

# SMALL PLACES

## *Novel Skeleton and Development Map*

A fictional tragedy built from the engine of attachment, poverty, religious authority, institutional handoff failure, and a woman too large for the place asked to contain her.

Draft architecture for Violeta Tulceanu

# 1. Core Book Identity

## Title

Small Places

## Logline

A former orphanage girl returns from Western Europe with money, scars, and a changed sense of herself. When her savings are absorbed by the people who once despised her and her only emotional anchor disappears into a remote religious house, she follows - not for God, but for the friend. There, her survival intelligence collides with an obedience machine ruled by a young priest who mistakes defiance for possession.

## Central sentence

*A woman trained by survival enters a world trained by obedience, and every institution translates her wrong.*

## Core premise

Ruth Vale has survived what should have consumed her: institutional childhood, low-status work abroad, solitude, poverty, and the humiliation of being nobody's daughter. She returns from the West with hard-earned savings and an unspoken claim to personhood. But the small place that made her does not want the independent woman back. It wants the orphan back.

When Ruth learns that Ellen Marsh - her childhood friend, anchor, and last witness to the original self - has entered the religious house of St. Agnes of Blackwell, Ruth follows her. She does not seek vocation. She seeks the person who made the world feel survivable.

Inside St. Agnes, Ruth's strategies for survival - provocation, boundary-testing, theatrical distress, refusal to kneel - are interpreted through an entirely different grammar: obedience, sin, possession, spiritual warfare. What begins as an attempt to force a rupture becomes a crisis no one can stop.

## The novel is not

- not a documentary or direct retelling of any real case
- not an exorcism horror novel with a supernatural answer
- not a simple anti-clerical cartoon
- not a helpless-saint victim story
- not a mystery whose point is solving a medical fact pattern

## The novel is

- a jurisdictional tragedy
- a social-psychological autopsy
- a novel about small places that cannot hold large wounds
- a story about attachment becoming geography
- a study of how performance becomes crisis when interpreted by the wrong authority
- a book about the death of a woman between church, state, village, medicine, money, and media

## 2. Thematic Engine

### Scale mismatch

Ruth has lived in larger systems: the city, the West, labor migration, money, motion, private survival. She returns to a place small enough that every gesture is over-read and every difference becomes accusation. The book is driven by scale mismatch: a woman formed by border-crossing is forced into rooms built for obedience.

### Smallness as force

Small places are not harmless. Their danger is compression. A small village can make gossip absolute. A small religious house can make one man's authority total. A small hospital can discharge what it cannot treat. A small inheritance of resentment can swallow a woman's savings and call it fairness.

### Money as selfhood

Ruth's savings are not a convenience. They are proof. They mean she survived abroad, worked, planned, denied herself comfort, and returned with something that belonged to her. When that money is taken, borrowed, absorbed, or morally redistributed by her family, the theft is not merely economic. It is ontological: the small place is taking back the orphan and destroying the independent woman.

### Attachment as geography

Blackwell is not a spiritual destination. It is where Ellen is. Ruth's map is emotional, not practical. The remote religious house makes no sense as a life choice unless the friend is understood as home, witness, sister, possible lover, or sole remaining anchor.

### Female defiance as demonology

Ruth does not behave like a penitent. She looks, laughs, curses, tests, resists, and refuses automatic reverence. Father Caleb interprets this not as trauma, grief, or social defiance, but as spiritual rebellion. In the religious house, female noncompliance has only two names: disobedience or demon.

### The body as court

Ruth's body becomes the place where all failed jurisdictions write themselves: orphanage trauma, migration, stolen money, social humiliation, attachment panic, psychiatric mismanagement, religious authority, restraint, emergency medicine, and media spectacle. By the end, the body is evidence, but no institution can read the whole text.

## 3. Fictional World

### Primary region: Hollowmere

Hollowmere is a poor eastern district: wet fields, abandoned houses, labor migration, cheap churches, municipal neglect, and a social order built on shame, gossip, small debts, and memory. It

is deliberately Anglophone and fictional, but it carries the atmosphere of peripheral poverty and institutional absence.

### **Village: Bracken Cross**

Bracken Cross is the place that remembers Ruth incorrectly. Its people remember a dependent orphan. They do not know what to do with a woman who returns with money, a foreign coat, a changed walk, and the eyes of someone who has learned to judge adults back.

