

It's important to gain the reader's attention from the start. Begin with a catchy sentence.

My grandfather was crushed by a Mack Truck and survived. I am sure this means something, but I don't know what.

Edit, cut, rewrite.

I remember when my hair got sucked into the drain of the Jacuzzi bathtub in Ocean City where my family used to go on vacation every year.

Choose a point of view.

Whenever I try to talk to other people about this they always want to know the details of the scene:

How did the truck make it through the highway guardrails?

How did they discover you?

Did he have to rebuild his house?

Was your head already under the water?

Did the truck driver die?

Did you have to cut off all of your hair?

Make sure your story has a clear beginning, middle, and end.

I don't know the answers to most of these questions and, anyway, it's not the point. The point is the missing significance. I am missing something and I'm not sure what it is, but it sometimes seems like the story about my grandfather isn't all that great, but that the rest of the world is so weak that it can't stand up to it. Or other times it seems like things are blurry and I can't find my glasses. Or it seems like I should have died in the bathtub and didn't so my life should have more meaning than it does.

Edit, cut, rewrite.

When I go walking around by myself, which is almost never, I think about the physical reality of the situation, how the metal must have felt pressing down on his chest, how shocking it was to expect the end of *Good Times* and see an upside down grate coming at his face at sixty miles an hour instead.

Edit, cut, rewrite.

When I think about it now it seems symbolic in a way that I don't quite understand, but I know lungs aren't meant to work underwater, and I know that I almost died. And I know it is just coincidence that I didn't.

Edit, cut, rewrite.

When my grandfather was sixty-three years old a Mack Truck careened off the side of the road, rolled over three times and crashed through the ceiling of his living room. It landed on top of him, but he survived, only to die several years later on the couch in some Ocean City apartment.

Set up the plot. Remember: character is action. What do your characters want? Their desires will drive the story. Develop your characters fully, know more about them than you will ever use in the story.

Name?

Grandpa.

Age?

Dead now.

Job?

Retired, was in the Navy (professional drunk).

Ethnicity?

White.

Pets?

Bloodhound, named Ticks.

Religion?

Good one.

Children?

Four.

Something hated?

Children.

Sleep patterns?

Had the tendency to fall asleep in front of the television in the living room.

Drinking patterns?

Would drink perfume if no other alcohol was available.

Phobias?

Probably trucks, if I had to guess.

Faults?

Abusive, self-destructive, alcoholic, has superhuman ability to survive accidents.

What does your character want?

A drink.

Use descriptive phrases. Show, don't tell your readers.

Long black hair too close to the mechanism which sucks in the water so it can get shot out to your back muscles and neck muscles. Pressurized water: good for what ails ya. I remember thinking, "more air, more air."

My grandfather died in that very same apartment. Not from getting his hair stuck in the drain, though. He was bald and died because even after he got hit by a Mack Truck and survived he continued to treat his body like shit. I think it even made it worse. I think it made him feel invincible. My grandfather used to smoke like a chimney and would drink perfume if it came down to it. And it did. Come down to it.

I remember it smelled like salt water on the balcony and I remember my mother cutting off the rest of my hair. So it would match, so it wouldn't look bad, so the other kids wouldn't laugh, and

presumably so I wouldn't get it stuck in another drain or in that same drain again, which would've been a real kick in the teeth for her.

Phobias?

Drowning.

Any illnesses?

No.

Nervous gestures?

Wait, that's my illness.

Faults?

When I was twenty-two years old I moved in with my grandmother. Six months into our cohabitation she fell down a flight of stairs. She broke her hip, her right arm, and shattered her face rather severely. She was placed into a rehabilitation center for elderly people who have hurt themselves somehow, but are ultimately expected to recover. After several weeks she was sent home. It was discovered almost immediately that while in the rehab facility she had contracted *Clostridium difficile*, more commonly known as C-diff. C-diff attacks the digestive system. For healthy young people it is about the same as a stomach flu, for elderly and the infirm it can be very dangerous. She got sicker and sicker, I was twenty-two years old. So I left. I moved out. And my grandmother died all by herself. I was young enough that taking care of a dying elderly person shouldn't have been my responsibility, but I was old enough to know better. And I did know better, but I did it anyway. This, I still think, is the worst thing that I ever have done.

Give your characters an inner life. What are their thoughts, dreams, ambitions?

I often wonder how initially, in the absolute first moment of seeing the scene, my grandmother felt. I wonder if, for just one second, she saw the metal and the blood covered broken glass sitting in my grandfather's seat and just felt pure relief. I wonder if amidst the chaos and the terror and the shock if she hoped, deep down, that she was finally free.

She moved immediately after my grandfather died. Into a smaller house. This is the place where I would later move in with her, and then not long after that would move out and abandon her to a lonely and sad death. I drive by this house every day to remind myself of the worst things that I am capable of.

Edit, cut, rewrite.

Living in the town where you grew up is learning to breathe underwater.