

by jess rizkallah

PART ONE: THE CHARACTER CASE FILES!!!!

CREATE A WANT AD FOR YOUR IDEAL PROTAGONIST

- what are the qualifications for the job?
- what sort of resume are you looking for?
- what should they expect to face in the narrative? (ex: physically, literally, existentially.)
- what are the rules of the Universe you hope to build for them?
- what is the dress code?
- what might be the conflict that arises?
- etc

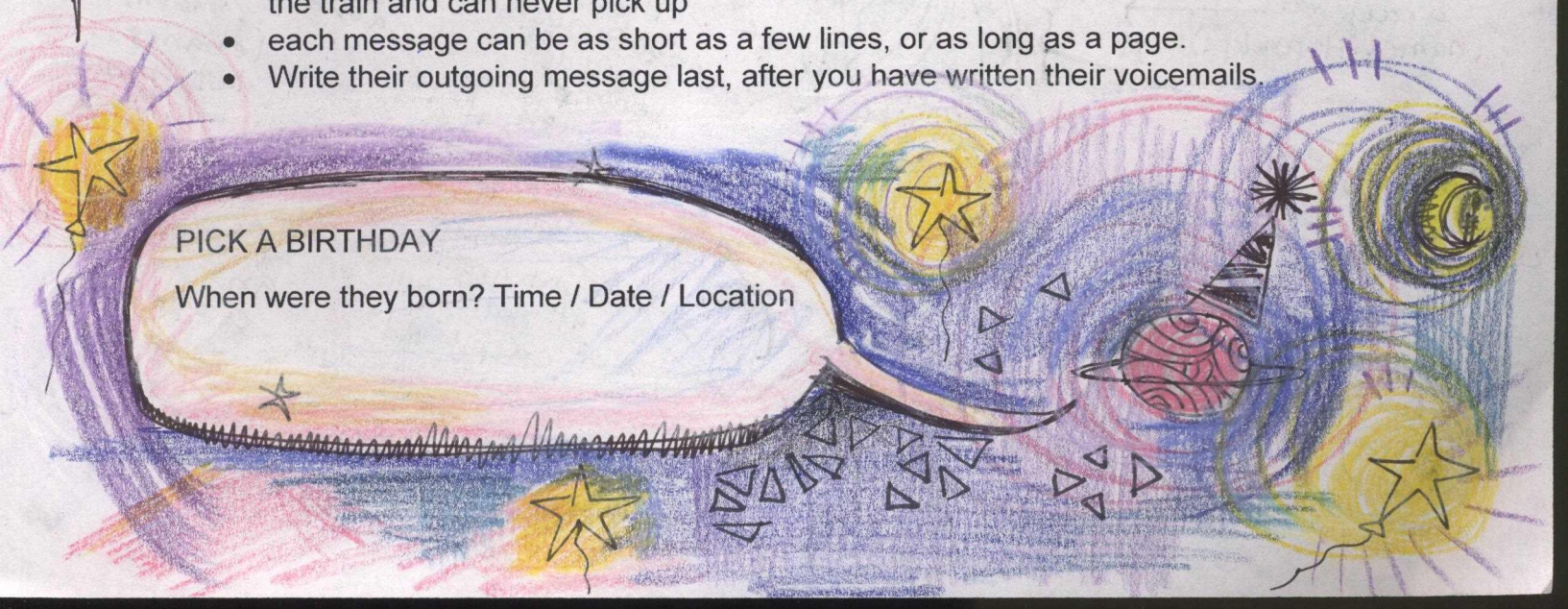
write three responses to this ad. these don't have to be any of the characters that you eventually choose, but each response should have distinct voice. think of this as an access point into the mysterious daunting realm of What (and Who) The Heck Am I Going To Write About?

TRANSCRIBE THREE MESSAGES LEFT ON YOUR CHARACTER'S VOICEMAIL

- what time is it? How old is the message?
- who is calling them? what is being asked of them? what news might they be receiving?
- Maybe they receive a butt-dial message: what does it sound like?
- Maybe they're in trouble, maybe they're avoiding someone, maybe they forgot something somewhere
- Maybe they're in love, maybe they're out of the country, maybe they're always on the train and can never pick up
- each message can be as short as a few lines, or as long as a page.
- Write their outgoing message last, after you have written their voicemails.

PICK A BIRTHDAY

When were they born? Time / Date / Location





DRAW YOUR CHARACTER:



Sometimes we don't know how our characters look like (among other details) until we draw them. Revisit pages 144 & 145 in *Syllabus* by Lynda Barry. As you draw, question what emerges and assign a backstory for it.

