As evidenced by the stories under scrutiny here, writers use any number of vehicles to transport their characters into unfamiliar terrain. In "The Lady with the Little Dog," Chekhov does it through setting, returning Gurov to Moscow, where he is forced to reconcile his real life with the recognition of his genuine love for Anna cultivated in Yalta. In "The Dungeon Master," Lypsite does it through action—his RPG players finally confront their dragon, and despite the protagonist feeling he will be rewarded for his bravery, the Dungeon Master senselessly (and character appropriately) kills the protagonist's avatar. In "What is Seized," Moore does it through the introduction of a new character, Jacob Fish, Lynnie's mother's college boyfriend and first (likely only) true love. In stark contrast with Lynnie's "cold" father, Jacob's visage lights up with a "kindness and graciousness." The contrast takes us into the world of what could have been, a world that generates true pathos given our knowledge of the mother's many regrets on her deathbed.

Finally, there is Kelly Link's "Two Houses," a wildly original and haunting tale within the tale, where Sisi's ghost story temporarily removes us from the spaceship and places us in an entirely different world, one that necessarily informs the one we've gotten used to. This works because Link's story is cerebral in nature, not so much about the present action as about the reader's contemplation of consciousness—what it means to exist. This is also why the bulk of Link's work is focused on complicating and reframing. Because the story is effectively an amalgamation of stories, less attention needs to be paid to the specific journey of our heroine, Gwenda. In this case, the entirety of the "Reframing" section, a full 25% of Link's story, is dedicated to Sisi's tale.

No matter how the author chooses to effect this transition, in this fourth section, there must be a new environment or situation to help us recontextualize our understanding of the initial circumstance or conflict.

Section 5: Rock Bottom ~17%
From this new experience comes opportunity—in each story, the protagonist finds hope in some element of said new experience, and given the serious nature (if not tone) of most literary stories, that hope is necessarily short lived.

At the latter stage of this section, our hero, having enjoyed a respite from his pain, sinks to rock bottom, at least insofar as the contained story is concerned. In "The Dungeon Master," having finally been allowed the opportunity to attack the dragon, the protagonist is stunned to witness the destruction of his avatar. When his very real anger about his very fake death causes him to proclaim, "It's not real!" a brawl ensues that destroys the boys' bonds with one another and to varying degrees with the game itself. The one activity that he has relied on for socialization and enjoyment—meager as both were—is gone. Of course, only after these two worlds shatter against each other can he begin to fashion a fresh start from the scraps.

Section 6: Resolution ~16%
In the end, like a true conductor mensch, each author offers the protagonist a solo, some isolated moment in which to recognize or reveal some kind of growth or learning, or lack thereof. As with all of this stuff, there are any number of ways an author can accomplish this. “Old Boys” ends with Caesar’s physical isolation on a solitary walk through Washington DC, flipping a coin for direction. “What is Seized” concludes with an observation, Lynnie absently responding to a gas station attendant while focused on the triangular plastic flags that flap to get her attention “like things that seem to want to sing but can’t,” obviously echoing the mother’s singing during Lynnie’s childhood. In “The Dungeon Master” it’s a clairvoyant journey that transcends time and space and uncovers the other characters’ respective futures before our hero considers the runaway nature of life without an RPG escape ramp. And in “Two Houses,” Gwenda goes forward “in a great spasm, her arms extended to catch the wall,” and is unable to distinguish the two sister ships she has tattooed on her hands, or in other words, unable to determine if she has in fact died whilst on this journey.

PART VI: Case Study

Robert Stone: “Helping” (*from* 100 Years of the Best American Short Stories)

Robert Stone’s short story, “Helping” is a linear narrative where distinct scenes have little overlap in terms of characters or actions, but are connected as part of Elliot’s day of broken promises. The threads that run through the story are primarily emotional and psychological. Elliot suffers from PTSD-fueled alcoholism, and the story hinges around the moment a little less than halfway through when he falls off the wagon.

“Helping” is a story about illness and survival, responsibility and nihilism. It is also a story of threats. In the end, Elliot has not killed himself. His wife, Grace, has not left him. Vopotik, the child-abuser who threatens Grace does not show up to seek revenge. There is nothing to suggest Elliot’s life will change, or even that he wants it to. At the story’s end, his desire for forgiveness, for a gesture from Grace, may be simply a desire for simplicity and comfort. Or, for the optimistic among us, it could be an epiphany, one that will get Elliot to change his behavior for good. I’m not sure the story supports this optimism, but one could make the argument as Elliot realizes his base line need for Grace. Still, Elliot’s world is not one in which good things happen, even when good people like Grace sacrifice to make it so.

I. Introduction - 4%
In the opening paragraph, Stone sets the tone with a string of negative adjectives—gray, wet, cold, lonely, old—to describe a trip Elliot recently took to Boston. He also introduces the primary factor in Elliot’s character arc when he notes how Eliot “sensed a broken promise,” “but did not drink,” for “He had joined Alcoholics Anonymous fifteen months before.” In the paragraphs that follow, we get the sense that Elliot is troubled, searching for something. His discontentment is highlighted by his fixation on sobriety. In the second paragraph, he is “Sober,” walking in the woods. The fourth and fifth *begin*, respectively: “Day in, day out, he was sober,”

and “Sober, however, he remained.” The repetition is almost ridiculous until we realize how on point it is with respect to Elliot’s thoughts. The man is an alcoholic on the edge.

