

# Writing Fiction: An Early Memory

## Part One: The Child as Narrator

“Write what you know” is by now such a cliché that people tend to ignore it. For the beginning writer it’s pretty good advice. Your own life - and your memories of it - have an intensity and immediacy that are useful in creating fiction. It’s not just what you know, however, but how you see it, shape it, and enhance it with your imagination. This is the crucial difference between fiction and fact. Fiction is always sifted through a singular set of perceptions, feelings, and wishes, while fact can be recorded by a machine designed for that purpose - a tape recorder or camera. Furthermore, the fiction writer often supplies an implicit rather than explicit moral attitude.

### THE EXERCISE

Using the present tense, write an early memory in the first person. This should be something that happened before you were seven. Use only those words and perceptions appropriate to a young child. “My father looks confused” won’t do because a five-year-old is incapable of this articulation. “My father has a funny look on his face” is fine. The memory should be encapsulated in a short period of time - no more than an hour or so - and should happen in one place. Don’t interpret or analyse; simply report it as you would a dream. When you can’t remember details, make them up; you may heighten the narrative so long as you remain faithful to the ‘meaning’ of the memory - the reason you recalled it in the first place. Limit: 550 words.

### THE OBJECTIVE

A fiction writer should be able to present a narrative without nudging the reader or in any way explaining what she has written. The narrative should speak for itself. In using a child’s voice you are forced not to analyse but merely to tell the story, unembellished.

## STUDENT EXAMPLE

The doorbell rings and I know it's Aunt Judith, the old lady I've been hearing about. She's come to visit us from where she lives, San Francisco, which is very far away. It takes almost a whole day to fly to my house from there in an airplane. She's very old, probably around eighty. I'm peeking through the stair railings when my father answers the door. All I can see is a grey coat and some white hair. She must be deaf because my father's voice is loud when he says hello.

My mother calls, "Come down and meet your Aunt Judith." She's holding her aunt's hand and smiling. I come down and stand behind my mother when I say hello. I don't want her to kiss me. She has more wrinkles on her face than I ever saw. She pats my head and says, "So big for five."

My father says he's going to make some tea. My mother and Aunt Judith and I go into the living room and sit down.

"Come here, Emily, and sit by your old aunt," she says, patting the couch next to her.

I feel funny but I go and sit where she says. She smells like bread in the oven.

"Tell Aunt Judith about school," my mother says.

"I'll be in first grade next September," I say.

My father comes in with the teapot on a tray and some cups. I'm too young to drink tea. I tried it once and it tasted like dirt.

My mother and Aunt Judith are talking about people I don't know. My father looks like he doesn't know them either. I'm staring, but Aunt Judith doesn't mind. She has a mouth that sticks out like a fish with hairs over her top lip. Then I say, "You know what Aunt Judith? You have a moustache." I don't make it up; she does have a moustache; it's just like my grandfather's only not quite so bushy. Aunt Judith gets a funny look on her face. She stands up and says, "Where's the bathroom?"

My mother shows her where the bathroom is and when she comes back she tells me that I shouldn't have said that about Aunt Judith's moustache. "But it's true!" I say.

My mother tells me that just because something's true doesn't mean I have to say it out loud. She looks angry.

Aunt Judith stays in the bathroom a very long time. I want to tell Aunt Judith I'm sorry but I don't know how to. Finally, my mother knocks on the bathroom door. "Are you alright, Judith?" Maybe she thinks she's dead or something.

I can hear Aunt Judith's voice but not what she says. My mother says, "She's okay."

My father says, "Big-mouth Emily."

I'm not staying around anymore. I go upstairs but not to my room. I sit at the top where I can hear Aunt Judith when she finally comes out of the bathroom.

- EMILY HONIG

In probing my childhood (which is the next best to probing one's eternity) I see the awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold.

- VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Source: *What If?* by Anne Bernays & Pamela Painter