

Writing Fiction: An Early Memory

Part Two: The Reminiscent Narrator

Something crucial to remember: The story doesn't exist until you tell it. In other words, whatever its bare bones, it's how you, the writer, put them together that counts. Viewpoint, tone, style, narrative shape, and time distance - all these elements have as much to do with a story as does the basic "plot". A reminiscent narrator remembers something because it has a special, pointed meaning for him. Here is how the adult Frank Conroy writes about his father, who died young. The book is *Stop-Time*.

And I remember visiting him at one of the rest homes when I was eight. We walked across a sloping lawn and he told me a story, which even then I recognised as a lie, about a man who sat down on the open blade of a penknife embedded in a park bench. (Why, for God's sake would he tell a story like that to his eight-year-old son?)

We draw up out of the well of our unconscious those things that have emotional significance. In contrast to the previous exercise, this one will force you to search - with an adult sensibility - for the underlying 'meaning' of the event you simply reported in 'An Early Memory: Part One'. What have you learned in the interim? What can be gained (or maybe lost) by hindsight?

THE EXERCISE

In no more than two pages, use the incident from 'An Early Memory: Part One' and tell it from the vantage point of who you are today, that is, inject it with adult vocabulary, insight, subtlety, and comprehension. For instance, "My father was obviously confused" replaces "funny look." You should change the way the incident is told without altering its structure or meaning. Use the past tense but keep it a first-person narrative. As in the first part of this exercise, try to let the material speak for itself.

THE OBJECTIVE

As in a good many of these exercises, the idea is to empower the writer with the knowledge that he controls the material, and not the other way around. There are countless ways to tell the same story and each way says something a little different, not only about what happened but also about how the teller feels about it. You're the first and last authority; your power - at least in this realm - is unlimited.

STUDENT EXAMPLE

At the age of five I learned how easy it is to wound someone simply by pointing out to them something obvious to everyone else. I think that I forgot this from time to time as I got older but I certainly learned it in a dramatic way.

My mother's Aunt Judith was then in her late eighties - an old but vigorous childless widow who had helped translate the books of Thomas Mann and lived alone in Berkeley, California. She had come East to visit her brother, my mother's father, and was paying a call at our house. I had never met her and was a timid child anyway, so I hung back until she patted the couch beside her and told me to come sit next to her. I could tell by the expression on my mother's face that she was anxious to have Aunt Judith like and approve of me. I think my mother and she had had an unusually close relationship when my mother was young and lived in New York - where Aunt Judith also lived before she moved to the West Coast.

My father offered to make some tea and disappeared into the kitchen. I mainly listened while my mother and Aunt Judith reminisced about people whose names I did not recognise. But I didn't really mind because I was having such a good time staring at her face. It was a mass of veins and wrinkles - far more than my grandfather had. And she had a black moustache. If you hadn't seen her clothes or heard her speak you might have thought she was a man.

My father came back with the tea and they all drank, Aunt Judith making slurping noises and seeming to enjoy herself except that she really didn't have any idea how to talk to a child as young as I was. She asked me one question - I think it was about school - and then seemed to forget I was there.

But, as I said before, I didn't mind at all; I was a watcher.

Did I know, at some depth, that I should not say what I then said? To this day I'm not certain. But, with no windup, I suddenly said, "You know what, Aunt Judith? You have a moustache."

Her hand flew to her mouth; she looked as if someone had just pierced her lung with a sharp knife. She stared at me, got up, and said, very quietly, "Anne, will you please tell me where the bathroom is?"

My mother was obviously flustered and led her to the downstairs bathroom.

When she came back my mother tried to explain to me that just because something was true did not mean that you had to say it out loud. On my part, I tried to argue but soon gave up because I felt so bad. My father told me I was a big-mouth.

Aunt Judith stayed in the bathroom for fully fifteen minutes. I think my mother was worried that she had fainted. I knew what she was doing: She was studying herself in the mirror, perhaps seeing this horrible moustache for the first time; it must have been a shock.

They were annoyed at me and embarrassed by what I had done (and I can't say I really blame them. A big child but a tactless one). They were nice enough to let me go upstairs. The truth doesn't carry with it its own protection against pain.

- EMILY HONIG

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