### **Religious house: St. Agnes of Blackwell**

St. Agnes of Blackwell is a half-built women's religious house outside the village. It has unreliable electricity, bad heating, no proper medical access, buckets, candles, cheap incense, icons, damp wool, and dogs barking after dark. It should feel poor before it feels gothic. Poverty is the architecture; theology is the language painted on it.

### **Hospital: St. Jude's District Hospital**

St. Jude's is underfunded, tired, procedural, and anxious to move difficult cases through. It has paperwork, medication, a locked ward when convenient, and no real capacity for the kind of human crisis Ruth represents.

### **Media world: The Voss Hour**

After Ruth's death, Peter Voss turns the case into late-night national spectacle. His show gives the novel a second-stage chorus: experts, callers, priests, neighbors, outrage, superstition, and the obscene entertainment value of institutional failure.

## **4. Character Bible**

### **Ruth Vale**

Late twenties. Former orphanage child. Worked abroad in factories, cleaning jobs, care work, or informal labor. She is not polished but not naive. She is sharp, funny, proud, unstable, suspicious, and more competent than the village wants to admit.

Her core wound is not simply abandonment. It is reclassification. She fought to become a woman with money and movement; the people at home insist on seeing the orphan girl again.

*I survived. I made myself real. And now they want the orphan back.*

Ruth's danger is that she knows how to provoke and survive adults, but she misreads the type of adult before her. She thinks Father Caleb can be pressured, embarrassed, or forced into a normal social response. He cannot. His response system is metaphysical.

### **Ellen Marsh / Sister Agnes**

Ruth's childhood friend from the orphanage. Ellen entered St. Agnes because obedience felt safer than freedom. The religious house gave her a name, clothing, routine, hierarchy, and a way to transform trauma into discipline.

For Ruth, Ellen has been swallowed. For Ellen, Ruth is the past arriving like a storm. Their bond should remain emotionally ambiguous: sisterhood, dependence, rescue fantasy, erotic undertone, jealousy, guilt, abandonment panic. The ambiguity is part of its power.

*Ellen had not gone to God. She had gone to a place where no one had to choose anymore.*

### **Father Caleb Ward**

Young, severe, charismatic in a local way, hungry for authority. He is sincere, which makes him more dangerous. He believes in demons, fasting, purification, obedience, and spiritual warfare. He also believes, perhaps without knowing it, that his authority must be recognized or the order collapses.

Ruth threatens him because she does not see him as sacred. She sees a man in a black coat, too young for the power he claims. Her gaze demystifies him. His theology offers a way to reassert dominance: if she resists him, it is not valid resistance. It is a demon.

*If she did not fear him, then fear itself had left the house.*

### **Mother Beatrice**

Older religious woman, practical and tired. She understands food, laundry, fever, bleeding, and bodies better than Father Caleb does. She senses that Ruth is becoming medically wrong, but she lacks the courage or institutional standing to overrule him. Her tragedy is obedience with knowledge.

### **Dr. Simon Hale**

Local psychiatrist or emergency doctor. Exhausted, dismissive, half-competent, trained enough to name Ruth and not enough to save her. He represents state medicine as shrug: diagnosis, medication, discharge, responsibility displaced.

He may not be malicious. He is overwhelmed and arrogant. He sees Ruth as a problem that cannot be solved within his shift.

### **Martha Vale / Aunt Mabel**

The family figure who absorbs Ruth's savings. She may not think of herself as a thief. In her mind, Ruth owes the family or the village. Ruth came back from abroad with money; the poor at home have a moral claim. This is resentment dressed as need.

*She had been away long enough to become rich in their imagination and poor in every practical way.*

### **Peter Voss**

Late-night interviewer, scandal merchant, national voyeur. He arrives after death and preserves raw social material the respectable press sanitizes. He is vulgar, exploitative, sometimes accidentally archival. Through him, the tragedy becomes entertainment and folklore.

## 5. The Hidden Truth of the Fiction

Inside the fictional reality, Ruth is not possessed. The novel should never confirm a supernatural explanation. It should also avoid reducing her to a clean diagnosis.

She may begin with performance: possession as theater, crisis as leverage, disturbance as a way to force Ellen to choose her. But she is also genuinely fragile, traumatized, sleep-deprived, economically stripped, humiliated, and frightened. The performance becomes the channel through which the real crisis arrives.

