SAMPLE

EXPLORE WRITING



Your Story Plan

The Keeper's Step

Built from your own writing · November 2026

Your story in a sentence

Eleven years after her father climbed the lighthouse stairs and never came down, Maggie Rourke returns to the island that buried the truth, and finds the lamp lit, a child in red wellingtons, and a silence that has to be broken before it takes somebody else.

The Keeper's Step

Maggie Rourke was seven the night Inishcorr went dark. Her father Tomás went up to light the lamp during a storm and did not come back, a fishing boat broke on the rocks, and the island closed over the whole night like water. Maggie was taken to Galway and raised in a house where nobody said the word Inishcorr aloud. Now eighteen, with her aunt freshly buried and a set of keys in her pocket, she comes home to a lighthouse everyone pretends is empty. It is not. Someone has been restoring the lamp in secret. A seven year old girl leaves things on the third step for the man she says lives in the light. And old Dessie Gallagher, who looks at Maggie as if she has risen from the sea, knows exactly why the island would rather it stayed dark.

Literary gothic mystery with an undertow of the uncanny. A novel, around 80,000 words.

What your writing already does well

You write weight without ever saying the word grief. "Everything on Inishcorr was heavier than she remembered" does the work of a page of backstory, and you let the reader feel it through three concrete things: wind, silence, a stare across a bar. The plan builds on this by keeping the island's guilt physical: it lives in objects, rooms, weather and the way people stand, never in explanation.

You trust the small image to carry dread. "Set neatly side by side" is a chilling phrase precisely because it is calm. Someone tidy put those boots there. The plan leans into this, giving you a child, a secret restorer and a buried night, each announced first by a small wrong detail before anyone speaks of it.

You understand collective silence as a character. "The island decided, in the way islands do" is the thesis of your novel in nine words. Inishcorr itself is your antagonist, and the plan makes that silence the thing Maggie has to walk into and crack, person by person.

You handle the uncanny with restraint. "Something clicked into place" could be a ghost or a man with a spanner. You never tell us which. The plan keeps both answers alive as long as possible, and lets the human answer carry the emotional resolution while the stranger one is allowed to linger at the edges.

Your main character

Maggie Rourke is eighteen, Inishcorr born and Galway raised, and she has spent eleven years being the quiet girl with the dead father and the aunt who changed the subject. She is observant to the point of discomfort, good at reading a room because she grew up in rooms where the real conversation was happening under the floor. She carries her father's keys, her mother's name (Áine, who died when Maggie was three) and a seven year old's unfinished memory of a storm.

What she wants is simple and she would say it plainly: to know what happened on the stairs. What she truly needs is harder. She needs to stop being a ghost in her own life, someone who stays politely dead so that other people can be comfortable. She needs to decide whether Inishcorr is a wound or a home, and to choose it or leave it on her own terms rather than be removed from it a second time.

Her flaw is patience of the wrong kind. She was trained into waiting: wait for Nuala to be ready, wait for someone to explain, wait to be told she belongs. On the island this reads as calm, and the islanders mistake it for consent. Her fear is that the truth will be ordinary and cruel, that her father was not taken by anything grand but was simply allowed to fall, and that the people who let it happen are the same people who taught her to swim.

She starts as a visitor with keys. By the end she is someone who has stood in the storm, lit the lamp herself, and made the island look at what the light shows. Whether she stays to keep it is her choice, and the novel earns the moment where she makes it.

The people around them

The opposing force is Inishcorr's agreement not to speak. It has a face in Dessie Gallagher, but it is bigger than him: it is the post office going quiet, the priest's careful kindness, the ferryman who forgets to mention the evening sailing. The island is not evil. It made a bargain eleven years ago to survive the knowledge of what it did, and Maggie's return threatens the only peace it has.

Dessie Gallagher, publican and keeper of the silence

Dessie is seventy, owns the only pub, and has run the island's affairs for forty years the way a man steers a currach: by feel, and without discussion. Eleven years ago he asked Tomás Rourke to leave the lamp dark for one night because a boat was landing goods on the far strand that the island could not afford to have seen. Tomás refused because the Saint Fiachra was out with Dessie's own son aboard. Dessie followed him up the stairs. What happened there he has told no one, not even the priest. He wants Maggie gone, gently if possible, because he is fond of her and because her face is her father's. He presses on her with hospitality, with a room above the bar, with a ferry ticket paid for, and finally with fear.

