

*Tell the Truth.
Make It Matter.*
a memoir writing workbook

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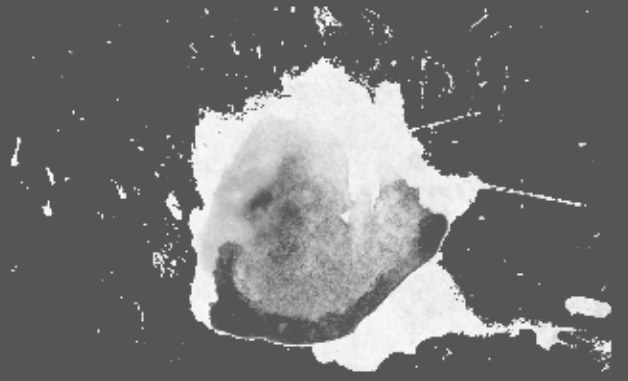
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INTRODUCTION

THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS TO TELL THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE: As a sharpen-the-pencils science-y report spanning the first thing you remember straight through to the last thing you remember, including this very moment, now. I mean: Now. Actually: *Now*.

(Imagine how long that would take.)

(Imagine how finally impossible.)

As a blow-by-blow of a single something—a single day, a single hour, a single bowling party, a single manicure, a single argument, a single snack, a single shopping spree, a single accident—told precisely as that something happened. Maybe there are possibilities here, but I shall sound the warning bell: You can fool yourself into thinking that simply writing that single something automatically qualifies as meaningful story.

(The bell has rung: It does not.)

As a meditation on the stuff that has—for some reason you'll only discover while writing it down—mattered most. The clinking of your grandmother's knitting needles. The faded flowers that fall from your shelf of antique hats. Your white rat, Joseph, and his quick-tailed genius. Your preference for the color bistre brown. Your obsession with artichokes. Your favorite nook in the library. Your history of love. Your father's talent for burning toast. The smell of sawdust in the garage. Your hoverboard triumphs. The sister you lost. The sister you never had. The sister you always wished you had.

(Now we're getting somewhere.)

As a poem, as a song, as a monologue. As a first-person telling, as a second or a third. As a past-tense rendition or a present-tense sprawl. As a bit of film. As performance art. As a sculpture built of clay. As a cartoon strip.

Yes.

(The thing is: We have options here. Don't let anybody tell you that we don't.)

As a lie, as a distortion, as an attack, as a fiction.

Nope.

(The story of your life is the story of a truth. We don't have options like *that*.)

You're holding a book called *Tell the Truth. Make It Matter*. There's got to be a reason for that. Maybe your aunt read your diary and thought you had the writing knack (have you forgiven her yet?). Maybe homework is due—the kind in which writing is involved—and you're stuck. Maybe you're on vacation in a log cabin with some extra wick in your candlesticks, or maybe you're waiting, in a hospital, for someone you love to get well, or maybe you've just finished reading the best graphic memoir ever and want to know how the author had the courage to tell a story just like that.

Whatever your reasons, truth is now our quest. How we find it, how we share it, how we allow the act of writing our stories to shape our perceptions of ourselves. It's a journey, and you've shown up. You're here. Sharpen your pencils, uncap your pens, click in. Over the course of the coming pages, with the help of leading questions, open-ended prompts, exhortations, and examples, you'll discover your voice, profess the true you, navigate your world, come to know your stories, and write the opening pages (and many scenes) of your memoir. You'll go back in time and lean forward, into the future. You'll study photographs and yield to songs. You'll declare what you know, overcome what you've forgotten, move away from anecdote toward meaning.

I've taught memoir in university classrooms and across the country for years. I've published six memoirs and a book of memoiristic essays. I blog the truth. I interview memoirists. I teach memoir on a farm, by the sea, near a river. I believe, in other words, in memoir. I love the form. But I also know that memoir writing is rarely easy and that we shouldn't expect it to be. This is life that we're talking about it. The wonder and confusion of it. The glories and contradictions. The triumphant and the tragic. The hard-core facts and gauzy dreams.

We've made room for it all in the pages to come.



