

or moments of reflection? What is your whole story building to? How will it resolve? Remember, you do not have to plot every literal step—jump cuts are allowed!

- Once you determine which of your narrative stepping stones could be potential scenes, decide how you will bring them to life cinematically. Recount them so we can see and experience them with you. Some stories might have many small scenes, others might have only two or three, but remember there is usually one pivotal scene that your story builds toward.
- Make sure to stay in the action and describe the scene from the inside. Allow the listener to experience your story by taking them through the events, the way they unfolded for you. Avoid telling from hindsight.
- What are the details that will make your scenes (and your overall story) memorable and uniquely yours? Draw from all your senses. Choose specific details to highlight important moments, create emotion, and build tension in your story, but don't go overboard with distracting or overly specific details that might risk confusing your listener. When in doubt, revisit your *one sentence* and determine if the detail supports the overall arc of your story.
- Is there important backstory you need to drop in or weave through in order for your listener to understand the context of the story?
- How will you land your arc? How will you illustrate what changed for you? Can you *show us* how you are different now than you were at the start of your story?

When the doctor said I needed a kidney transplant, my boyfriend immediately volunteered. It was in this moment I realized he loved me. He loved me so much he was willing to put himself in harm's way.

As we summited the mountain, I could see for miles. I wasn't afraid. And suddenly I realized I had let go of my fears one by one as I made the climb.

Or you can try giving the transformation more real estate in the story. Extra details act like a highlighter. Dress the moment up a little. Let it wear mascara or a bow tie.

I was nervous, but I let him know I was moving out.

Versus:

I agonized about letting him know I was moving out. Each weekend I was sneaking a box of my most precious belongings into a storage space. I was only able to find the courage to tell him after I had put the down payment on the moving truck and the date was set. I felt like he might be able to talk me out of it if the plan wasn't solid and already in motion.

It's the same moment, just fully dressed. It directs the listener. Look here!

Sometimes the change in the story may not feel true to you in the present day. "That was a long time ago. I've changed. So much has happened since! My waking hours are no longer consumed with a burning desire to finally beat smug Yolanda at tennis." You may have long ago moved on (we hope so) and not even know Yolanda anymore. But there could still be a great story there! Place yourself back in that time, and maybe perspective will reveal the real reasons why it was so important to you then. You may have pro-

posed and grown, but the passion you once felt for the game and for vanquishing Yolanda can live on. (Take that, Yolanda!) It's fine to end the story anchored in how you felt at a particular moment in time. We go through many changes in life. Where one story ends, another begins.

You, right now, are all of the stories that came before you.

PERSONAL STORIES FOR COLLEGE AND GRANT APPLICATIONS:

Kendi Ntwiga, a Moth Global Community Program graduate and instructor, told a Moth story of being picked on by the local schoolchildren, but working day and night to score the top marks that eventually make her the hero of her Kenyan village. She uses this story as the basis for every grant application she writes for her organization, which encourages young women entering STEM fields. The story helps potential new funders understand her drive and commitment to the next generation. She says, "Given the high number of applicants these days, going in with a personal story from the beginning helps you stand out and get shortlisted." Aisha Rodriguez, Diavian Walters, and countless other graduates of Moth high school workshops used their Moth stories for their college essays to showcase their character and how they see the world. The stakes are high in all applications, so show your potential new school what was once on the line for you in another area of your life, and how you came out on the other side!

from, but they didn't think that the prosecution made their case beyond a reasonable doubt. And when I was still not convinced, they sent that older gentleman juror to talk to me. And he sat across from me and very gently said, "Maybe one day someone that you love very much will be in this situation where it will look like they committed a crime, but they are innocent, and this law that states that a person is innocent until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt will save them. It's not a perfect law, but it's the law we were asked to follow in this court today. So please consider that." And I couldn't believe how much thought they all put into this. So I changed my vote.

Danusia goes into the story thinking jury duty is pointless and rigged. Her entire mindset is changed by the morality of her fellow jurors, the people she previously thought of as "square" and small-minded. She leaves with new respect for the system and especially her fellow jurors.

In Dr. George Lombardi's "Mission to India," the resolution happens in a strange and rather reverential moment while operating on Mother Teresa.

I said, "Let's get that pacemaker out." And they looked at me and said, "You want it out, you have to take it out." I said, "I've never done that before." I got a charge nurse and a basic tray, and I prepared the patient. The pacemaker box came out readily, but the wire, the wire that had been sitting in her right ventricle for several months, was tethered into place, and it would not budge. I twisted and turned and did all kinds of little body English. This thing was stuck. I started to sweat. My glasses fogged over. There had been stories that if you pull hard enough you can put a hole in the ventricle, and she could bleed into her chest and die within a matter of minutes. So in the most surreal moment, I said a prayer to Mother Teresa, for Mother Teresa, and the catheter came loose! I took it out. I cultured the tip, and I

proved that this pacemaker was the cause of her infection. She got better. Her fever broke. She woke up. A couple of days later, she was sitting in a chair, eating.

The tension that Dr. Lombardi creates as he describes performing the procedure on Mother Teresa's heart pulls us into the stakes of this crucial moment. With the wire removed, he runs the final test, which confirms his initial diagnosis. Our relief breaks along with Mother Teresa's fever, bringing us to a natural resolution. And note: This peak *usually* comes toward the end of your story, but it doesn't have to. Where and how you order these narrative stepping stones is entirely up to you.

AND THEN+REALIZED. (YES, IT'S CROSSED OUT ON PURPOSE.)

By following the arc to the conclusion, we do not mean you should say, "And then I realized . . ." Please avoid this phrase at all costs. Often, people will cue the change in the story by saying "And then I realized" or "In that moment." As clean and neat as it would be for us as storytellers, very often the big moments of our lives don't immediately change us. Sometimes they're the catalyst for change, the first domino in a beautiful cascade. We may realize the magnitude of an experience only in hindsight.

The truth is, you most probably did *not* realize it then. It would take years of meditation, the death of a toxic cousin, and a divorce for you to *actually* realize what happened. Having your bike stolen was a story-worthy start, but you cheapen your story by shoehorning enlightenment into a moment that's not there. Think about language you can use that is efficient and true. "It would take me years of therapy and two more broken hearts before . . ." "Sometimes I wonder if that was the beginning of the end . . ." It's more truthful and possibly even more fun!

