



BOOK CLUB KIT

# The Three Stories For Vicky Fitzgerald

NATASHA KARIS

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Discussion Guide • 32 Questions

*“Until your last breath,  
nothing is over.”*

EDWARD

# A note for whoever is hosting

*Two things worth knowing before you open the discussion.*

## THIS GUIDE CONTAINS SPOILERS

Parts One and Two assume everyone has finished the book. Part Three, on page 7, gives away who the person by the tree turns out to be, and everything that follows. If someone in your group is still reading, stop at the end of page 6.

## ON THE SUBJECT MATTER

This is a warm book about a bleak subject. Its whole engine is a premonition of a suicide, and it holds that steadily in view for two hundred pages: the rope, the tree, the person who has decided. It also carries self-harm, a sudden bereavement, an industrial-school childhood, dementia, and a terminal diagnosis.

There is a good chance somebody in your room has sat where Vicky sits at the end of Chapter Forty-Six. You do not need to manage that, and you should not go looking for it. Three small things make a real difference:

- Say at the start that anyone can pass on any question, no explanation needed.
- Let the conversation stay with Vicky and Edward. People speak sideways, through a character, when they are not ready to speak directly — and that is a whole conversation in itself.
- Have the resources on the last page to hand. Not read aloud. Just there.

One further note. The book is unusually direct about the mechanics of a death by suicide in Chapter Nineteen, told from the point of view of the tree. It is beautifully done and it is still hard going. If a member skipped it, that was a reasonable thing to do, and the discussion does not require anyone to have read it.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are more questions here than any group needs. Pick six or seven. The ones marked with a star ✦ are the ones that reliably open a room. If your group likes to read aloud, page 9 has four passages chosen for it, each with a single prompt.

One structural suggestion. The novel is built out of three stories told across a single night, so it discusses well if you take it in the same shape: the visitor first, then the three stories, then the morning after.

## About *The Three Stories For Vicky Fitzgerald*

It is Halloween in Knockarraig, and Sergeant Vicky Fitzgerald has three days left before the Garda station she runs single-handed closes for good. There is a storm coming in off the Atlantic that the town is not ready for.

In the middle of Main Street, in the middle of it, she finds an old man standing naked in the rain. He will not give a surname. He will not go to the hospital. He wants one thing only, and he cannot ask for it outright: to be invited into her house.

Once he is in, he tells her he is her grandfather Edward, dead in a trench in 1941, permitted one night back because Samhain is the night to let visitors talk. He has three stories to tell her before sunset tomorrow, and a warning. On the second of November, someone will hang themselves from a tree in the woods outside town, and Vicky is the only person who can stop it.

She has the date. She has fragments of the vision. She does not have the person.

### ABOUT NATASHA KARIS

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Natasha Karis is an Irish author based in Cork. She writes contemporary, emotional women's fiction that dives into heavy subjects — grief, abuse, addiction — but leaves the reader with hope. Many of her novels are set in the fictional coastal town of Knockarraig, inspired by Youghal, Co. Cork. She shares her writing life with three children, a cocker spaniel and her husband.

### TWO THINGS AT THE FRONT OF THE BOOK

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The dedication is to the author's grandmother, and it is more or less the thesis of the novel:

*For my Nan, Mary McCarthy. And all the relatives who came before. Your blood runs through mine. Your wisdom runs through each page.*

There is also a playlist — ten songs, from Declan O'Rourke's *Poor Boy's Shoes* to The Gloaming's *The Sailor's Bonnet*. The link is printed in the front of the book. It makes very good background for the evening, and one of the tracks belongs squarely to Deirdre.

### WHERE IT SITS

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A standalone, and a good place to start. Vicky Fitzgerald also investigates the case at the centre of *The Four Loves Of Alex Hayes*, and Knockarraig is the town shared by Natasha Karis's other novels. They can be read in any order.