Cathal Gallagher, Dessie's son, the man in the lamp room

Cathal was twenty three the night the Saint Fiachra struck Carraig Dubh. He was the one who lived. He watched the light go out from the water, and he has spent the years since quietly rebuilding the mechanism his father let rot, telling himself it is only a hobby. He is the mechanism turning over in your first page. He wants the light lit and does not have the courage to be the one who lights it. He is Maggie's uneasy ally: he knows more than he says, he will not betray his father outright, and he presses on her by handing her pieces and refusing to assemble them.

Róisín Gallagher, seven, the red wellingtons

Cathal's daughter. Her mother left for the mainland when Róisín was two and did not come back. Róisín has adopted the lighthouse as her kingdom and leaves offerings on the third step for the keeper she insists still lives there. She is not frightened of the tower; she is frightened of the sea. She mirrors Maggie at seven exactly, and she is the reason the island's silence becomes dangerous rather than merely sad. She presses on Maggie simply by existing: Maggie cannot leave a seven year old alone with a secret the way she was left.

Bríd Ní Dhomhnaill, postmistress

Bríd lost two brothers on the Saint Fiachra. She knows the island's bargain and has hated it for eleven years, but she has had nowhere to put the hatred. She is the silence in the post office when Maggie asks for directions, and she is also the first person to say the boat's name aloud. She wants someone to be blamed. She presses on Maggie by feeding her the truth in a shape that serves Bríd's grief, and by withdrawing when Maggie refuses to be her weapon.

The world of the story

Inishcorr is a small island off the west coast, two ferry sailings a day when the weather allows and none when it does not. Perhaps two hundred people, a pub, a post office that is also the shop, a church, a school with eleven pupils, a harbour and a hill with a disused lighthouse on it. The light was officially downgraded by Irish Lights before Tomás vanished and formally decommissioned afterwards, replaced by a buoy. The island has let the hill go to bracken and nobody walks it.

The time is roughly now, or a year or two back, but Inishcorr runs on an older clock: mobile signal only on the pier, a landline in the pub, the ferry timetable pinned to the post office door. The disappearance was eleven years ago, so Maggie's memory and the island's memory are both long enough to have hardened.

The mood is grey and tidal: long exposures of light and weather, interiors that smell of turf and salt, conversations where the important sentence is the one not finished. The rule of this world is that the island's old economy, the landing of goods nobody taxed, was never a crime to the people who did it,

only a necessity, and that what is necessary is never spoken of. The rule of the uncanny is subtler: you never confirm it, but you never quite deny it either. Footsteps on the spiral when no one is up there. The lamp coming on when Cathal swears he did not touch it.

Three details to keep returning to: the drawer in the lamp room where Tomás kept apples and where the sweet rotten smell comes from; the third step, worn to a dip by eleven years of Róisín's offerings and, before her, by a keeper's boot; and the fuchsia hedge at the end of the cottage garden that is far too tall and thick for eleven years, as if something underneath it has been feeding it.

What it is really about

This is a novel about what a community buries in order to go on living, and who pays the rent on that burial. Inishcorr did not set out to destroy Tomás Rourke. It chose one night of darkness for its own survival and then could not afford to let the light back on, because light shows what is there. Maggie is the thing that was buried with him: the child nobody could look at.

It is also about inheritance. Maggie inherits keys, a cottage, a name and a silence. The island inherits guilt and passes it to a new child in red wellingtons. The question the book asks is this: when you discover the people who raised you did something unforgivable to keep you all afloat, do you forgive them, expose them, or find a third thing that is neither? And a quieter question underneath it: can a place be home if it would rather you had not come back?

The shape of the story

The opening

Maggie climbs the hill with her father's keys, exactly as you have written it. She finds the red wellingtons, hears the mechanism turn, and the light sweeps the water for the first time in eleven years. She climbs the rest of the stairs and finds the lamp burning and the lamp room empty, a flask still warm on the sill, and from the gallery she sees a small figure running down the hill towards the village.