### The plausible hidden sequence

1. Ruth returns from the West with savings and a changed sense of self.
2. Her money is taken or morally absorbed by family/local actors who resent her foreign autonomy.
3. She realizes Bracken Cross wants the orphan back, not the independent woman.
4. She follows Ellen to St. Agnes, because Ellen is the last anchor.
5. She tries to retrieve Ellen through memory, pressure, anger, jokes, and scenes.
6. When direct persuasion fails, Ruth escalates behavior to make herself impossible to contain.
7. She discovers that possession language frightens the house and gives her temporary control over attention.
8. Father Caleb interprets the performance as a literal spiritual event.
9. The hospital refuses durable responsibility and returns her.
10. The monastery takes the hospital handoff as proof that medicine cannot solve a spiritual problem.
11. Ritual containment begins.
12. Fear, restraint, dehydration, exhaustion, humiliation, and panic make the crisis real.
13. Her body collapses between monastery incompetence and medical failure.
14. After death, every institution rewrites her according to its own protection needs.

## 6. Five-Act Structure

### Act I - The Girl from the West

Ruth returns to Bracken Cross with a suitcase, savings, and the wrong kind of confidence. She expects discomfort, not symbolic demotion. The village and family do not celebrate her survival; they inventory it. Her money becomes visible, discussed, borrowed, needed, judged. She is made to feel selfish for wanting to keep what she earned.

By the end of Act I, Ruth understands that home is not home. The only remaining coordinates are tied to Ellen.

### Act II - The Friend at Blackwell

Ruth travels to St. Agnes of Blackwell. The house is smaller, poorer, and stranger than she imagined. Ellen is now Sister Agnes. She has a new name, new obedience, new gait. Ruth hates the transformation because it feels like theft.

Father Caleb appears as the authority of the house. Ruth does not bow internally. This is the first silent war.

### **Act III - The Game**

Ruth begins disrupting the house. At first the disruptions are social: sarcasm, laughter, refusal to follow rules, obscene remarks, emotional scenes with Ellen. When she sees the religious effect of possession language, she uses it. It gives her power over the room and proximity to Ellen.

The hospital is called. It diagnoses, medicates, and discharges. Ruth returns. The monastery reads this not as institutional failure but as confirmation that the problem is spiritual.

### **Act IV - The Obedience Machine**

Father Caleb intensifies. Prayer becomes supervision. Fasting becomes purification. Restraint becomes protection. Ruth fights at first because she is still Ruth. Then she fights because she is afraid. The nuns become frightened and obedient. Ellen is torn apart but cannot leave the structure that has become her shelter.

Ruth's body begins to fail while Father Caleb reads the failure as evidence of spiritual battle.

### **Act V - Evidence**

The final medical handoff fails. Ruth dies. Afterward, every actor develops certainty. The priest says he tried to save her soul. The doctor says she was already beyond help. The village says she was always trouble. The family says little about the money. Ellen becomes silence. Peter Voss turns the dead woman into a national screen.

The reader understands that Ruth did not die because of one demon, one priest, one doctor, or one scene. She died because every small place tried to make her small enough to fit.

## **7. Chapter Skeleton**

### **Part One - Germany Money**

#### **1. Four Thousand Euros**

Ruth returns to Bracken Cross with her savings, a cheap suitcase, and the private triumph of having survived abroad. The money is introduced as selfhood made liquid.

#### **2. The Orphan Comes Back**

The village receives her through its old category: orphan, dependent, manageable. Ruth notices the mismatch immediately.

#### **3. Western Money**

Relatives begin circling the savings. Requests are framed as need, duty, family, and fairness. Ruth feels the first bite of social demotion.

#### **4. The Borrowed Sum**

The money is taken, borrowed, misplaced, invested, or morally absorbed. Ruth realizes that no one sees theft; they see correction.

## **5. Ellen Is at Blackwell**

News of Ellen/Sister Agnes reaches Ruth. The monastery becomes the only remaining point on the map.

## **Part Two - St. Agnes of Blackwell**

### **6. The Road to Blackwell**

Ruth travels to the remote religious house. The landscape narrows. The world becomes mud, trees, fences, and bells.