# The visitor

*A naked old man on Main Street, and a woman who believes in nothing.*

## TO START

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- 1 The book opens on Vicky in a park, going after three boys with a bag of eggs, and one of them telling her “*It’s Halloween. It’s practically the law to egg things.*” It is very funny, and eighty pages later you understand it was also the beginning of the plot. What did you make of the tone in those first chapters, before the storm and the old man arrive?
- 2 ♦ Edward cannot come in unless he is asked: “*I could never have suggested it. I had to be invited in.*” A whole book turns on Vicky making one unguarded offer to a stranger. Would you have brought him home?
- 3 Vicky is the sole Garda in a town that is about to lose its station, and she is entirely defined by that. Before Edward says a word about ghosts, what did you think was wrong with her life?

## TRUST, AND LISTENING

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- 4 Edward names her lesson on the first night and never lets go of it: she must listen, and she must trust. Is trust actually Vicky’s problem — or is her suspicion the thing that has kept an entire town safe?
- 5 ♦ Lenny puts the same thing less kindly: “*when you look for the wrong in someone your success rate will always be one hundred per cent. How about you just stop looking?*” Is he right about her, or is he asking her to be worse at her job?
- 6 “*The truth doesn’t always make sense,*” Edward tells her. The novel asks the reader to accept a ghost at a kitchen table on more or less those terms. At what point did you stop resisting it — or did you?
- 7 He explains Samhain to her as something stolen and renamed — a new year, not a fright night, older than Christmas in Ireland and rewritten by the Church. Did the book change how you think about Halloween?
- 8 Edward will not let her light a fire, refuses food, feels no cold. The book is careful about the rules of what he is. Did those small constraints make him more believable to you than a grander sort of ghost would have?
- 9 He calls her Victoria from the first minute and never once calls her Vicky. “*How can anyone with a name meaning victory be anything but strong?*” When did you notice she had stopped correcting him?

# The three stories

*Deirdre and Brendan, Edward and Mary, and the person by the tree.*

## DEIRDRE, 1900

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- 10 Deirdre marries her Fenian in secret under the tree by the river and is a widow before nightfall, Willmott's men holding Brendan down. A year to the day later Willmott dies alone in a ditch and nobody is ever questioned. Vicky says only "*Good for you, Deirdre.*" Is that the right response? Is it the novel's?
- 11 ♦ Asked whether Deirdre was all right afterwards, Edward answers: "*She lived, Victoria. She found a way to live.*" Not healed, not happy. Is that the most the book is willing to promise anyone?
- 12 Brendan's blood runs into the soil, feeds the roots and embeds his cells in the wood's memory. The tree is arguably the novel's second main character. What is it for — witness, memory, or something with a will of its own?

## EDWARD, 1941

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- 13 Edward enlists to fight the Nazis from a neutral Ireland, and Mary names the cost exactly: he will stand beside the sons of the men who destroyed his family, and be blanked at home if he comes back. "*I'm not going off to fight with the British, I'm fighting against the Nazis and I couldn't give a damn what nationality stands next to me.*" Was he right to go?

- 14 ♦ He secretly hoped Mary would issue an ultimatum and stop him. She supports him instead, because it is what she loves about him. Which of them do you think the book is harder on?
- 15 Edward's son — Vicky's father — grows up in an institution believing his father abandoned him, is separated from the sister who was adopted, and hardens into a man who lets nobody in. "*what you think, what you believe, is what you get.*" How much of Vicky's adult life is traceable to a decision made in 1941?
- 16 In the care home her father, who does not recognise her, tells a stranger about his little girl: "*Kids are easy to love. What's hard is putting aside your mess, loving someone when everyone you trusted with your love hurt you.*" Does that scene forgive him? Should it?
- 17 "*We learn our parents' ways. Even if we don't want to.*" Vicky keeps everyone at a distance exactly as he did. Is inherited pain presented here as a curse, an explanation, or an excuse?
- 18 Edward does not tell the third story — he shows it, and puts Vicky back in the river. Given what she is made to live through again, is that a gift or a cruelty?
- 19 ♦ The blue atoms of Christian lift her body to the bank. He was already dead; he saved her anyway. Did you read that literally, or as the story Vicky needed in order to survive her own survival?
- 20 The cinema scene lines up Alice, Adrian, Robin, the girl in Richie Collins's car — people alive because Vicky lived. "*You should have been asking how many lived because of you.*" Is that an argument that would work on anybody, or only on someone who counts?
- 21 Vicky's mother heals her hand, and asks one thing: "*Return to the girl who wasn't afraid to talk to someone on a bus.*" Which of the two visitors — grandfather or mother — actually changes her?