Why did you make their jacket red? Hm, maybe they only wear bright colors because they have a recurring nightmare that they are lost at sea but no one can ever find them because they blend into the murky water? Or maybe they bike at night a lot and don't want to be hit by a car. Or maybe the jacket was on sale and it's not that serious. OH NO someone just bumped your arm as you did this assignment in the dining hall and now there's an extra mark you can't erase above the left eyebrow!!!! fine, it's a scar now. How did they get the scar? Maybe when they were five they fell out of a tree and then later that day a cat scratched them above their eye. For some reason that day is marked by falling out of the tree, even though they have no scars from that.

Or maybe they got into a fist fight in the produce aisle last month, and now whenever the scar tingles they know with certainty the Yankees are going to win that night (but they're a Red Sox fan. #strife)

Or maybe it's a streak of paint because you just decided your character is a painter.

Alternatively, you may already have a good idea about what your character will look like and what their style will be, so this exercise will be more of planning-as-you-draw kind of thing. Feel free to make it into a diagram.

NAME: Dalia Haddad

← ethnic eyebrows makes her always seem very interested at all times — great during boring lectures, not great at bars full of creepy old men

↑ my cousin's name

↑ common Lebanese last name

★ probably an artist, look @ those purposeful hands

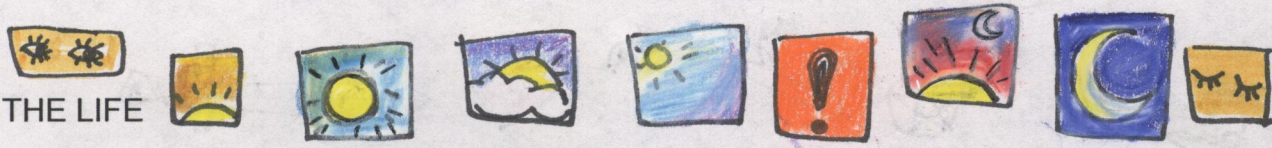
— going thru a turtle neck phase

glamorous errant gray hair (named it penelope)

recently grown out bangs — current crisis is whether or she should chop her hair into bangs (has been playing "cut your bangs" by girl pool on repeat for a week straight)

carries tension in shoulders

A DAY IN THE LIFE



write three basic paragraphs following a day in the life of your character. It must be third person, and they're not allowed to talk. Some guiding questions, if you need them:

- When do they wake up? where do they go? How do they get there?
- What's something they see every day? How does it affect their day? Do they pause to appreciate it, to react to it? Or do they register and keep it moving?
- What do they do when they aren't in motion?
- Who calls them? do they pick up? why? Or why not?
- What's their neighborhood like? What are their neighbors like? Do they have pets? Plants? Children?
- What do they have for breakfast, lunch, dinner?
- what don't they notice around them?
- It might be helpful (if you have time) to spend an afternoon by yourself, paying extra attention to what you notice and how your daily life unfolds around you. How do you move through it? How do you wish you moved through it?

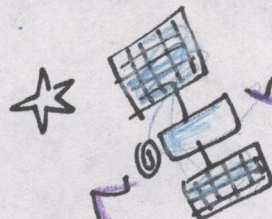
A DAY IN THE LIFE (diary remix)

now your character is allowed to speak. Slip into first person to write your protagonist's diary entry about the day that you described in the previous exercise. include thoughts, feelings, biases, personalized metaphors, lyrics stuck in their head, etc. this is a space where you will begin to develop their inner world. This is important to do before you insert them into a narrative with a conflict. Most of the time we are who we are when we are alone at the end of the day, before we come up against any conflict. Who is your protagonist in their resting state? This will help you write them easier when you throw them into whatever adventure you have in mind.

one page minimum, no maximum.

FLASH EXERCISE (more lists):

- what are five items on their grocery list
- who are the last three people they called
- what do their last three tweets say
- the last five books they read
- the last news article they bookmarked
- three secrets they've never told anyone
- three fears
- five places they have traveled or want to travel to
- what's in their Netflix queue
- their first three memories
- five posters that decorate their bedroom
- their five favorite relatives
- their three favorite movies
- what keychains hang from their keyring





TAROT



go to the following website and you will be given a random tarot card. Feel free to refresh the page as many times as you want before you decide on a card. Record what the card is, and look up what it means. Then write a short description of what this card means to your character. Is it addressing their past? Their current situation? Their future? Assign an event(s).

<http://serennu.com/tarot/onecard.php>

If this is helpful in pulling backstory, pull as many cards as you like. Feel free to give your character an entire tarot reading (spreads on the website are: 1 Card 3 Card Horseshoe 9 Card Celtic Cross 12 Houses) and see what else comes to mind.



ASTROLOGY



Whether or not this is something you believe is real, this exercise will teach you more about who you will be writing about, and hopefully be helpful personality accents to add to the person you've been creating. This can help you hone in on how they move through the world, how they react, process, etc.