The moment everything changes

The island has seen the light. By morning everyone knows Maggie Rourke is back and the lamp has been lit, and the two facts have been joined in every kitchen. Dessie comes to the cottage with a loaf and a bottle and a kindness that is also an eviction notice. Maggie, who has spent her life being moved along, finds that she cannot do it this time, and says so.

The point of no return

Maggie catches Cathal in the lamp room and learns he has been restoring the mechanism for years. He tells her the island will never let the light be kept, but will not say why. Instead of leaving, she moves out of the room above the pub and into the keeper's cottage, and begins asking the one question nobody will answer: what was the name of the boat?

The midpoint

On the anniversary of the night, Maggie lights the lamp herself, deliberately, and the island comes up the hill. It is the first time in eleven years they have stood on it together. Dessie tells her, in front of everyone, that she does not know what she is calling in off the water. Bríd, in front of everyone, says the name Saint Fiachra. The silence is broken and nothing can be put back.

The darkest moment

A storm comes in and Róisín is missing. The island, frightened and ashamed, turns on Maggie: the light has woken something, the Rourke girl should never have come. Cathal, who has told Maggie only half of what he knows, is out searching the rocks. Maggie is alone in the cottage with the fuchsia hedge thrashing against the window and the knowledge that her father, too, was blamed for a boat he was trying to save.

The climax

Maggie climbs the stairs in the storm to light the lamp for the search. Dessie follows her up, as he followed Tomás. On the spiral, in the dark, with the wind in the tower, he finally tells her what happened: the argument, the hand on the arm, the fall, the body carried to the garden before dawn. Maggie has to choose whether to listen to him or push past him to the lamp. She does both. The light finds Róisín on the Carraig Dubh ledge, and Cathal brings her in.

The ending

The island has seen the light used for what it was built to do. Dessie goes to the Garda himself, or does not, and either way he is finished as the island's keeper of decisions. The fuchsia hedge is cut back and the ground under it is opened and Tomás Rourke is buried properly, in the churchyard, with his name on a stone. Maggie stands on the gallery at dusk. The lamp is not needed any more; there is a buoy for that. She lights it anyway, because a light is a thing you choose to keep, and the book ends on the question of whether she will be here to light it tomorrow, answered in the way she sets her father's keys on the sill rather than in her pocket.

Chapter by chapter

1. **The Hill.** The climb, the wellingtons, the mechanism, the light. Maggie goes up the rest of the stairs and finds the lamp room empty, a warm flask, and a child's figure running downhill. Establishes voice, dread, and the two mysteries at once: who is lighting the lamp and who is the child.

2. **Nuala's Envelope.** Galway, three weeks earlier. The funeral, the flat, the drawer of unanswered letters from Inishcorr: from the priest, from Dessie, from Bríd. The keys. Maggie reads them in one sitting and books the ferry. We learn how thoroughly she was taught not to ask.

3. **The Crossing.** The ferry, the ferryman who knows her face, the post office where Bríd goes quiet, the pub where Dessie looks at her like a ghost. The room above the bar. Every kindness has a lid on it. Ends with Maggie deciding to walk the hill that night rather than wait for morning, which loops back to chapter one.

4. **The Keeper's Cottage.** Next morning she goes to the cottage she grew up in and finds it dusted, aired, the beds made. Someone has kept it. Her first long memory of Tomás, the apples in the lamp room drawer, the night of the storm from a seven year old's eye level. The fuchsia hedge, far too tall.

5. **Red Wellingtons.** On the strand Maggie meets Róisín, who knows her name before she gives it and asks whether she has come to take the keeper's job. Róisín explains, matter of factly, that a man lives in the light and likes apples. Maggie realises the island's children have grown up with a ghost story that has her father in it.

6. **The Mechanism.** Maggie waits in the tower and catches Cathal at the lamp. His account of the restoration, year by year, bearings and lenses ordered under false names. He tells her the island will not stand for the light and will not say why. She moves into the cottage that day. The point of no return.