## DISCUSSION • PART THREE

# The second of November

*Do not open this page until everyone has finished the book.*

- 22 ♦ The vision was never a portrait of a person. It was a chain of events — the tattoo, Lenny's sad face, the rope he handed her, her own boots. Did you solve it before she did? Did you want to?
- 23 “*The person she needed to save was herself.*” Vicky spends the whole book certain she is the rescuer and never once the one at risk. Looking back, what were the signs — and why does she miss every one of them?
- 24 She is shown the exact chain that would have played out without Edward: the wrong side of the swing doors, Archie's shot, Lenny dead, the station closing, and then the tree. It is a Christmas-Carol structure with the ending removed. Did knowing the alternative make the rescue feel earned, or a little too tidy?
- 25 ♦ Edward's great secret is this: “*Suffering will not make you a better person, it isn't a requirement for heaven. It is a choice.*” Is that true? Is it a fair thing to say to someone in grief — and does it land differently coming from a man who died at thirty-eight?

## DISCUSSION • PART THREE • CONTINUED

## TO END ON

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- 26 At the waterfall he ages, then reverses — a soldier her own age, then a boy of nine — and salutes her. He leaves Christian's clothes floating on the water. Why does the novel end his visit with both men taken away at once?
- 27 She spends her evening on satin sheets, candles, cushions, flowers, and a proper dinner cooked in an oven she has not used since Christian died. Of everything the book could have chosen as her first act of living, why shopping?
- 28 She waits under the tree all day and nobody comes. She screams at the sky for one more day with Christian, and howls like a wolf until she doesn't need to. Did that scene work for you? Was it the real climax of the book?
- 29 ♦ Darren is on his sofa with the gun in his mouth, dying of cancer and about to lose his house. Vicky does not talk him out of it — she says she won't stop him, then argues about his album and his hair. Would that have worked on anyone else? Is it the best scene in the novel?
- 30 “*Because a man taught me exactly that lesson. We have to trust.*” Edward came back to save his family, and the person he saves is the one who then saves Darren. Does the chain of it hold together for you, or does the novel ask for one coincidence too many?
- 31 The last pages jump forward: a wedding by the tree, a pregnancy in the same spot as Deirdre's, two tattoos that join into a heart, and a son named Edward. Was that the ending the book deserved — or would you have left her standing in the woods, alive, and stopped there?
- 32 Edward asks for one thing before he goes: “*Live for us. Please.*” Who would say that to you, and what would they mean by it?



## Four passages, four questions

*All the tree knows is that it likes when someone sits underneath its branches, when it feels a body against its trunk, a life force and energy mingling with its own ... Sometimes it's years before it feels any attention again, but still it waits, and when someone comes, it sees, it hears, it loves.*

ASK: IS THERE A PLACE THAT HAS HELD YOUR FAMILY THE WAY THIS ONE HOLDS THE FITZGERALDS?

*You cannot erase or change the suffering that already happened in your life, but what you haven't understood, what most people don't understand, is that you choose to suffer. There is no reason to carry it around afterwards.*

ASK: WHAT ARE YOU STILL CARRYING THAT YOU WERE NEVER ASKED TO PICK UP?

*Look at the leaves, the bright reds and oranges and purple. The darker days starve the leaf of chlorophyll ... When we see that colour, we don't think of the decay, we only see the beauty.*

ASK: WHERE HAVE YOU SEEN SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL THAT WAS ACTUALLY AN ENDING?

*Being rigid caused problems. The fact that water stayed fluid enabled it to sidestep the blockage, move around with ease and, even though its course calibrated, the journey did not stop.*

ASK: WHAT HAVE YOU GONE RIGID AROUND — AND WHAT WOULD GOING AROUND IT LOOK LIKE?