NOTHING BUT
THE TRUTH



SERIOUSLY?

Why bother? And what is truth anyway? Aren't we all pretty clear, in this day and age, that the truth is suspect territory? Science keeps outrunning itself. Facts are relentlessly broken. There are lost memories, reconfigured memories, tangled memories, tainted memories, rebuffed memories, and at least a handful of mice at the RIKEN-MIT Center for Neural Circuit Genetics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with scientifically induced false memories, according to a *New York Times* story. There's that boy you thought you maybe loved who isn't at all the guy he'd seemed. There's that stranger you saw driving a pickup truck who turned out to be driving a Jeep. There's what your mother said versus what your father said versus what you thought you saw for yourself versus what you told your friend versus what that friend then told your sister.

Truth—be honest—is hard. Memory often falters. My version is not your version. What you leave out (and, as has been seen, we must leave most of it out) is its own kind of contortion. Given the grand impossibility of it all, why rumble down the road in search of truth? Since everything looks like shades of gray, how can any little lie you tell finally make a difference? Who, after all, is going to find out? And how do we make the stories of our lives engaging—how do we deal with that make-it-matter stuff—if, in the end, we are not allowed to bend?

I feel the urge to apologize, but I can't. True stories are life stories, artfully (and honestly) resurrected. They are one person's story—with an eye toward universal consequence. It is the writer speaking not just of himself but of the human condition. It is Big Stuff, or it should be. It can reach across the great divide—connecting people, inspiring people, sometimes even saving people.

It can't do any of that if it springs from deliberate deceit.

I've dared to write six books that fall into the category known as memoir, not to mention what (embarrassingly) now numbers hundreds upon hundreds of truth-infused essays. I've gotten things wrong; believe me, I have. But I've never gotten things wrong *intentionally*. I've never ratcheted up the facts of my story to make me sound more interesting or someone else more dull, me more heroic and someone else less so. I've always done the research, if research was to be done—checked the files, studied the photographs, looked up the old newspaper accounts, talked to the other eyewitnesses.

Because when you commit to telling the truth on the page, you are committing to seeing the world—and yourself—with heroic clarity. He may not be the villain you thought he was. You may not be entirely to blame. What might have seemed like purposeful cruelty at first was really (we learn as we remember, and as we find words for our remembering) an epic misunderstanding. Search for the truth, write that truth, and you grow wiser, more thoughtful, more ready for the world as it is. Search for the truth, and write that truth, and you're not just putting words on a page. You're shaping your own sense of who you are and what you're capable of.

Heroic clarity.

I find it surprising how eager some “truth” writers are to manipulate, or break, the truth. It didn't really happen quite like that, they wink, but the fiction is

seducing. It wasn't winter when it occurred, but summer tastes far sweeter. I will change her name and every single thing about her, so that she can't come after me, complaining. She was sipping tea, but for this scene beside that window, I prefer a sugar-free soda.

Small stuff? Inconsequential? Except: It really isn't. Don't mess yourself up by changing the details on purpose. This is *your* life. This is *your* book. Write the truth. Get even the smallest details right. The car he drove. The horse's color. The size of the caterpillar. Choose to write it wrong, lie on purpose, and you punch a hole in your true-story dike. You get a little gush of fiction flowing, and pretty soon anything goes—the lines blur, the facts dim, the message muddies, your testimony is unreliable. Give yourself permission to fabricate one little thing—for the sake of being cool, for the sake of having it easy—and you've stepped across the line.

Don't give yourself permission.

Stand straight.

Be the place where the truth tries to live, because the truth—your best rendering of it, your most honest try—is, in the end, what defines you.

Your truth is your story.

YOUR FIRST LIE

EXERCISE

Might as well begin by writing eight full sentences about the first lie you remember ever telling.

Your first lie. Written true:



1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

TIP: Are your sentences alluring? Do your details sing? If you read these sentences aloud and a pencil dropped, would the whole room hear it? Ask yourself whether there's a bigger story here. A story about a family. A story about a need. A story about who you were before you became the person who chose to tell the lie (had to tell the lie?) you just described. Ask yourself what might have happened if you'd opted for the truth.