And a magic trick: You can just lift out "and then I realized" or "in that moment," and the story will still work as is!

GETTING TO KNOW YOU: What if you had just one short “great-est hits” story in your back pocket on a date? Something to lighten the mood and show your sense of humor or your adventurous side? We’re not suggesting you over-rehearse before meeting your could-be soulmate, but to calm your jitters, you could think of a story or two. Small decisions that at the time felt monumental may make good stories for a date. Think about the choices you made when you were growing into the person you are now. What about the time you switched your lunch table to sit with the chess club—or got busted copying CliffsNotes word for word? Did you tell a dad joke at your neighbor’s funeral but found the family loved it because they just needed a laugh? How about that one time you tried hitchhiking? Or the story of your dog Foxy’s adoption? Did you just drive from Taos back to Baltimore straight through the night and only make it through by blaring ‘90s pop hits on repeat? A very short story will give a new romantic prospect (or new friend!) a glimpse of who you are. Stories invite conversation. They encourage your “plus-one” to ask questions and share stories of their own.

UP AND OVER

At this point, like a roller coaster ride, you have your audience traveling up, up, up with all the tension you’ve built. You have the scenes and the backstory. The temperature is rising. The *action* is rising. But where is it all leading? The last and perhaps most important piece you’ll need is the apex of your story: the “main event”! Your entire story is built for this moment. It’s why we’re all on the edge of our seats.

WE NEED A RESOLUTION

In the main event of your story, you come face-to-face with the dragon. This scene is the energy shift; it’s where the story turns the final corner and your resolution is apparent. Something is achieved, insight is gained, and you metaphorically win or lose what you set out for at the start. We now understand how the you at the end of your story is quite different from the you we met at the beginning.

In David Montgomery’s “Spicy,” David’s shattered confidence builds and builds, until he finally gets to meet Victoria “Posh Spice” Beckham, famously the most aloof Spice Girl.

Before I know it, I am thrust into brightness, now three feet away from my idol, and she squeals, “Oh my God, it’s you!” She seemed genuinely excited to see me. At these events, she sits at a little table, and she does not stand up for anyone or anything. If you want to get a picture, you have to lean across the table, and they take a Polaroid from the side, real personal-like. She asked how many shows I was actually seeing and did not believe me until I pulled out the evidence of the twenty-two ticket stubs. She got up out of her seat, grabbed me by the hands, pulled me to the red carpet, and said, “You are fabulous. We’ve got to get some pictures.” Mind: blown. And it started to click. You know what, David? You’re not better off dead. You might even be special outside of Spice World, too.

Consider how you will illustrate what changed for you. How will you land your arc? Do you get what you want in the end? Or are you—our fearless hero—back to square one and ready to start again?

At the end of “Guilty,” Danusia Trevino is lovingly confronted by her fellow jurors.

Each one of those eleven people talked to me. They didn’t say that I was wrong. They said they understood where I was coming

BACKSTORY

When something happens, and you just *have* to call your friend to share it, remember that your friend knows a lot about you—your background, opinions, and shared experiences—and it informs how they receive the story. Your listeners will only have the back story you provide, unless you are famous—and even if you are, the audience probably knows nothing about you and your inner life. In iconic rapper Darryl “DMC” McDaniels’s story “Angel,” it’s important for us to know that while on a world tour with Run-DMC, he’d been suffering from debilitating depression, and had recently found out he was adopted. This is information the audience needs to know in order to fully understand his story.

You have an endless backstory; the art is figuring out which parts are relevant. It’s hard to imagine telling a story about being fired that would *not* nod to your extraordinary history of thirty-seven firings, but we can’t possibly hear about everything from your childhood paper route to your corporate gig. Most people would instinctively gravitate to the biggest, boldest, or most outlandish firings, but sometimes it might be the smallest firing that has the most impact, such as being fired as the merchandise wrangler of your kid’s Little League team. Perhaps being fired from that volunteer gig says more about your character and your emotional state than anything before.

Backstory can be dropped in or woven through—you don’t need to start with it. Downloading *all* the backstory at the very top is exhausting and usually a bit boring. However, your audience also doesn’t want to feel lost in a story out of the gate. They want *in*! Providing some backstory is an invitation. It lays the groundwork, giving listeners the context they need to interpret and understand the events with you.

Decide how best to parcel out what the listener needs to know and when. Sometimes you might share the backstory before a crucial moment to allow your audience to fully savor that moment

when they get there. Other times, you might start with a scene, and then back up and reveal some important context from before this moment. It’s like saying, “When someone cut off my grandmother in the church parking lot, I was worried. I should back up and tell you that in 1944, she was arrested for uttering profane language in a public place and was released under a thirty-five-dollar bond.”

Early in Vin Shambry’s story “Outdoor School,” he lets us know that he, his mom, and his little sister were struggling and had to live under a giant tree, and that he considered himself the man of the family. Then he introduces the exciting week that all sixth graders in Portland look forward to throughout elementary school: a week in the woods, living in cabins, with teachers and instructors. Because we already know Vin’s living situation, we really get to enjoy him describing his bunk, the meals, the joy of just being a kid. He doesn’t need to give a ton of detail about the contrast . . . we get it.

I only had two pairs of pants and two pairs of underwear, and no quarters for the laundromat. Matter of fact, I don’t even know if they had a laundromat. So I went to the counselor and I asked him. He told me that they would wash and dry my clothes for me, and I didn’t have to worry about it, and it was okay to run and jump in the river. I felt taken care of. At Outdoor School, I didn’t have a care in the world.

We appreciate Vin’s carefree camp experience so much more because we know his backstory. And because he shared the closeness of his family at the top, we also understand his ending, that though he loved Outdoor School, he was also haunted by worry about how his family was coping.

Each story will be different! Decide how best to arrange the details for your story—and if all else fails, always err on the side of keeping your listener *in the know*!

dense all the things that were said into *one time at church*. Otherwise it will be confusing.

