

## MEMOIR WRITING - FIVE EXAMPLES

by Jan Quilici

### 1. Building interest and suspense with a realization at the end

It was a beautiful night at the beach. The moon made the wet sand shine as I followed my boyfriend and my best friend along the surf line toward the lights of Santa Monica Pier. Tears were pushing from behind my eyes but I refused to let them see me cry.

How could they do this to me? My best friend and my boyfriend! The humiliation felt like an anvil had settled in the middle of my stomach.

Earlier when Walt and I arrived at Anne's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday party, I saw that Anne was the only one without a date. It didn't take long for me to figure out that I was the one without a date. Anne appeared all gooey-eyed around him and he had that possessive look I had seen so many times before when he looked at me.

After the party, Walt wanted to go walk on the beach. I just wanted to go home, but I was so choked on the humiliation of the party that I just went. So there I was, numbly putting one foot in front of the other. Finally, they ended the torture and took me home—Anne riding in the middle of the front seat. We were quiet in the car riding through the late night streets of LA. When the car pulled up in front of my house, Anne turned to me.

"Walt and I are going steady now."

I half fell out of the car and ran to the front door. The key seemed to have a life of its own and was determined not to go in that lock. Finally my late-night brother came to the door and let me in. The dam broke and the tears came.

"What's the matter, Janet?"

Somehow Mom was there too. My lovely mother held me while I cried out the story. Oh, how I wish she were still here when my 70-year old self needs comforting!

Crying, I went to bed and all night the horrible night played out in my head.

When I saw Anne in school on Monday, I felt as if my entire body were filling up with something hot and red. She tried to say hello, but I just turned away and walked off. For the rest of high school, I never spoke to her. Our friends tried to talk to me about patching it up but I wouldn't. It must have been hard to have two in our close group not speaking. They could not include both of us in anything.

Looking back, I can see that Walt's behavior didn't surprise me, but Anne and I had been best friends since we were six. Every sunny day we stood on the school steps and used our sun reflectors to get sun on our acne'd faces. We stood, wallflowers together, at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade dances and we swooned over Jimmy Darren and the Everly Brothers. I wouldn't forgive her for betraying and humiliating me and it ended our friendship.

For the rest of high school, I would go out with guys just to be going out, but kept myself from caring about them very much. I told myself that I did not want to get too interested in anyone since I was going away to college, but now I can see it was the trust that was gone.

## **#2 Example of truth when your memory is not perfect (several memories combined into one)**

It's Easter morning and I wake up to rain on the roof. Today is not going to be exactly what I thought it would be, wearing my new patent leather shoes to church. Now that I am in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my mom thought that I could have a pair of high heels. They aren't real high, just an inch and a half, but they look so pretty and shiny and go so well with my new dress and hat. Red white and blue are really big this year and my dress with the white top, blue skirt, and red piping on the jacket and red narrow belt looks so pretty! And I love my navy blue hat. I planned to wear my Easter outfit so that's what I am going to do.

I get out of bed and wash my face and fix my hair, which looks good by the way because last night my mom set my hair in pin curls and I sat under the dryer. I love sitting under that dryer that my mom bought from a beauty shop that was closing. Especially on a cool evening, I can just sit under there with that warm air blowing on my head and fall asleep. There's no extra room in that bullet shaped dryer hood so falling asleep doesn't wake me up. We keep the dryer in my parents' bedroom and I just love the feeling of that warm air on my head. Anyway, it doesn't take me very long to get ready because of course we don't get to have breakfast because we are going to communion. You can't eat anything after midnight. One time one of the kids in my class asked Reverend Mother if you could still go to communion if you chewed on a hangnail and swallowed it. Well, that's ridiculous! Of course, you probably couldn't go to communion if you ate someone else's hangnail, but that would be gross! So I put my sulfur-based skin-colored makeup on my face to cover up the pimples. Maybe everyone will be impressed with my outfit and will forget to look at my acne. I try my best not to look at it myself but it's a little hard when I'm putting on the cover-up makeup.

When all four of us are ready to go, dad backs the car up the driveway and parks under the porte-cochere so we can get in the car without getting wet. We leave the house quite early because the church is really crowded on Easter when all those sinners that don't normally come to church decide that they should show up. And dad is going to have to park the car. Parking is not usually an issue because we walk to church. But not today. By the time we get to the church, the rain is pouring and water is about 2 in deep in the street. So Mom and I decide to take our shoes off and run through the water just in our nylons. It doesn't feel so good on my feet but I don't want anything to happen to my beautiful new real patent leather shoes. We get inside and find our usual spot a third of the way back on the left side and take off our coats. Everybody is so wet and there are so many wet coats and umbrellas that it kind of smells like somebody let a pack of wet dogs in there. But mission accomplished! We got to show off our new clothes and

the shoes didn't get wet. By the time we get out of church, the rain is just a sprinkle and the flooding in the street is more like half an inch. So we get to the car okay.