7. **A Loaf and a Bottle.** Dessie comes to the cottage. The most careful conversation in the book: he is sorry for her trouble, he has a ticket for Friday's boat, the cottage is damp, the island is no place for a girl alone. She says she is staying. He leaves the bottle. That night the lamp comes on by itself and Cathal swears he was in the pub.

8. **Two Graves.** Bríd takes Maggie to the churchyard and shows her the Ó Flaithearta brothers, drowned on a date Maggie knows by heart. Bríd says the name of the boat for the first time, quietly, and then says nothing else for a week. Maggie begins to understand that her father's night and the island's drowning are the same night.

9. **The Official Story.** The Garda report Nuala kept, the Irish Lights letter, the newspaper cutting: keeper lost overboard attempting rescue. But Tomás never went to sea that night; he went up the stairs. Maggie confronts the priest, who tells her the truth is in God's keeping, which she takes as confirmation that it is in somebody's.

10. **The Anniversary.** The midpoint. Maggie lights the lamp at the hour her father did. The island comes up the hill, the first time in eleven years. Dessie's warning about what she is calling in. Bríd's answer. The crowd disperses, but every door in the village is now a different door.

11. **From the Water.** Cathal's chapter. He tells Maggie what it was to be in the Saint Fiachra and watch the light go out: the brothers in the water, the rocks, the long swim. He tells her his father begged Tomás not to light it. He does not tell her the rest, and she knows he has not.

12. **The Third Step.** Róisín shows Maggie her offerings: shells, a drawing, an apple. She says the keeper leaves things back. Maggie finds, among the child's treasures, her father's tobacco tin, which was in his pocket the night he vanished. The uncanny and the human explanation sit side by side and you let them.

13. **The Far Strand.** Maggie walks to the landing place on the island's blind side and finds the old slipway, the ring bolts, the cave. Bríd, thawing, admits what the island used to land there and why one dark night mattered more than a boat with her brothers on it. The economy of silence laid bare.

14. **Dessie's First Confession.** In the empty pub after hours, Dessie tells Maggie he asked Tomás to leave the lamp dark and that Tomás refused. He says he went up the stairs after him. He says he never reached the top. Maggie does not believe him, and he knows she does not.

15. **The Falling Out.** Maggie accuses Cathal of knowing where his father's story ends. He will not choose between them. Bríd, realising Maggie will not go to the Garda with her, withdraws. The island closes its doors again. Maggie walks the garden at dusk and makes herself stand under the fuchsia and say aloud what she thinks is there.

16. **The Weather Coming.** The storm forecast. The ferry cancelled. Róisín does not come home from school. Cathal is on the rocks, Dessie is organising a search with lamps and no light, and the island's fear finds its target: the Rourke girl and her lamp woke the drowned. Maggie alone in the cottage, the hedge against the glass.

17. **The Stairs.** Maggie climbs in the storm to light the lamp for the searchers. Dessie follows her up. On the spiral, in the dark, he tells her the rest: the hand on the arm, the fall, the neck, the body carried down before dawn, the garden. She listens and climbs at the same time. She reaches the lamp. The light goes out across the water.

18. **Carraig Dubh.** The beam finds Róisín on the ledge where the Saint Fiachra struck. Cathal reaches her. The island, which has gathered on the hill again, watches its own light do what it was built for. Nobody speaks of the drowned.

19. **What Lies Under.** The morning after. The hedge cut back, the ground opened, the priest present, Bríd present. Tomás Rourke buried in the churchyard with a stone. Dessie's choice about the Garda, made in front of his son, whichever way you decide it falls. Róisín asks whether the keeper will mind leaving the light.

20. **The Keeper's Step.** Dusk. Maggie on the gallery. The buoy blinks out at sea; the lamp is not needed. She lights it anyway. Her father's keys on the sill, not in her pocket. Whether she stays is a question the last paragraph asks without answering, but the reader knows.

Your opening scene

Begin exactly where you have begun. The climb, the keys, the wellingtons and the light are the right first page and you should not move them. What the scene still needs to do is take Maggie to the top of the stairs before the chapter ends, so that the reader learns three things: that someone is tending the lamp, that they have just left, and that a child is involved. Hold back everything about Galway, Nuala and the letters; that is chapter two's job. Hold back any name for the boat or the drowned. Let the island's hostility be a stare and a silence, nothing more.