IF YOUR GROUP LIKES TO THEME IT

- **Bluebells on the table.** Deirdre carries them to her secret wedding and they lie limp beside Brendan's body by evening; a hundred and twenty years later Vicky carries a bunch to her own. They are on the cover for a reason. Any blue flower will do the job.
- **Put the playlist on.** Ten tracks, printed in the front of the book — Declan O'Rourke, Lizzie McAlpine, Hozier, The Gloaming. Low, in the background, for the whole evening.
- **Meet at the right time of year, with the right rules.** If you can hold this one near Halloween, do. Candles are the obvious touch, and Edward would have something to say about who lit them.
- **One story each.** The book's argument is that a family is a set of stories nobody bothered to pass on. Ask everyone to bring one story about a relative they never met, and open the evening with those instead of question one. It takes ten minutes and it changes the whole discussion.
- **Tea, and something on toast.** Vicky and Edward do the entire first night on a pot of tea while a storm takes the town apart outside.

IF ANY OF THIS WAS CLOSE TO HOME

# Support

*You do not have to be over it. You do not have to be coping well. You only have to tell one person.*

## IF YOU ARE STRUGGLING, OR THINKING ABOUT ENDING YOUR LIFE

**Ireland & United Kingdom** — Samaritans, 116 123, free, 24 hours, every day · [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)

**Ireland** — Pieta, freephone 1800 247 247 or text HELP to 51444, 24 hours, every day · [pieta.ie](http://pieta.ie)  
· free counselling for suicidal distress and self-harm. Also Text About It, a free 24-hour crisis text service · [text50808.ie](http://text50808.ie)

**United States** — 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, call or text 988

## BEREAVED — ESPECIALLY BY SUICIDE, OR SUDDENLY

**Ireland** — HUGG, Healing Untold Grief Groups · [hugg.ie](http://hugg.ie) · free peer support groups for anyone bereaved by suicide. Also Good Grief Ireland · [goodgriefireland.ie](http://goodgriefireland.ie)

**United Kingdom** — Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide · [uksobs.org](http://uksobs.org) · and Cruse Bereavement Support · [cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)

**United States** — American Foundation for Suicide Prevention · [afsp.org/ive-lost-someone](http://afsp.org/ive-lost-someone)

A DIAGNOSIS, OR CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH ONE

**Ireland** — Irish Cancer Society Support Line, freephone 1800 200 700, Monday to Friday 9am–5pm, staffed by cancer nurses · [cancer.ie](http://cancer.ie). The Alzheimer Society of Ireland runs a free National Helpline · [alzheimer.ie](http://alzheimer.ie)

**United Kingdom** — Macmillan Cancer Support · [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk) · and Dementia UK's Admiral Nurse Dementia Helpline · [dementiauk.org](http://dementiauk.org)

**United States** — American Cancer Society · [cancer.org](http://cancer.org) · and the Alzheimer's Association · [alz.org](http://alz.org)

IF THE PARTS ABOUT VICKY'S FATHER WERE THE HARD ONES

**Ireland** — Connect Counselling · [connectcounselling.ie](http://connectcounselling.ie) · a free telephone counselling service for adults who experienced abuse, trauma or neglect in childhood, including in institutional care.

**United Kingdom** — NAPAC, the National Association for People Abused in Childhood · [napac.org.uk](http://napac.org.uk)

If you are outside these countries, [findahelpline.com](http://findahelpline.com) will point you to a service near you.

MORE FROM NATASHA KARIS

**Meet Vicky again.** Sergeant Fitzgerald investigates the death at the centre of *The Four Loves Of Alex Hayes* — three women and a child grieving a man they each thought they knew.

**Knockfarraig.** The town appears across the novels, and they can be read in any order. Titles are listed in the back of the book.

**Meet the author.** Natasha is happy to join book clubs by video call where she can. Get in touch through [natashakarisbooks.com](http://natashakarisbooks.com) and say when you are meeting.

**If the book was worth the evening.** Reviews are how stories like this one find the readers who need them. A single sentence on Amazon or Goodreads makes a real difference — and a book club leaving several at once makes more.

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