

## Chapter 2

### *The Traveler and Companions*

In a memoir, you—the author—are the hero of the story. Everyone else plays a role in relation to you. They may be supporters or detractors. You may have beloved adversaries who mix support and opposition in ways that infuriate. You may travel with soulmates with complex and intimate influence over you.

How will you bring this diverse cast of characters to life on the page? Begin with yourself.

#### **Characterizing yourself**

We (your audience) need to care about you. What can you tell us about yourself that engages our sympathy?

Who are you at the outset? It's difficult to empathize with a writer who keeps her feelings under wraps. Your travel memoir will be as interesting as your ability to express your feelings. Show us your emotions at the trip's outset, your hopes and fears. Use these opportunities to foreshadow events to come.

Who do you become on the trip? Show the emotional impact of events that occur along the way, the struggle behind each decision you make. Reveal your vulnerabilities, your humanity, so we can relate to you.

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As I show you my emotions, the words I choose matter tremendously. To say, “When I heard my in-laws had decided to give us a trip to Italy, I was thrilled,” only goes so far. It tells, but doesn’t show. I need to make you feel the same emotion I experienced, standing in a brother-in-law’s living room, holding the phone.

To help convey feelings, try these techniques:

- Describe how your body reacts to emotions.
- Show how feelings translate into behavior.
- Dramatize the emotion of the moment.
- Show how people have affected you.

Here is the opening to my story about the Cinque Terre trip. Can you find examples of the above techniques in this excerpt?

“There won’t be any presents for you this year,” my brother-in-law begins, over the phone. It is Christmas 2007, and my husband and I are staying with another of his brothers in Chicago. As happens every holiday, the oldest brother calls in from Virginia, and we have a nice holiday chat.

“Really, we have everything we want or need,” I say, not sure how he expects me to respond.

He continues, “The brothers have decided to combine your Christmas and anniversary gifts this year. Marcella told me you guys want to go back to Italy. We’ll pay the airfare. You’ll have to handle the rest.”

“That’s tremendous!” My heart starts packing, but my brain hesitates. There is a hurdle to overcome. Could we really accept a gift so generous? From people who had done so much for us over the years? You bet.

But what will we do with our elderly fox terrier, Fred? His decline has tethered us close to home. We haven’t ventured out of state, much less out of country, in years. “I can’t wait to go. Thank you, thank you

all. Here, let me put Jim on.” I hand the phone to my husband.

In the second paragraph, I’ve chosen words like “not sure” and “expects” to convey my emotions of uncertainty, my desire to please. In the fourth, I’ve given you a contrast of head and heart, to show my excitement and trepidation doing battle. In the fifth paragraph, I’ve chosen words like “ventured” and “tethered” to dramatize my worried state of mind.

### **Details make the man (or woman)**

When you write about people, choose details that reveal what makes each one memorable to you. Tristine Rainer, author of *Your Life as Story*, recommends an exercise she calls “How to be...” in which she asks you to make a list of gestures and indicative behaviors, as if you were writing a how-to guide for impersonating the character you describe.

Here is an example, describing a restaurant host we met in Vernazza, one of Cinque Terre’s five little villages.

#### **How to be... Luca, the proprietor of the Pirati di Cinque Terre**

- Greet your customers with giddy energy. Move quickly, waving your arms a lot. When asked your name, say “Borat.”
- Be tall and just beginning to carry extra pounds on your frame, just beginning to watch your hairline recede.
- Tell customers what to order instead of taking orders from them.
- Ask your customers about themselves, then use what they tell you for banter. “Australians are the only ones who ask for eggs and bacon for break-

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- fast. No one comes to Italy for bacon and eggs. You will have the brioche.”
- Reveal details about yourself easily. “I came from Sicily when my brother fell for a woman from Vernazza. The two of us decided to open a Sicilian restaurant here.”
  - Touch your customers. Come up behind and begin a backrub.
  - Show supreme confidence in your restaurant. Say things like “The cannoli here are the best you will ever taste.”
  - Flirt with the girls, whether they are young or not, with men or not. “You must sit outside; you’re so beautiful you’ll attract more customers.”
  - Be one half of a pair of twins, and have fun with that. “He is the talented one, I am the handsome one.”