- **EDIT TO MAKE THE TRUTH CLEARER.** You might find omitting a character or streamlining events might make it easier to follow along. Do we really need to know that the cab driver heard the whole exchange? Does he recur as a character, or is this his only appearance? Grouping people together rather than listing them off individually might be less confusing: *my theater tech crew, everyone in Accounting*. Or perhaps you reorder a chain of events or even leave a whole chunk of action on the cutting-room floor. (It might be interesting that you stole the getaway car from your ex-father-in-law, but if we don't have a ton of time, it is enough that you just have a getaway car.)
- **OWN IT.** Part of the honesty in a story is also taking stock of your part in it. What have you done or not done to land you in this predicament? Aunt Ethel was cranky at the family reunion? Well, did you leave out the part about when you were twenty and ran over her foot with your car? Showing your honest, banged-up self will generally make us trust you and want to root for you.

- **IS THE POINT OF VIEW EVEN POSSIBLE?** It's hard to believe that you could remember a ton of detail from a story that happened when you were four, or in a coma, or asleep. Don't strain your credibility by telling a story that starts with your alleged thoughts in your mother's womb.

- **STAY IN YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE AND FEELINGS.** If you say that someone was thinking this, that, or the other thing about you, your listeners are taken out of the story. They stop and question whether your assumption is plausible or not. *How do you know what they were thinking?* To stay on track, tell us what you *knew* to be true: "John looked at me, and I instantly *worried* that he thought I was a fool" is probably more accurate.

MEG: I once had a storyteller tell me something awful that another person thought about him, and I said, *They told*

you that?? and he said, No. So then I asked who told him and he said, *No one, I just have a feeling that they think that.* So I said, *Okay then, just say that. Let it be YOUR feeling, don't state an assumption as a fact!*

Moth stories are not fiction, and perhaps more important, human beings are smart. When we're truly listening—as Moth audiences do enthusiastically—we can sense when a teller is lying, and it pulls us out of the story. In film and literature, this is sometimes referred to as an “unreliable narrator,” someone speaking in the first person whose version of events seems distorted, untrustworthy, or otherwise questionable.

Details, when used well, can make your story not just interesting but also harrowing, exciting, rich, fun, and colorful. They engage your listener on a sensory level and *show* us who you are and what you've experienced.

Stories are the original version of virtual reality—no goggles necessary.

SARAH ON FAMILY STORIES AND ARTISTIC LICENSE: My grandma Harriet told stories, many times with events just slightly out of order. I'd say, “Grandma, I was with you. That's not *exactly* how it happened,” and she'd crinkle her nose, point her finger at me, and say, “I know. I *spiced it up*.” When you tell stories, some things may get switched around. If you get a big reaction for those Technicolor details, the narrative can grow and grow over the years—as you tell and retell—to become a “big fish” story or one that could seem like a tall tale even if it's true. You can spice your story up, like Grandma Harriet, but keep the plot grounded in your lived experience. The essence of the story can still be truthful, even if you skip forward, omit a beat, or reorder things slightly.

recall it, you're recalling a memory of that memory. Details are bound to shift. Some may get lost, but some long-dormant details may also be brought back to light.

We often have complex and conflicting opinions about events as they unfold. It is rare that we feel just one emotion. Multiple truths can exist in tandem, and you can acknowledge two or three (or more!) in a story.

It is possible to be incredibly grateful for a lifeboat but also deeply resentful. Say you thought you weren't actually drowning and you didn't need it and wished you could have proven how strong you were, but you're also relieved that you didn't have to exhaust yourself. It all depends on the thrust of the story. Is this relevant to your arc? Sometimes that complexity is the story. The contradiction can be the focus of the story, but if it isn't, it's best to leave it out.

TMI: Divulging too much information in social settings can be uncomfortable. Think twice before adding a TMI laundry list of pet peeves, the saga of your bum toe, or a trilogy of pet tragedies. (God, I miss Fluffy.) Be conscious of what you're sharing and the themes within these stories. With too many distracting details and digressions, your neighbor, fellow PTA parent, or potential new partner will wonder: What is this person trying to say? What is the point?

CATHERINE: I was on a blind date, and in the first minute, he told me the story of being fired just hours earlier. That was bad enough, but then he told me he was fired because, in his words, he was "grumpy, lazy, and likes to complain." It didn't make me eager to sign up for a second date.

SARAH: Years ago, a first date told me a very serious story of his favorite vacation. He'd unexpectedly found himself at a nudist resort where he spent his days playing volleyball (!) and his nights at a club on-site, where the dress code was "sport coat

only." He said this resort at first seemed strange but quickly became his favorite place. At the end of the story, he looked deeply into my eyes and asked, "Does this sound like something you would be interested in?" He purposefully used a story to illustrate something that brought him joy. It was a test to see if I might share that same interest. But—much respect to nudists—I politely said no. I loved the story, we just weren't a fit—but I won't soon forget him.

TRUTHS TO CONSIDER

- **OUR MEMORIES ARE A LITTLE FAULTY (AT BEST).** What if you don't exactly remember a few of the details? *Was it Wednesday or Friday? Was I eight or nine years old? Was his name Joe or John? Did I receive the care package from Mom before or after I filed for divorce?* This is a time to make a choice about what is most likely true. If this detail is not factually correct, will it make a difference to the essential truth of your story?
- **REAL LIFE IS MESSY.** On Tuesday, you were sure you were in love. On Wednesday, you knew it would never work, but by Friday, you were engaged. Depending on the story you're telling, do you need to include Wednesday? Is the story still true without the day of doubt? If the Wednesday blip is of no consequence, leave it out, or it'll just confuse the listener.
- **UNCOMPLICATE THE TRUTH.** It is okay to simplify if the simplification feels honest. If your story has multiple details that happened at different locations or times, you can condense them into one scene or location. Say there's a part of your story where something is mentioned at a church service, and then a few days later, something else was said at Bible study, and then at the next church service, another thing was said. It's perfectly fine to take a little artistic license and just con-

your story is about the time your father drove four hours in a snowstorm to pick you up after a bad date, it might not be relevant to share that he plagiarized his paper on *Romeo and Juliet* in high school. We only need to understand his character as it relates to your story.

