

Noreen tips the edge of a purple colored gel pen between her teeth as she looks over her summer list. She's made the big decision to step up in some of her classes and just scanning over the work, she already knows it's going to be intense. Geez, I may have to start all of this now even! Is this what high school is going to be like?! She abandons the pen next to its rainbow colored counterparts and puts her things away, deciding to deal with this challenge tomorrow. She scans over her shelves absently, pushing the thoughts rattling around in her mind to the side.

She rolls on her swivel chair toward her bookshelf on the other side of the room, scanning over its contents. Unsatisfied, she opens up her school computer and goes on to her library's website, checking out some books to pick up the next day. Much better. Now I can start my work tomorrow. Sure enough, as soon as she acquires the books, she delves into her summer reading homework for her English class; she only takes breaks to read one of the two survival guides for high school she also borrowed. She spends the week absorbed in one of those english books, taking it with her everywhere, even to dinner, where her parents have to finally tell her to put it away.

"You don't need to worry about your schoolwork yet, sweetie, it's only the first week of summer," her mother gently reminds her. Noreen just shrugs but complies, setting the book to the side of the table. "Have you checked your phone? Alivia has been trying to talk to you."

"Has she?" Noreen asks, feigning innocence, pretending she hasn't seen any of the missed calls from her older sister.

"Yeah, she misses you," her mom insists.

"Wouldn't it be fun to facetime with her?" Her dad adds.

"I don't know," Noreen replies, pushing her food around her plate. "I'm done eating, can I be excused?" She asks, standing up with her plate. Her parents watch in defeat as she washes her dish, grabs her book, and ventures back upstairs.

That second week of summer is spent watching history videos, reading the textbook, and taking notes filling out worksheets. Noreen has placed her phone on the other side of the room, on her bed, underneath pillows. But she still catches the sound of a ringer going off while she's working. Noreen reluctantly gets up and answers her sister's facetime call.

"Hey, Alivia," she greets.

"Hey sis," Alivia responds from the passenger seat of a car. "Why the distance?" She prods and Noreen just rolls her eyes at the irony.

"You're the one on a summer road trip," Noreen reminds her.

Alivia purses her lips.

"Mom and Dad agreed it would be good for me," Alivia reminds her. Noreen sighs. She knows it's supposed to help Alivia adjust to adulthood with her anxiety and all, but... nevermind. It was still ironic for her to be the one complaining about distance when she was who knows how many miles away. "I'll be home in a month or so, and you can call me whenever, you know that right?" She adds.

"I know. Sorry, I have to do work right now."

“But it’s only the sec----” Noreen cuts off Alivia’s reply as she hangs up the call, throwing her phone back toward her bed. Again, she spends the next few days absorbed in her history work.

“Noreen, I really think you need to hold off on your work,” her mom concludes at dinner, her dad adding,

“Haven’t you finished it all by now anyway?”

“Nope. Still have a few more classes.”

And so the cycle continues. Noreen ignores Alivia’s calls, even some of her brother’s, Kieran’s, and absorbs herself in her work, trying to get the end of summer to come without having to think about the repercussions of what that truly means. But then at the end of the month she runs out of work. So she turns to books. If Alivia calls her, she’s reading. If her parents want her to talk at dinner, she begrudgingly puts the books away. If Kieran calls, she bores him with details of her book. She actually quite enjoys that display of spite.

After enjoying a call with Kieran and explaining her latest read to him, she shakes the emotion away, reminding herself it’s not worth it to think or give any attention to the fact that her older siblings are away.

“Look, Nory, I want to talk to you, please,” Alivia finally begs one night. Noreen is too tired to get her book out and gave into answering the call cause she was bored. But she soon figures that probably wasn’t the best idea.

“Why does it matter?” Noreen rolls her eyes.

“Because you’re my little sister!” Alivia shouts. “I thought you’d miss me, but you don’t care about me at all, do you?! You won’t even talk to me!”