These “stage directions” probably won’t end up phrase-for-phrase in your character descriptions but they will be helpful. The exercise leads you to a list of all the little things you recall your characters doing. Use these details to make descriptions of your characters more vivid. (Note how I included remembered snippets of conversation in my sketch of Luca. A bit of this patter found its way into the final story.)

Stage your “reveals.” You don’t have to tell us everything you know about a character when you first introduce him. Each time he makes an appearance, you can reveal another detail, building your portrait as you go.

## Writing about living people

How do you suppose Luca would feel about being described as I’ve depicted him? Or how about this description of another character we met in Cinque Terre?

But who's this coming through the gate to our balcony? An elderly woman with a mad cloud of silver hair, flowing embroidered denim skirt and blouse, ropes of silver jewelry around her neck, wrists, fingers. She must be one of the gypsies we've been warned about.

It turned out she was our host's mother, an artist and a pillar in her business community, coming with important news. How would she feel to find I had described her to the world as a mad-looking gypsy?

I never used to worry about writing about people around me. After all, my writing was for my own enjoyment and practice. But then a few essays were published, and suddenly the cats were out of the bag. I had to deal with the implications of using friends and strangers as "my" material. I started a conflict with relatives when an essay published online included my description of their summer cottage, and a cousin shared it with the rest of the family. My aunt went to her grave without forgiving me for disrespecting her. (I think it was the line about her house smelling of wet rot.)

Specific details are vital to making your writing interesting and believable. However, writing about living people introduces issues. We want to live in harmony with others—but we want to be true to our art. We must balance ethical and legal considerations with the demands of creativity.

As writers, we have to understand what can happen to people when we reveal what we know about them. Ask: Who might this information hurt, and how much? How much do you care about causing that harm? Sometimes, as is the case when people have abused their power over us, the answer might be: "Who cares," or even "Good!" Beware of writing from anger, and particularly with revenge as a motive. It will come through in your writing, and readers will lose sympathy for you. You're the hero, remember? Heroes don't snipe or gripe. Don't break faith with readers who are rooting

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for you. But just as important, don't break faith with the people in your life.

"Each of us must balance the reasons for writing a story or for using real names, against the harm that might be done to someone else," writes Judith Barrington in *Writing the Memoir*.

Of course, you can choose not to worry about the consequences until you think about sharing your work with others. Like me, you can use writing about real people for your own creative process.

When you decide to put your work before an audience, consider the consequences. Switch to fictional names if necessary to tell your truth without negative consequences for yourself or those you care about. But for your first draft, stick to true names. As you write you dive into your memories, pull them into active mind-space, use them, and re-file them. Using false names while in this creative act may cause "misfiling." The line between remembered detail and created story will blur.

## What we take with us

An important aspect of character is "baggage." Lost baggage in Italy is called "smarito"—unmarried. What poetic recognition of how "married" we feel to the stuff we carry with us on our trips—our baggage literal and metaphorical.

In Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *North to the Orient*, a classic account of pioneering aviation, she describes packing for a three-month trip in a tiny airplane. "Every object to be taken had to be weighed, mentally as well as physically. The weight in pounds must balance the value in usefulness."

Now, as you begin to write about a travel experience, pause to consider the baggage you take with you. What preconceptions accompany you—and how soon will they be abandoned? What item packed (real or metaphorical) will turn out to foreshadow a turning point ahead?

As you introduce and develop your characters, be sure to include clues about their “baggage.” These kinds of details appeal to our innate curiosity about others.

**Assignment: Introduce your cast of characters.**

A memoir is inherently character-driven. Who are you? More importantly, who do you become when you are traveling? How does you-the-traveler differ from your everyday self? What do you carry with you that you hope will earn its weight in usefulness?

Who are your companions on this trip? What roles do they play, as supporters, adversaries, protagonists, or some blend of these roles?

For each person who made this trip, write a character sketch, a list of attributes, or a “how to be...” exercise. Jot notes about scenes that show these traits and attributes in action. Later you will decide where these scenes fit into your outline.

You will draw from these character sketches as you write your travel memoir.