- Go back to where you wrote your character's birthdate, time, and location. Then, go to the following website and pull up their birth chart.
- <http://astro.cafeastrology.com/natal.php>
- What is their sun sign? Their moon sign? Their ascendant (rising) sign?
- Look up the meaning of each sign and think about how they would work together inside your character's personality. (this website will provide an explanation for you, if you want to use that)

Explanations from BUSTLE:



Your Sun sign is the core of your ego, the basis of your "you-ness... another way to think about the Sun is to imagine that it is your personality's Boss." When you think of the question, "What's your sign," what you're really asking is, "What's your Sun sign?"

Your Moon sign, meanwhile, is essentially, "You, drunk" — which is to say, it's your darker, emotional inner self that you don't necessarily reveal to others. If you're especially sensitive, you may connect more with the characteristics of your Moon sign than your Sun.



Your Rising sign, also known as your Ascendant sign, is the "you" you consciously present to the world — the lens through which you view interactions. Though that may not seem necessarily as important as Sun and Moon, what you're willing to reveal says a lot about you.



In other words: what are your character's dominant personality traits? and then who are they when they are alone or in love or with people they trust? then who are they when they face the world? Personify their signs and put them in a room together. (*a Scorpion, a Crab, and a Lion walk into a bar...*) What do they say to each other about your protagonist?



MIXTAPE FOR DALIA HADDAD !!!

1) Walden Pond - ATTA BOY

One time she fell in love with a sad mountain man who had a flip phone

2) Sappho - Frankie Cosmos

This song is an inside joke with herself as she waits in the closet

3) Writer in the Dark - Lorde

She recently found out she was a Scorpio-moon and this song started to make sense

4) Forrest Gump - Frank Ocean

One time was chased by an angry Jack Rabbit as she listened to this song in her headphones. (ANARROW escape)

5) WHALE - YELLOW OSTRICH

reminds her of a dream she had from inside of a whale

6) ANEL MARRAH - ABDEL-HALIM Hafez

Her grandfather whistled this song a lot. He passed but she still hears the whistling as she falls asleep.

7) WHO SAYS - JOHN MAYER

DON'T TELL ANYONE. SHE WILL DENY IT. (Still has JOHN MAYER POSTER ON HER WALL)

8) WORK SONG - NINA SIMONE

Her first coffee shop job when she spilled a gallon of milk and stopped crying when this song came on.

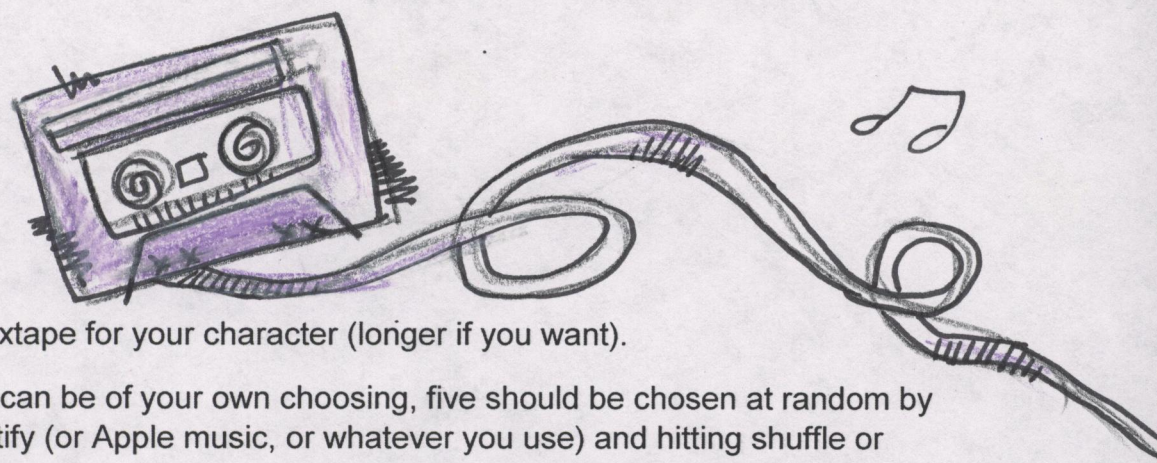
9) BLESSINGS - CHANCE THE RAPPER

This reminds her of her mama's hands.

10) J, J, I - Big D & The Kids Table

SKA PHASE. HIGH SCHOOL. (No further questions)

MIXTAPE



Make a ten track mixtape for your character (longer if you want).

- Five of them can be of your own choosing, five should be chosen at random by going to Spotify (or Apple music, or whatever you use) and hitting shuffle or radio.
- If you don't have the shuffle or radio function, have a friend send you five random songs.
- For each song, assign a memory or an event or a person your protagonist associates with this song. For songs you're unfamiliar with, look up the lyrics.
- A sentence for each song is fine, but feel free to elaborate as much as you'd like.