- **MISLEADING DETAILS.** Don't mention that your uncle just finished plumbing school unless a pipe is going to burst. If you put too much emphasis on a detail, the listener will hold on to it throughout the story and be disappointed when you never come back to it. *Whatever happened to the plumber?*
- **QUESTIONING DETAILS IN YOUR OWN STORY.** Saying something like "I can't remember the details of the argument" or "I was *probably* driving to school" might cause the listener to question whether you are remembering everything else correctly. Better to say, "Before class, we fought like cats and dogs!" Include the details you *do* remember instead of pointing out the ones you don't. In most cases, the ones you remember will be enough to move the story forward.

USING DETAILS TO SETTLE A SCORE. This is not the time to grind your axe. We have found that when a storyteller shares a story and bad-mouths someone—an ex, a friend, a parent—they run the risk of putting the listener on the defensive. Human nature wants to protect people who aren't there to defend themselves. Your neighbor might very well be a jerk, but unless we know and care about you, we will most likely question your motives for telling this story. It's important that you show the listener who *you* are first, and gain their trust, so that when you introduce this bad element, they will already be firmly on your side.

THE TRUTH ABOUT DETAILS

At the end of every episode of *The Moth Radio Hour*, we hear producer Jay Allison say, "Moth stories are true, as remembered and affirmed by the storytellers." Memory is imperfect, and sometimes

the way we remember our experiences is different from how the events actually unfolded. Think of Moth stories as an artistic time capsule of one person's emotional experience of events.

FRIMET GOLDBERGER, MOTH STORYTELLER: Stories are not static; they grow, they shrivel, they stretch on one side and shrink on the other. Like people, stories evolve—even, and especially, on our own stories. Memory is unreliable; we tend to remember things based on present perceptions. And in that sense, no person's story stays the same.

It's impossible to remember our experiences with scientific accuracy. Stories rely on memories, not court reporters, and rarely can we roll back the tape. Memories are porous and imperfect, and can be deeply influenced by internal bias. The truth we see, and therefore the truth we tell, is colored by every single experience we've lived through.

DR. WENDY SUZUKI, MOTH STORYTELLER AND NEUROSCIENTIST: Our memory is precious because it provides the scaffolding for who we are as a person, including defining our own personal histories. However, at the same time, our memories don't act like a YouTube video, recording every move in precise detail. Instead, our memories are fallible, inaccurate, and can be modified literally every time we recall them.

To complicate matters further, the details and pictures that you've had etched in your mind for all these years could be protecting the innocent, fanning the flames of a grudge, or clouded by nostalgia.

As you're considering and constructing your story, acknowledge that what you remember about these events is not *all there was to remember*. This experience left a lasting mark, but every time you

JENIFER ON RIBBON-CUTTING TOASTS:

On occasion, you might have to toast not a person but a place or thing, such as a hospital wing or a new branch or brand. In this case, you are likely toasting and celebrating the team responsible. What is the "personality" of the team? (Scrappy, diligent, magically creative, fierce, intimidating!) How is that "personality" reflected? Shed some light on how the team found each other and found unity in its purpose. Remember to focus on the *why* of their venture. "Now we can heal more people/serve more clients/sell more." Sometimes there is a very clear story arc. You can nod to the process of development: from seed to plant, from blueprint to brick and mortar. Make sure to include the challenges, because the valleys make the mountains seem higher, and a toast is a mountaintop-worthy celebration.

THE PERILS OF DETAIL OVERLOAD

Details can offer useful color, but don't go overboard! Too many details can be distracting and fatigue a listener. If you go into great detail about something that doesn't really connect to the rest of the story (e.g., if you digress and tell us about your uncle Al, when he isn't particularly relevant), it can be confusing. Anytime a detail raises a question or causes a listener's mind to wander, they're off trying to figure out the answer to the question in their head while you've moved on. You lose your connection.

It's like having too many vases on the mantel—you can't fully appreciate the beauty of one when there are others competing for your attention. When directing a story, we'll sometimes say, "The audience won't know where to look." Choose a few details that really shine and capture our attention, and save the others for a different story where they can get their due. You are a multitude of stories; they won't be in storage forever.

When debating whether a detail is relevant, go back to the *one sentence* of your story. If the one-sentence summary of your story is: *This is a story about a dog who finds a home*, you won't want to include the details about the cat unless they directly support the story of the dog.

More details on the detail pitfalls to avoid:

- **TOO MANY SPECIFIC DATES.** Mentioning multiple dates can make a story feel long and tedious. The listener might think the dates are important and get frustrated thinking they have to keep track. *On March 9, 2009, I did this, then on September 21, 2010, I did this, then on November 24, 2021 . . .* Are the dates really important? Is one crucial? Don't tell us over and over what time it was or a specific date, unless that's a driving force of the story.
- **TOO MANY NAMES AND CHARACTERS.** It's enough to know you have twenty-three cousins, we don't need all their names and ages. Say the name of a person in the story only if they are a *key character*. Once you name someone, the audience will think they need to remember that person because they're integral to the story. Even if a person *is* a central character, it can sometimes be easier to refer to them by who they are (e.g., "my dentist" rather than "Nancy") for the sake of simplicity. Any added characters must have a functional purpose in the story.
- **TOO MANY GRAPHIC DETAILS.** Don't go into the gory details of an injury (or the intimate details of a romantic encounter) if they aren't what the story is ultimately about. Sometimes people will add in details they think are cool or shocking, but they end up distracting the listener. The teller has moved on with the story, but the listener is still back there thinking about the gratuitous image you've conjured. Make sure the details you choose support rather than compete with the story.
- **DETAILS THAT MIGHT BE AT ODDS IN YOUR STORY.** Situations are often complex, but make sure your story makes sense. If

the best. In "GFD," one small detail says a lot about Micaela Blechman's classmate.

She is a lipstick girl and I am a ChapStick girl. So she knows more than me, right? And she's not nervous about ninth grade at all.

In "The Gig," Christian McBride remembers meeting legendary musician Freddie Hubbard for the first time.

Freddie Hubbard was a man with a huge spirit, very macho kind of guy, almost had, like, a mob boss mentality. To be a good musician wasn't enough. He was very dramatic; he didn't make the rehearsal, didn't make the sound check, just showed up for the gig. I'm in the dressing room, shaking in my shoes, and Carl says, "Hey, Freddie, this is Christian McBride." I was seventeen at the time, and Freddie just kind of looks at me and says, "Yeah, nice to meet you." We go on stage and we play and to hear his horn up close like that, I almost had a heart attack. I thought, "Oh my God, I'm playing with Freddie Hubbard. I can't believe this."