End the scene on the gallery, with the light turning behind her and a small figure running down the hill, and the feeling of being watched by the whole dark island below. Not fear exactly. Recognition.

Here is one way it could begin:

> *She went up. The stairs turned on themselves the way they always had, and her hand found the rail before her eyes did, cold and furred with verdigris, and she counted without meaning to. Forty one. Forty two. At fifty the light came round again and lit the wall in front of her white, then let it go.*
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> *The lamp room door was open. The lens was turning, slow and enormous, and the air in there was warm. On the sill sat a flask with its cup unscrewed and a mouthful of tea still in it, steam lifting. Nobody. The gallery door banged once against the wind and stood open.*
>
> *Maggie stepped out into it. Below her the island lay in the dark like something that had stopped breathing to listen. The beam went over the water and came back over the village and in that second she saw, halfway down the hill, a small shape running, red at the feet, not looking back.*

Three things to watch as you write

You love the triple. "Salt and paraffin and something sweeter" is perfect, and so is "the wind, the silence, the way old Dessie looked". Over a novel the rhythm can become a tic the reader starts to hear. Vary it: sometimes let one image stand alone and do all the work. Instead of three things being heavier than she remembered, try one, and then a sentence that has nothing to do with weight at all.

You lean on "very" for stillness. "Maggie stood very still" works beautifully once. Watch for it recurring at every moment of dread, because stillness loses its power when it is the only register for shock. Give her other reactions: she puts the boot down too carefully, she laughs, she says something ordinary aloud to the empty tower. Fear in a real body is various.

You withhold so well that you may be tempted to withhold forever. The sample ends on a question and that is right for page one, but a novel of unanswered questions becomes a fog. Decide, for every chapter, one thing the reader learns for certain by its end, even if it is small: the name of the boat, the date on the gravestone, the fact that the tin was in his pocket. Mystery is fed by revelation, not starved by it.

Your writing plan

Aim for 1,000 words a session, four sessions a week. That is roughly 4,000 words a week and a complete draft of 80,000 words in about twenty weeks, so twelve weeks gets you well past the midpoint and into the storm with the end in sight. If a session gives you 600 good words, take them and stop.

Weeks one to three: the island closes

Write chapters one to six. The climb, Galway, the crossing, the cottage, Róisín and Cathal. Do not polish chapter one again; you have it. Your milestone is the end of chapter six, with Maggie moved into the cottage and the question of the boat's name on the page.

Weeks four to six: the silence cracks

Write chapters seven to ten. Dessie's visit, the two graves, the official story, the anniversary. Your milestone is the midpoint scene on the hill with the whole island present and the name Saint Fiachra said aloud. Read the scene back and make sure every named character is somewhere in that crowd.

Weeks seven to nine: the truth in pieces

Write chapters eleven to fifteen. Cathal from the water, the third step, the far strand, Dessie's half confession, the falling out. Your milestone is Maggie alone under the fuchsia saying the thing she fears. If you find yourself explaining the economy of the far strand at length, cut it by half; Bríd's bitterness tells us more than the price of diesel.

Weeks ten to twelve: the storm

Write chapters sixteen to twenty. The weather, the stairs, Carraig Dubh, the grave, the gallery. Your milestone is the words "the end" on a draft, however rough chapters eighteen and nineteen are. Write the stairs scene first if you need to; it is the heart of the book and the rest will arrange itself around it.

A closing note

You already know how this island sounds, and you already know how to make a reader stand very still on a stair. What the plan gives you is permission: to let Maggie climb all the way up, to let the island answer for itself, to put the body in the ground and the light back on. Trust the smell of apples and the neat red boots. Trust that silence is a character and that you are the one person on Inishcorr allowed to make it speak. Go up the hill. The lamp is already turning.

About this plan. This plan was built from the sample of writing you shared and is a starting point, not a set of rules: change anything that does not feel like your story. Your writing and your ideas remain entirely yours. Explore Writing, www.explorewriting.co.uk