Back home again, mom and I put on aprons and get to work on breakfast. The table is already set with the Easter decorations we made. That Easter egg tree that we spent so much time on is in the center of the table. We had a lot of fun coloring raw eggs and then putting holes in each end and blowing the raw egg out of the shell. Then we hung the empty eggs on the plastic tree branches. I bet we have the only Easter egg tree in the neighborhood. Also on the table are the calla lilies that I painted. Mom has calla lilies growing in the backyard and so we picked half a dozen of them and I painted each one a different color and then put glitter on them. All we have to do to get breakfast ready is for Mom to cook the bacon and scrambled the eggs that she already has set to go in the pans. The fruit is already cut up and the orange juice in the pitcher and all that is left is for me to make the toast. We all sit down and I say the grace. Because I'm the youngest in the family it has been my job to say grace for as long as I can remember. I try really hard not to get Tongue Tied In The Middle. I've said it so many times that somehow it just doesn't come out right anymore. I always get stuck on "from thy bounty". Actually, I'm not even sure what it really means. My dad's relatives make up different ones and don't say the same thing all the time. I don't know why we don't get to do that. If it was different every time, I don't think I would get Tongue Tied In The Middle. Breakfast was good as usual. My mom really knows how to have everything ready to go so we got to eat right away.

Aunt Becky, Uncle Paul, and cousins Suzie and Sam will be coming for dinner so there is still some work to do before they arrive. Mom made a cake in the shape of a lamb so we make white frosting and sprinkle it with coconut and color some of the frosting and put it in a tube and make a bow around the lamb's neck. We got some See's Candy so we can put a piece at each person's plate. We also have Easter baskets for Suzie and Sam. Sam's favorite thing is cashew nuts so instead of candy he has a can of cashew nuts in his basket. Suzie gets a sugar egg with a scene inside as well as a box of chocolate eggs. I don't really want to grow up because nobody gives the grown-ups an Easter basket and I love See's Candy.

They arrive about 4 o'clock with their Easter baskets for us. We kids go right to the card table in the living room and get out the cards and start playing. My uncle and Aunt get out their cigarettes and start smoking. We kids hate it but they are the adults so I guess they get to do whatever they want. Maybe being an adult isn't really so bad since you get to do whatever you want all the time. My mom and dad don't smoke, but they keep the ashtrays out and after everyone leaves, they air the place out. They don't like it any more than we kids do. Dad and Uncle Paul are chatting while Mom and Aunt Becky are

in the kitchen getting things ready. Dad and Uncle Paul haven't gotten into any arguments yet and we are doing okay playing Crazy Eights. Sam is seven now so the three of us can play for quite a while before Sam gets mad because he's not winning.

When we sit down at the table, I am no longer the youngest so I don't have to say grace. Sam stutters so even though he is the youngest, he doesn't say grace either. My cousin Suzie is elected. She's good at it and doesn't get Tongue Tied In The Middle. But just wait another four years when she is my age and she'll probably be having the same problem. We are all enjoying our food and then my dad brings up the candidates for Congress that they will be voting for in November. My dad says that Uncle Paul's political views are to the right of Genghis Khan whatever that means. The two of them spend a few minutes talking about who might be running in November and then the conversation turns to my dad's favorite topics which are overpopulation and pollution. He is against both of them and says they are tied together. If we didn't have so many people, we wouldn't have so much pollution. I don't know about overpopulation but I'm sure against pollution. Sometimes just sitting in the classroom, my eyes start to water. Even though we live on the westside of Los Angeles, some days in the fall everything just looks brown. Uncle Paul doesn't really care about overpopulation or pollution. Sometimes they argue about pollution and I think the main reason Uncle Paul says he's not worried about it is because he just likes to argue with my dad.

We finish dinner and cut up and serve the lamb cake. It was so cute that I really hated to see it get cut up. But it really did taste good. Aunt Becky admired our decorations and our Easter clothes and then they got on the phone and called my uncle in Iowa so that we could all say hello to Uncle Floyd, aunt Gloria, cousin Jan and Cousin Bob. I'm really looking forward to going to Iowa to visit as soon as school is out. Uncle Floyd's Farm is my favorite place in the whole world. And because Aunt Becky and my cousins come at the same time, it's lots of fun!

### **Example #3 Writing about family**

One day my son and family were here for dinner. Granddaughter Denise mentioned that she went to school wearing one black and one navy shoe. She was sort of laughing but I could tell that she saw it as a serious fashion mistake, possibly even an embarrassing one. I flashed on my mother at Nazareth House telling me that she went to breakfast one morning unknowingly wearing an orange blouse with pink pants—and no one had told her so she could go and change. She was mortified! All her friends knew she was blind and knew it would upset her if they told her. How she found out eventually, I don't know.