Many stories include a colorful family member. Instead of saying "My uncle was eccentric," in her story "Ashes and Salmon," Joan Juliet Buck quotes her uncle Don.

"When I was bringing your grandmother's ashes down to Cannes to bury them, somebody gave me a smoked salmon to cheer me up. I was not going to pack it in the suitcase, so I left the smoked salmon in the carrier bag, and your grandmother was in one of those pale-blue Pan Am overnight bags. I put them both above my seat in the plane, and when we landed at Nice, I collected the smoked salmon and I forgot your grandmother."

In his story "The Met, Mrs. Vreeland, and Me," about working for the legendary *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland, Andrew Solomon

could have stated that she was opinionated about fashion. Instead, he gives us this:

We were walking through the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum. And she put one of her small, clawlike hands on my arm. And she said to me, "Young man, stop for a minute. I want you to look around this room, and contemplate the fact that every one of these people went into a store in which other things were available and selected what they're wearing right now."

We asked storyteller Carl Banks to render the twin sister he lost to suicide more clearly in his story "Over the Bridge." With limited time, he only had a few sentences to do it, and yet, a lifetime of memories to choose from.

He went with this:

She was an amazing visual artist. She was an unrepentant radical with a touch of anarchist, but she had an extremely tender heart and was incredibly sensitive.

He could have left it there but chose to add this rich detail:

She used to draw caricatures of tourists at Six Flags, and she was so sensitive that she couldn't make any money doing it. She would always give the drawings away, either thinking it wasn't good enough or thinking it was so good that they should just have it for free.

The summary of his sister was good, but the Six Flags detail really paints a picture.

It's another way of connecting and engaging with your audience. We feel closer to his sister, and to Carl, because of this story detail.

It was a kiss I could feel in my toes. A kiss I can still feel in my toes.

Many people have been through some harrowing moments while driving, but in "That Thing on My Arm," Padma Lakshmi takes us from being a passenger eating lunch in her mother's car to the moment the car was hit.

I was eating this rice. Suddenly I heard a loud bang! And I looked up, and I can remember the plate flying . . . and yellow rice everywhere, like confetti. And as the rice came down, all I could see was this beautiful, crystal-clear blue sky. No clouds, no cars, no road in front of us, no trees, nothing. Just endless, mind-blowing blue sky with these kind of yellow grains flying all around. Then, all of a sudden, I heard another thud. And then it was just stillness.

When you dig into the scenes you've identified, details begin to emerge that might be interesting and bring more meaning to your story. Those tennis shoes that you wore every day for all of 1986 might tell us a little bit about who you were in your youth; the random man at the grocery store who was laughing uncontrollably in the produce section might illustrate how you thought everyone around you was acting unusual.

Consider how Danusia Trevino shows us she didn't want to be picked for jury duty in her story "Guilty":

I got dressed for jury-picking day. I spiked my hair. I made sure my bat tattoo was in full view. I put on motorcycle boots, jeans with holes, and a T-shirt that said I Wanna Be Your Dog.

Each of these storytellers used specific details to bring their scenes to life. Try it in your story. Instead of "I was nervous about a meeting," share the playlist you blasted in your headphones to get

you pumped as you walked into your boss's office to ask for a raise. Make us root for you to get the R-E-S-P-E-C-T you deserve!

MOTH FOUNDER GEORGE DAWES GREEN ON "BURIED TREASURE": There's a bit of magic that raconteurs use, which I call "buried treasure." Early in your story, in the first minute or two, you bring up some small detail—usually something physical, talismanic: "So that was the day Uncle Wilkins took us to Coney Island. We all rode the Cyclone and the big Ferris wheel, and then I climbed into a photo booth to take a strip of photos. Four shots, and before each one Uncle Wilkins called out a pose for us to assume. 'Surprise!' he said. We all tried to show surprise. 'Fury! Sorrow! Exultation!'"

Then, as your story goes on, you palm that detail. Forget it, leave it alone. Till you come to the end of your narrative, when you produce it again:

" . . . And the cop handed me Uncle Wilkins's threadbare wallet, and I looked through it. There was a twelve-year-old gym membership, his expired driver's license, and nothing else—except a long, folded cardlike thing. Which I unfolded. It was a strip of four photo-booth snapshots. The four of us assuming those poses. 'Surprise. Fury. Sorrow. Exultation.'"

Your listeners will have completely forgotten that photo strip—until you bring it up in this entirely new context. And now that that they know the characters involved, the photo strip—the "buried treasure"—will be laden with new meaning. If you pull off this sleight-of-hand nimbly, it can be a powerful and moving device.

DETAILS BUILD CHARACTERS

When describing other people in your story, try looking for details and choices that will help us understand the character of that person

broke bread at 17,500 miles per hour, going around the planet every ninety minutes, seeing a sunrise and a sunset every forty-five, I thought about the people that I'm now working with and trusting with my life. African American, Asian American, French, German, Russian, the first female commander of the International Space Station. Breaking bread, floating food to each other's mouths. All while listening to Sade's "Smooth Operator."

The specificity of details brings the scene to life. Instead of it *was* raining, tell us about the noise of the rain on the roof or the puddles that blocked the path.

In Trisha Mitchell Coburn's story "Miss Macy," she describes the journey from her small Southern hometown to the big city like this:

Miss Macy and I boarded the train for New York City with a bottle of Drambuie and a brown paper bag filled with Southern fried chicken. Thirty hours later, we walked into the Waldorf Astoria hotel. We had never seen anything like it. It was out of a movie or something. And people sounded different, and they looked different. And our room was a far cry from the cinder block walls of my bedroom back in Alabama.

You draw these details out from any (or all) of your senses. How did something feel, both emotionally and physically? Was there a sweet smell or an eerie whistling sound? Did someone use a turn of phrase that sticks with you? Was there a thought that ran through your head in the moment?

In Shaun Leonardo's story "El Conquistador," he paints the picture of what it felt like the first night he got in the ring as a luchador.