“Me not caring about you. You’re the one who LEFT, remember?!” Noreen yells back. “You’re the one who couldn’t care less about me. You left me all alone!”

“What?!” Alivia replies, shock plastering her face. “Sis, I left for a road trip, I’m not gone forever. And you’re not alone. You have really good friends and Mom and Da---”

“I’m not talking about them. I’m talking about how here I’m alone!”

“You know I had to do this! Why can’t you just be happy for me? Call me? Be there for me? You’ve done nothing but ignore me all summer!”

“You’ve done nothing but leave me alone all summer!” Noreen throws back.

“You AREN’T ALONE!?” Alivia cries. “What is wrong with you?!” She shouts.

“NOTHING! I wouldn’t do this to a little sister!”

“Do what?!” Alivia repeats, rushing a hand through her curls.

“I DON’T WANT TO TALK TO YOU IF YOU CAN’T FIGURE THAT OUT!”

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT!?”

“You don’t care about me!” Noreen repeats.

“Yes I DO! You’re the one who doesn’t care about me. You’re being a terrible little sister right now! I can’t believe you’re acting like a two year old!”

“You’re the one who’s a two year old! You can’t even go to college without having a meltdown!” Noreen insults and Alivia gasps, tears falling from her eyes.

“Maybe it's good I'm going away!” She fires back.

“Yeah, maybe it is! I hate having to live with you anyway!” Noreen hangs up and throws her phone across the room, crying into one of her pillows. She hadn't meant it. She really hadn't. In fact, the opposite is true. She just really misses having her siblings with her. She wants them to come home. How is life going to feel normal with such a large crack in their everyday interactions? It was hard enough with her brother, but now she has to watch her sister leave too. I should've just talked with her. But I didn't want to bring it up because it's not like we can change anything. Still... it's better than leaving the word 'hate' hanging around in the air. She goes over to her floor to search for her phone, sighing in relief when she confirms it's not broken.

A little nervous, she clicks on Alivia's name to call her back.

“You do miss me,” she answers softly, wiping the last of tears from her eyes.

“Of course I miss you! But I didn't want to think about...”

“Being alone,” Alivia finishes.

“Yeah,” Noreen agrees. “It's not the same without you here.”

“I won't be going far from home, sis, I'll be an hour away.”

“But you're still not gonna be here everyday,” Noreen reminds her. “I miss you already and I hate already having you gone. Who am I supposed to talk to?! What am I supposed to do with myself if I'm not doing school work?!” Alivia gives a small smile.

“You have friends, remember? Go have fun. Watch some tv series. Reading is good too, as long as you're not overly obsessed. Call me sometimes?”

“I... guess. I just wish it was back to how it was.”

“How it was?”

“With both of you home,” Noreen clarifies.

“Yeah... I do miss Kieran too. But maybe you don't have to live without us the whole summer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let me talk to him and we'll see what we can do, kay? And we'll work on a plan for visiting once school starts. Trust me, sis, you are not going to lose your siblings. And we definitely aren't going to let you be alone. Got it?”

Noreen nods and lets out a smile, finally having a real conversation and catching up with her sister. She texts her brother an apology too, explaining why she was acting so off the past few weeks.

“I don't hate you, by the way,” she assures Alivia at the end of the call.

“I know, and I'm glad,” Alivia smiles. “I love you.”

“Love you too. See you soon?”

“Definitely. Good night!”

“Good night!”

For the first time in weeks, Noreen finally feels like she's gonna be ok come freshman year. Her fears were irrational and stupid and it took finally letting it out to realize that she'd been blocking herself off for faulty reasons. Plus, Alivia kept good on her promise. Now Noreen

has the date marked on her calendar when the Darrow siblings will finally be back together for a few weeks.

Huh, so this must be what it feels like to be prepared for life, she decides, smiling up at the circle marking the exciting day. Even though it still sucks having to wait, she knows she has her siblings to fall back on, and that's all it takes to comfort her and ease her mind as she continues to tackle the rest of summer before 9th grade.