Getting to know Denise throughout her childhood has been like getting to see my mother as she grew up. Mom never had a lot of money for clothes, but she had really nice things and wore them well. She shared her good taste with me and some of my fondest memories are of going shopping with her. We might be just going to buy something mundane like shoes to go with my school uniform, but we would always take a tour through the clothes looking to see what was in fashion and what we liked. We found that we both immediately went right to anything blue. As she lost her eyesight and her arthritis became worse in her 80's and 90's, we still went out to lunch and shopping for clothes. When she could still see at all, she would hold things up really close to her eyes to see the color and pattern. When that became too difficult, I would put her in a dressing room and go collect things I thought she would like. I helped her put them on and then described how it looked and she would test it for fit and comfort. On my monthly trips to LA right up to her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday, we would go to the mall and get her something new. Oh, how I miss her! Part of the reason I shop online is that going to stores isn't much fun anymore without her. Denise loves to shop too.

She is 11 so right now the store of choice is Justice. She has really good taste and style and always knows what is in fashion for her age group. I remember a few years ago when she informed me that she wasn't wearing pink anymore because pink is only for little girls. She seems to be following the family tradition and wearing a lot of blue. Like Mom, she always accessorizes and does it well. Both Mom and Denise are good at getting value for their money. For mom it was more about the versatility of a piece—how many places could it go and how well would it hold up to washing or cleaning. For Denise at Justice, it is more about, "If I buy from this rack, I can get two for the price of one."

One of the biggest ways I see them alike is that they are each the sole extravert in a nuclear family of introverts. My Dad, brother and I are introverts, but Mom is an extravert. Denise is an extravert while her Mom, Dad and brother are introverts. I have talked to Denise about her great grandmother and how she would have understood her. But it is different if you are the extravert child rather than the extravert mother. Denise

is much more talkative than the rest of her family. They sometimes actually bribe her or dare her to be silent for a while. Whatever Denise thinks, she says. And she does have interesting things to say, but I suppose I can understand the reaction of the rest of the family. Denise is always ready to go – anywhere. And once there, she doesn't want to go home. She loves being with people. Mom was always ready to go too! And she loved being with people and telephoning and writing them. In dealing with me, Mom was always saying things like, "You have been reading all day, go call one of your friends and get out and do something." She would work with me to know what to say when I met new people and I would watch her with other people and learn how to successfully converse. It seemed what she did was ask leading questions and then really listen to the answers. Sometimes it felt like intrusion. My friends loved the attention she gave them. But I saw it as her trying to take over my friends. Sometimes I thought they came over just to see her and eat the cookies she always had in the cookie jar. Looking back, I can see that she taught me a lot about getting along with people and about how children just love it when an adult gives them undivided attention. I understand now how rewarding it is to see a child light up when they see you and to have real conversations with children.

Baking is another point of comparison. I had a period of making fancy decorated cakes when the kids were smaller. And Denise liked to as well. By now she can make the icing from scratch, run the mixer, do the covering layer and squeeze out frosting to do the decorating. Quality time together. My mother had her cake period too. I remember a bunny cake she did at Easter for the grandsons that took her all day. She is the one who taught me to bake—cookies, cupcakes, pies, cakes, banana bread, even candy and fruitcake.

Every day I wish I could have more time with my mother, doing those ordinary –and sometimes extraordinary—things. When I am with Denise doing things, I have that same warm feeling and it brings back times with my Mom, but without the pain.

#### **Example # 4 one piece of an intro to hang individual memories on AN ORDINARY LIFE IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES**

##### **The Cold War**

Most of what I learned about communism in elementary school was from watching *I Led Three Lives* on television and rooting for Herb Philbrick to ferret out those communist cells. Also, my Catholic School indoctrinated us into thinking that if the Communists took over in the United States, they would immediately close all the churches and Catholic schools. I never could make up my mind if I thought that was bad because I really didn't like going to church and I hated my Grade School. There was definitely some appeal in having to go to a public school if the Communists took over. And then of course there was Duck and Cover. Seems like we spent a lot of time under our desks. We learned to watch for that bright flash of light that would be the warning . I remember when I was about 10, hearing in class that the pope had been given a letter by Our Lady of Lourdes to be opened in the year 2000. The nun that taught us suspected that it was to tell the world that there would be an atomic bomb that would destroy most of us. So I calculated how old I would be in the year 2000 and thought that's how long I would live, to age 56 . It was scary but that age seemed so ancient and so far in the future that I didn't worry about it too much. In high school my Civics teacher started the anti-communist club and about the only thing we did was boycott the movie *Spartacus*. Since it was boycotted, of course I went and of course I couldn't figure out how it was about communism. But it took until I was grown up to see just how bad Joe McCarthy, and McCarthyism, was.



**GNV Example 5 Triggering images. Flesh out the images to bring out the experience**

It's a hot lazy August afternoon. Sherry and I are stretched out on the carpet in our den. The shutters are closed against the sun and the darkened walls and ceiling make the room seem cool. The carpet feels rough-soft against our legs. Mom sits in the easy chair and as she reaches forward to get the newspaper off the footstool, the chair tilts forward with a squeak. The green ceramic mixing bowl between Sherry and me is full of juicy green Thompson grapes.

We have the comic book collection stacked next to Mom's footstool and we're reading our old favorites. I crunch a grape and follow the antics of Little Itch in my Little Lulu comic. Sherry is laughing at Uncle Scrooge pushing coins around in his vault with a plow.