The night comes, and it's a rickety ring in some makeshift arena with folding chairs, and the mariachi music is blaring, and it feels glorious. And they call out my name, and all the blood rushes

right out of my body. But I pull myself together, I get pumped, and I step out in all white and gold. The knight in shining armor with a fourteen-foot velvet cape. I hit that ring and I'm looking good, and then I get my ass kicked.

JODI POWELL, MOTH DIRECTOR: We often forget the inner dialogue. It is equally if not more important to let us know what you are saying to yourself in the moment as it is to hear what you are saying out loud to everyone else.

In discussing his story on *The Moth Radio Hour*, François Clemmons, a Black man, takes us to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, where in a now iconic scene, filmed at the height of the civil rights movement, he and Fred Rogers, a white man, soaked their feet in a kiddie pool.

So I took my boots off, put my socks over there, and we indeed put our feet in that same tub. I get chills thinking about what a statement it was. And he cared enough to say something. So we put our feet in the water together, and he had a little hose, and he ran some water there. Once again, you think about what the policemen did with the hose when they were so powerful, knocking people down. And here were two people in friendship using the hose to wet our feet.

There are events or situations that a vast number of people have experienced: falling in love, losing a loved one, being diagnosed with cancer, coming out, the birth of a child. Many of the "stepping stones" in these stories will be the same for everyone. The challenge is to find the details that make your familiar life experience remarkable and uniquely yours.

Consider the difference between "We kissed" and how Moth storyteller Jeni De La O described her first kiss with her husband.

On the other side of the world, in the Embakasi neighborhood of Nairobi, an eighteen-year-old birthday girl asked each adult guest to tell a memorable story of their eighteen-year-old self. Stories were shared by the girl's grandmother and grandfather and everyone who was there to celebrate. The best story was the one her grandmother shared about how her husband (the girl's grandfather) taught her how to drive a car. Moth instructor Maureen Amakabane, who was there, said, "It was so beautiful. The grandfather said that he'd tell his version of the story at next year's birthday celebration! We all laughed. I was there with my young daughter, and not only did we get to know the family and neighbors better, but my daughter asked if we could do the same for her next birthday."

BEFORE WE EXIT SCENE

As you craft your scenes, make sure to stay in the action and describe them from the inside. Be an active participant rather than a passive observer, and avoid telling from hindsight. Allow the moment to unfold the way it happened for you.

Consider the difference between

I was scared when I walked in the room because I heard a noise.

and

As I opened the door, I heard a growling noise in the corner—and my heart started racing!

Tell it as if you were standing in it and feeling it now. If a detail or scene is surprising, don't ruin the surprise by telling us it's coming! Give us the gift of feeling surprised along with you. Lose the preamble "and then the most amazing thing happened."

getting the expectation might actually dilute it. Resist the urge to tell a listener what to think or feel, and let them come to their own conclusion.

If your story is feeling flat or you notice your listener is tuning out (or maybe *you* are!), try finding a scene to make it more engaging.

DETAILS

The brand of margarine, the song on the radio, the texture of the blanket, the fragment of crime scene tape still on the doorframe, the feel of moss beneath your bare feet—details turn your scenes from black-and-white into Technicolor. They make the story vivid, real, and tangible. They are often the juiciest part. Believe it or not, even the most obscure details can make your story feel *more* relatable. They highlight moments, create emotion, add tension, and ultimately support the stakes and the arc of a story. Details make your story unforgettable to the listener.

MEG: I often tell people to blow it up big—look at all the details and moments you have to play with. The first step is to assess everything you have and then decide which of the details really support the story you are trying to tell.

In Leland Melvin's story "A Moment of Silence," he tells us about arriving at the International Space Station and being invited for a meal in the Russian segment by the commander. She told him to bring the rehydrated vegetables and they would provide the meat. He described the evening like this:

The smell of meat getting heated up. Their beef and barley, and our green beans with almonds, all being shared with people that we used to fight against, the Russians and the Germans. As we

boat ashore. . . .” It was about the time that I reached the second hallelujah that I realized that was, in fact, the only line I remembered. But Shawnees have never been quitters. So I decided there can be different versions of the same song. There can be, like, extended dance remixes, where vocals are looped repetitively. I closed my eyes, ‘cause sometimes it’s better not to see your audience. And while I stood there singing, I had plenty of time for existential questions, like Who is Michael? Why does God want him to row his boat ashore? And then finally I hit that line for the sixteenth time, and I stopped. The organist, who was not quite sure what was happening, continued to play for a minute, but when she realized it was finally over, she stopped in kind of an abrupt way. And then there was silence, and in that silence, I walked back down the center aisle. I started to climb back over my friend’s knees. As I did, our eyes met, and he just said, “Dude.”

In Alistair’s story, the scenes build toward him giving in to the pressure of performing in church, in an attempt to make his host happy. In sharing his inner thoughts, Alistair strategically slows his story down—thus building the tension, anxiety, and dread that he felt in that moment on the pulpit. Using this technique, Alistair not only reveals his vulnerability—he helps the audience *physically feel* that same dread.

Some stories might be chock full of small scenes, while others may have only two or three more detailed, impactful scenes. Usually there is one *big* scene (or the “main event”) that the entire story is building to, which includes the climax. This is the scene without which there is no story.

In James Braly’s “One Last Family Photo,” his family has gathered at the deathbed of his sister Kathy. The story comes to a head as they witness Kathy’s wedding held in the hospice room.

My dad stands up. The nurse walks in to make sure Kathy’s not being coerced. Steve walks over to the corner and takes Kathy’s hand, and the preacher opens the bible and begins speaking very

quickly, “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony”—like an auctioneer. Because he needs to finish before Kathy falls back asleep.

Kathy says, “I do.” My dad looks at Steve, and they shake hands.

My mom says, “Congratulations,” and gives him one of her bony osteoporosis hugs. I pop open the champagne and pour it in the paper cups from the water cooler.

And everybody is drinking a toast to the bride and groom when someone says, “How about a picture of the kids?”

I walk over to the corner and stand on one side of Kathy’s bed, and my brother and sister stand on the other, and we pose for a photograph. We’re looking out at a giant poster of the same pose, taken twenty years ago at my sister Corinne’s wedding, the only photograph of the four of us together ever taken. Corinne had it enlarged and put on Kathy’s wall to remind her of home.