### **7. Sister Agnes**

The reunion with Ellen is wrong. Ellen is gentler, slower, more obedient. Ruth feels abandoned by the transformation.

### **8. Father Caleb Ward**

Ruth meets the young priest. He expects reverence. She gives him assessment. The first mutual misreading begins.

### **9. No Electricity**

The material poverty of the house is established: buckets, candles, cold, half-built walls. Ruth sees not holiness but deprivation dressed as virtue.

### **10. Mother Beatrice**

The older nun observes Ruth with practical unease. She sees the body before the theology.

## **Part Three - The Game**

### **11. The First Scene**

Ruth disrupts prayer or mealtime. She expects irritation. The house reacts with fear.

### **12. The Devil Has Good Timing**

Ruth discovers that possession language changes the power dynamics. For the first time since returning, adults orbit her.

### **13. Ana, Look at Me**

The core attachment motive surfaces. Ruth wants Ellen to choose her. Ellen cannot.

### **14. St. Jude's**

The hospital briefly takes Ruth, labels her, sedates or medicates her, and returns her. Nobody owns the crisis.

### **15. Returned Goods**

The monastery receives her back as proof that secular medicine failed. Caleb's authority expands.

## **Part Four - The Machine**

### **16. Obedience**

Caleb reframes Ruth's behavior as spiritual warfare. The house begins moving as one organism.

### **17. Black Fast**

Food and water become morally charged. Ruth's body is treated as battlefield rather than patient.

### **18. The Body Disagrees**

Symptoms of exhaustion, dehydration, fear, and physiological stress appear. Caleb reads them as demonic resistance.

### **19. Mother Beatrice's Hands**

Beatrice tries small acts of mercy but cannot break obedience. Her hands know something the doctrine refuses.

### **20. The Friend Does Not Leave**

Ellen fails to choose Ruth. The wound that began everything becomes final.

### **21. Restraint**

The point of no return. The restraint is justified as safety, purification, or necessity. Ruth's performance becomes terror.

### **22. Prayer Like a Cage**

The ritual becomes containment. Sound, smell, touch, thirst, fear. The chapter should be claustrophobic and bodily.

## **Part Five - Evidence**

### **23. Ambulance**

The final handoff to medicine occurs too late or badly. There may be confusion, panic, improper intervention, or bureaucratic defensiveness.

### **24. Afterward, Everyone Knew**

After the death, everyone becomes certain. The certainty is self-protective.

### **25. The Voss Hour**

Peter Voss interviews the religious house. Their sincerity is worse than villainy. The national spectacle begins.

### **26. Agnes Silent**

Ellen/Sister Agnes cannot narrate the truth because the truth would require admitting she was the prize and the failure.

### **27. Small Places**

Final chapter. The novel closes on the idea that they called it a demon because none of them knew what else to call a girl who would not kneel.

## **8. Key Scenes to Draft First**

**Ruth counts the money**

A quiet early scene. Ruth counts the saved euros privately. She does not count them greedily. She counts them like proof of survival. The scene should make the later theft feel like a soul injury.

### **The village sees the coat**

Ruth returns wearing something bought abroad. Not luxurious, but different. People notice. The garment becomes social evidence: she thinks she is above them; she has money; she has forgotten where she came from.

### **First reunion with Ellen**

Ruth expects warmth and recognition. Ellen gives love filtered through obedience. She may touch Ruth's hands, then withdraw because a bell rings. That withdrawal should hurt more than an insult.

### **Ruth laughs at Father Caleb**

The laugh is the first exorcism in reverse. Ruth strips him of aura for one second. He never forgives that moment.

### **The hospital returns her**

The institutional handoff scene should be bureaucratically banal. No thunder. A signature, a prescription, a shrug. The horror is that nobody understands that this is the turning point.

### **Mother Beatrice offers water**

A small mercy scene. It may fail, be interrupted, or become evidence against Beatrice. The point is that the body keeps trying to enter the story and the story keeps refusing it.

### **The interview**

After Ruth's death, Father Caleb explains. He sounds sincere, calm, and wrong. The reader should feel the full horror of a person who believes the story that killed someone.

## **9. Tone and Style**

### **Narrative voice**

Close third person with controlled shifts: Ruth, Ellen, Father Caleb, Mother Beatrice, Dr. Hale, and occasionally the collective village/media voice. The prose should be sensory, compressed, and exact. Avoid gothic excess; let poverty and certainty do the work.