II. Character – 21%
Here, we are introduced to Blankenship, a contemptible person who (in his delusions about having fought in Vietnam) serves as Elliot’s foil and antagonist. Their conversation leads to Elliot’s critical line (which helps to inform us, perhaps, of the reason for his alcoholism), “It’s ridiculous for you to tell me your problems have to do with Nam. You were never over there. It was me over there, Blankenship. Not you.” At this stage, Elliot admits that his anger is “driving him crazy.” Ultimately, the scene introduces Elliot’s present condition as a recovering alcoholic who, while struggling with his own mental illness, is forced to confront similar disorders in others. This, it seems, is unstable ground. The tension exists in Elliot’s *response* to the irony of Blankenship’s position, and the conjuring of his own past fear.

III. Complication – 23%
Stone uses setting to enhance tone and theme when he opens the third section with a description of the cold. The environment in this story is inhospitable (the air itself stings), while the ice that covers most everything compounds the stagnation Elliot feels. After Elliot visits the library, the place where he used to hide out when he was “out of work and booze-whipped,” he realizes as he walks toward a neon bar sign that he had “contrived to promise himself a drink.” In this world of ice, the environment inside the bar—Springsteen on the jukebox, happy hour prices, the bartender’s welcome—feels right. He has a drink and his spirits change. The classical tape he “snapped off at once” when he got in his car after leaving Blankenship is now playing “on full volume.” After 18 months, he has once again fallen off the wagon. In the scene that follows back at home, Grace looks at him “in fear” as she registers his drunkenness, a sentiment founded in the “violent fantasies” he begins to describe, and which clearly Grace has been forced to endure plenty of times before.

IV: Reframing – 19%
The reframing of circumstance in “Helping” occurs when Grace takes shape as a real character. She has just lost a court case concerning a man named Vopotik and a three-year-old child with broken fingers. Despite her pain, Elliot continues to drink and act like a jerk to her. The shame he feels suggests that he understands on some level that he is hurting her, and yet he continues to act in self-destructive ways. The argument they get into leads to his brutal admission that he doesn’t think he “will ever be dead enough—or dead long enough—to get the taste of this life off [his] teeth.” Grace responds with an ultimatum of sorts, saying that she will die if he falls entirely off the wagon again. It’s painful to witness this scene, as Elliot is digging himself a squared-off hole—it’s almost as if we can hear his shovel scraping the rock below.

V. Nadir – 17%
The hope that’s offered in the story is subtle—as this is not a hopeful story. Specifically, when Vopotik calls to threaten Grace, there is a moment where it’s possible Elliot will come to his wife’s defense in the way she needs. He puts himself between them, which, of course, is more likely drunken bravado and lust for conflict, than any sincere attempt to be Grace’s partner, but

given how hopeless most of this story is, Stone seems to be nodding toward something positive in their relationship, possibly something that once was but is no longer. This moment is fleeting, as Elliot antagonizes the man despite Grace's pleading for him to stop. While Elliot re-lives his war time fantasies, Grace's drunkenness mimics her revulsion, and she becomes physically ill. The nadir occurs when Grace says explicitly, "If I go it means I don't care anymore. Understand?" And he responds, "Stop asking me if I understand, I understand fine." He has successfully pushed away the only person who watches over him, and in this moment, though he doesn't quite realize it yet, he is truly alone.

VI. Resolution – 16%
In the final section, Elliot is isolated on his stakeout, reminiscing about Nam and the "three primary conditions of life," namely "fear, anger, and sleep." He falls asleep and wakes in the morning to wander outside, where Professor Loyall Anderson, a model citizen (in theory), who is young and handsome with a handsome family and, it seems, plenty to live for, sashays in to Elliot's private space on a pair of cross-country skis. When he finally picks up on Elliot's veiled threats and flees, Elliot returns to his desperate thoughts of life. Like the Vopotik's child, who may well be better off dead, the kind of trauma Elliot has suffered may not be something he can forget. After he fires the shotgun at a grouse and misses, he claims that he does not wish to harm any living creature, and the beautiful image of his wife at the window contrasts with much of what has come before it, possibly suggesting some kind of self-awareness. Stone offers Elliot this moment of redemption, as he begins "to hope for forgiveness," but to what extent he is capable of change is the question Stone leaves us with at the end of the story, in addition to wondering whether Elliot has already burned any and all bridges back to Grace.

PART VI: Conclusion

So, there you have it. A six-part structure that, if followed, almost guarantees literary mediocrity and might give you a fighting chance at something better.

In ten year's time, when you're reminiscing with a fellow Wally over coffee or a cocktail, she'll asks you to name your favorite graduate class. This won't be it. It might not even make the top fifteen of your standard, four-term program duration. But, if you obtained even the saddest little morsel of information to elevate your work, chuckled inwardly a couple times, *and* I graduate, it will have been a resounding success in my book.

Thank you all.