So, I stand there staring at how we used to look, posing for the last photograph we’ll ever take. My mom and dad looking on, all of us together in a room for the first time I can ever remember, and probably the last—because of Kathy who, in the end, is showing us all how hard it is, but how beautiful it can be, to let go.

BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS: On her fiftieth birthday, Mary Domo, an early volunteer at The Moth, threw a party, and asked everyone invited to come prepared with a two-minute Moth-style Mary story. Mary has many friends from vastly different parts of her life: her Hoboken crew, East Village neighbors, career friends, people from The Moth, people from Burning Man. The idea was for each guest to share stories. “That’s very Mary” could have been the theme. Each person only had a minute to paint a scene that showed her quirky genius. The little stories acted as introductions between people who had never met before. Mary felt loved, celebrated, and seen. All her guests felt more connected.

"Slow Walk." People from Detroit doing "The Ballroom." Folks from Kentucky doing crazy between-the-leg throws. They were here from California to New York City to Florida, each with their unique flair, and the place was packed. The classic music was thumping. The synchronized lights were blaring. The fog machines were humming. At that moment, a song by the Godfather of Soul, James Brown, came on. And once you hear that "wooooo" in the intro of "The Payback" you knew it was time for Chicago to get on the floor.

In "A Soldier's Story," army veteran Ray Christian talks about confronting his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with a few disturbing scenes where we see him quick to anger, confused, and even delusional. Then he shares this:

I find myself at the mall, and I'm sitting on the bench, just trying to gather my thoughts, and a middle-aged lady, she shows up, and she's got her very elderly and frail mother with her. And she says to her, "Mama, I have to go to the bathroom. I want you to sit right here and don't go anywhere until I come back. Okay?" And she leaves. And this old lady is staring at me and staring at me. I try to look away. She keeps staring at me, and then she slowly moves her trembling, frail old hand next to mine, and she holds it. And I start to cry.

Her daughter comes back and she sees this and says:

*"Mama, what are you doing? You can't be just touching people like that. Sir, are you okay?" I said, "I'm fine." And her mother looks up and says, "It's what he needed."
It is what I needed.*

Earlier in the story, Ray had shown us his erratic behavior. When we see him take comfort in a stranger's gesture, we know he can no longer ignore the signs of his PTSD. It is the moment he sees it too.

Scenes show us important moments, instead of simply conveying facts. Ruby Cooper does this in her story "Kirk's Christmas Gift," which explores her relationship with her son.

She could have told us: My son had charisma.

But instead, she shows us: He was seven years old when I took him to school for the first time. And I pushed him down the hallway in his wheelchair, and he was going, "Hi! I Kirk. Hi! I Kirk." And waving like he was running for office.

She could have told us: I had a hard time saying no to my son.

But instead, she shows us: When he lost his tooth that year, I said, "Here's what's going to happen. We're going to put your tooth under your pillow, and then the tooth fairy is going to come and exchange it for money." And he said, "No. Mine bring pie." I said, "No, no. The tooth fairy doesn't deliver pie. The tooth fairy's a little thing with a sack of coins." And he said, "No. Mine bring pie." I said, "Okay. . . . What kind of pie?" "Chocolate." So the next morning, the tooth was gone, and there was a box with a chocolate pie in it, delivered by a fairy at the local bakery.

This little scene of Kirk calling the shots and Ruby's inability to resist paints a picture of the dynamic that plays out later on in the story.

In "Shawnees Never Quit," Alistair Bane recounts a time he was asked to sing a hymn in church.

I turned to the organist, who was waiting patiently. I was like, "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore, please, ma'am." She smiled, nodded. "Good selection." The music started, and about the place I felt like there should be some words, I started to sing. "Michael, row your boat ashore, hallelujah. Michael, row your

In her story "Before Fergus," Lynn Ferguson tells us about a takeout dinner that she and her husband will never forget.

We arrived back home, my husband decides he wants some take-out food. I have this bizarre thing where I want to do a pregnancy test. It's positive. So my husband arrives back with his little brown paper bag to be greeted with the immortal phrase, "Put your curry down, sweetheart, there's something really big I have to tell you!"

Lynn uses the simplicity of this scene to underscore a moment that changes the trajectory of her whole family.

In her story "Cast in Bronze," Trina Michelle Robinson talks about researching her ancestors and describes a scene from her journey to Kentucky to retrace their steps.

We finally get to the homestead where my family was enslaved. We get out of the car, and everything is largely overgrown with wild flowers and tall grass. Scott [our guide], he starts pointing everything out to me, like where the main house used to be, the native grass and plants and trees, just so I can get an idea of what my family would have seen. There were these beautiful ancient oak trees and cherry trees and goldenrod. It was fall, so things were starting to fade, but when they were hit by the sun they were just so beautiful. I hated it, because how could beauty live here?

Scenes like Trina's keep us present. They drop us into the story and let us experience it. Because we can envision the sun on the goldenrod, we can better understand her struggle to reconcile the physical beauty with the historical ugliness. Which of your stepping stones could be told in a scene? Perhaps you start with a particularly exciting moment in your life or getting some surprising news—for example, the day you discovered you had a winning lottery scratch ticket. Push in and describe the actual moment:

- Where were you?
- Do you always buy a scratch ticket on the same day at the same location?
- Were you alone or with friends?
- Did you believe it, or did you have to ask someone to look at it and tell you it was true?
- Were you stunned into silence, or did you do a rowdy victory dance?
- Then what happened?

... And so on and so on.

GIVING SPACE TO A MOMENT

Scenes can be drawn from the active moments, places where something happens in your story and you want to slow down and explore. For instance, if your story begins with you quitting your job, don't just tell us you quit. Show us where you were—sitting anxiously in your boss's office or losing your cool next to a frozen yogurt machine that just erupted with raspberry swirl. Was there a phone ringing or a kid standing nearby laughing uncontrollably? What happened next? Did you stumble over your words, or did you take off that purple apron covered in yogurt and throw it on the floor before you stormed out?

In "Rich City Skater," Jacoby Cochran drops us right into the moment he's called to perform in the high-stakes world of competitive roller-skating circa 1990.