### **Style principles**

- No supernatural confirmation.
- No cartoon villains.
- No saintly victim simplification.
- Keep the body present: thirst, cold, fatigue, hands, breath, restraint, sweat, hunger.
- Keep the social world material: money, transport, heating, phones, electricity, documents, distance.
- Use religious language as jurisdiction, not decoration.

- Let every institution be partly right and fatally incomplete.

## Moral temperature

The book should not ask the reader to choose between demon and diagnosis. It should show that the available categories were all too small. Ruth dies because she is translated into each system incorrectly and no system is humble enough to stop.

## 10. Motifs

| Motif         | Function  |
|---------------|---|
| Money         | Proof of survival; later, proof stolen.                     |
| Water         | Care, baptism, deprivation, medical reality.                |
| Bells         | Obedience clock; sound of a world Ruth cannot enter.        |
| Hands         | Work, restraint, touch, violence, care.                     |
| Names         | Ruth versus the orphan category; Ellen versus Sister Agnes. |
| Candles       | Poverty and sanctity made visually identical.               |
| Doors         | Expulsion desired, containment achieved.                    |
| Clothes       | Western self, nun-self, orphan-self.                        |
| Dogs at night | The outside world still alive while the house closes.       |
| Television    | After death, spectacle replaces truth.                      |

## 11. Core Relationship Dynamics

### Ruth and Ellen

Ruth wants Ellen as witness, rescue, and proof that the orphanage self still mattered. Ellen wants the monastery because it replaces the chaos of attachment with rule. Ruth experiences Ellen's vocation as betrayal; Ellen experiences Ruth's arrival as the return of an impossible debt.

### Ruth and Caleb

Ruth sees a man. Caleb needs to be seen as authority. This is the wound. If she refuses reverence, he must explain the refusal as demon, madness, corruption, or evil. Otherwise he would have to accept that his authority has limits.

### Ruth and the village

The village is not jealous of wealth alone. It resents her evidence of exit. Ruth proves that someone despised can leave and return with money. That proof must be degraded or reabsorbed.

### Ruth and the hospital

Medicine names her but does not hold her. The hospital has diagnosis without responsibility. It becomes the gate through which Ruth is sent back to the wrong jurisdiction.

## 12. What the Reader Should Understand by the End

- Ruth did not go to Blackwell for God; she went for Ellen.
- Her money mattered because it was selfhood, not savings.
- Her initial acting-out may have been strategic, but the crisis became real.
- Father Caleb was sincere and therefore dangerous.
- The hospital's refusal or failure was one of the decisive plot engines.
- The nuns were frightened, untrained, obedient, and complicit.
- Ellen was not villain or savior; she was the attachment object who could not bear the role.
- The village wanted the orphan back.
- The media preserved the spectacle, not the whole truth.
- The death occurred because every place around Ruth was too small.

## 13. Possible Ending Lines

*They had called it a demon because none of them knew what else to call a girl who would not kneel.*

*In small places, the body is always the first thing to run out of room.*

*By the time they found a name for what had happened, Ruth had no use for names.*

*The house kept its bells. The village kept its stories. Ellen kept silent. Ruth kept nothing.*

*No one had lied exactly. That was the worst of it.*

## 14. Development Notes

### Research to fictionalize, not copy

- rural religious houses and material poverty
- orphanage attachment patterns and adult relational collapse
- labor migration and return-home shame
- acute psychiatric crisis versus performative distress
- restraint physiology and institutional responsibility
- tabloid true-crime television as national ritual
- religious obedience culture and authority psychology

### Ethical guardrails

- Do not use real names or identifiable real details.
- Do not copy exact death mechanics or legal chronology.
- Do not present speculation as real history.
- Let fiction carry the theory instead of claiming documentary truth.
- Preserve complexity: no pure monsters, no pure saints, no single-cause explanation.

## **Drafting priority**

15. Write the money scene first.
16. Write Ruth and Ellen's first reunion.
17. Write Ruth laughing at Father Caleb.
18. Write the hospital discharge scene.
19. Write the restraint chapter only after the first four are emotionally clear.
20. Write the Voss interview last, as the distorted mirror of everything that came before.