Now, if you've never been roller-skating in your life, a National Party is like the Grammys of roller-skating. I'm talking about some of the greatest roller skaters in America, all in one place, showing off their moves, their music, their style. At that moment, we were going through a roll call, which means every city comes on the floor and represents. So, you got people from Texas doing the

when you look back at all the different jobs, there has to be some connection. What did you learn in one experience that narrowed down what you wanted to do next?

When Travis Coxson, The Moth's executive assistant and office coordinator, applied for his job, he had just spent years traveling as a stage manager for Broadway tours. We worried that he'd miss being on the road. But in his interview he told us that when the pandemic shut down theaters, he was suddenly at home for long stretches of time. He found he loved quiet mornings with his longtime partner. What used to be a crash pad became a home. He settled into a routine and realized how much more grounded he felt. He wanted to pivot, and find a way to use his organizational skills for live theatrical events without living out of a suitcase. His story resonated with us, and we offered him the job. ⁽A person who can turn job changes into narrative stepping stones that relate to one another will distinguish themselves.) Telling the larger story of your work thus far is an impressive way to show the prospective employer who you are and why you are the perfect person for this role.

FINDING THE SCENES

Finding the scenes in your story brings it to life. What do these moments look like cinematically, as little movies? Reconstruct them in your mind and recount them vividly, so we can see and experience them with you.

In "My Dangerous Beauty Mission," Esther Ngumbi describes a familiar rite of passage: ear piercing.

I was growing up in a Kenyan village where there's no Walmart or Claire's to go get my ears pierced, so I had to do it the old school way. I locked the door, and I took that needle and thread, and I

placed the wall mirror so that I could see what I was doing. I start pushing the needle and I'm feeling pain, but my pain is overshadowed by the beautiful Esther I'm imagining I will look like. Oh, my first kiss, my first boyfriend! After a minute the needle pierces through my earlobe. I tie the thread and I repeat the process. I start pushing again. And after what seems like eternity, my second ear is done. I take a big sigh and take a minute to appreciate my beautiful me.

By bringing us into this detailed scene, she makes the audience feel both the pain and the joy she experiences from taking matters into her own hands.

In "This Is Going to Suck," Matthew Dicks tells us about being sent to the emergency room after a near-fatal car accident.

A nurse comes over and asks me for my phone number, and I give her my parents' number. Then I give her the number for McDonald's, because I'm supposed to be working that night. She scoffs at it, but I say, "No, that drive-through does not run well without me, and they're gonna have to get someone in," and, bless her heart, she calls McDonald's. My parents, they don't show up. I find out later that when they heard I was stable, they went to check the car out first. I'm waiting for a surgeon, because it's December 23 and they're hard to find, and I'm feeling alone. But I'm not alone, because when she called McDonald's to tell them I was out, those people started calling other people, and the waiting room is now filling up with sixteen- and seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids. They roll my gurney to the other side of the emergency room and they open a door, and one by one each of my friends stands in the door, and they wave and they give me the thumbs-up, and they say stupid things to make me laugh.

Matthew could have just said, "My parents were absent and so my coworkers and classmates became my chosen family." Instead he lets us experience the beauty of that realization with him.

we would live on this farm and everything we needed would come from the farm. And if we couldn't get it from that farm, then we would barter for it.

And she throws in a little scene to illustrate.

I can still see my father standing there with a piece of rotten fruit that we had gotten from a dumpster behind the Jack & Jill grocery store. And he'd say, "Jackie, look at this. Seventy-five percent of this pear is good, and someone's thrown it away." Then he'd cut off the bad part and we'd eat it. He just had this way of looking at the world.

She continues, summarizing the plan to rescue newborn calves, raise them, and sell them at auction, explaining how feedlots work. She weaves in scenes to illustrate how they put the plan into action and the obstacles they encountered, including the 1980 farm crisis.

Then Jackie brings the story to a close with one final big scene at the cattle auction after her father shares her story with his fellow farmers, many of whom are struggling financially themselves.

And that sale starts, and herd after herd is just coming through this sale ring, and the price is so low that they're practically giving these cattle away. And I get that feeling in my stomach that's just tightening because my fate is kind of marching toward me. And my herd comes into that ring. Those farmers started bidding, and then they kept on bidding. And they started bidding on those cattle like they were some kind of prize breeding stock. And that price, it went so far beyond what those cattle were worth, because those farmers were voicing their approval of my ability to try and pull myself up and pay off these bills. And they voiced that approval with wallets that had been emptied in this farm crisis. They didn't give to me from their surplus, they gave to me from their hearts. And I walked away with enough money, and paid that hospital bill off in full.

She lands her story with a final summary, including her reflection looking back on the experience.

A couple weeks later, I graduated high school, and my daughter and I took off out of western Nebraska, and I went on to earn a college degree. I joined the army, and I was awarded a bronze star for my actions in Desert Storm. I have been able to travel the world, and I have seen magnificent things, but a part of my heart has never left western Nebraska. It will always remain with the farmers who gave me a chance in life.

As the storyteller, you are in charge of how you use scenes, summaries, and reflections. You are driving this tour bus through your story, and you choose which scenes your "passengers" see—what we cruise past or where we pull over for a closer look. If your story is about applying for your dream job as a law clerk, it's probably okay to skip the fact that your parents ran a clown school. Or maybe, for the purposes of the story you are trying to tell, that is *exactly* where you metaphorically stop the bus and have everyone get out and take a closer look. "I had learned to walk on my hands but couldn't figure out how to put on a tie that didn't squirt water."

SARAH ON STORIES DURING JOB INTERVIEWS: My father spent his career in executive leadership, and he believes in connecting the dots on your résumé through story. He says, "When you look at your résumé, what did you learn in each position that led you to the next? What is the story arc of your career, and why is this new position the right next step?" For example: Maybe you were a bassoonist who then became a conductor and then ultimately interviewed to become a music educator because you wanted to inspire more young people to choose a career path of music. You might not know where the story of your career is going, but

Once you have all your stepping stones in order, you may find that you can completely skip some. Sometimes you need to see everything to realize the fastest path to where you're going. You can often jump-cut from one plot point to another without hurting the story. We don't need to see you measuring flour and mixing the batter, just take the cake out of the oven.

We'll talk about various structures you can use in a later chapter, but for now, as you're beginning to build your story, you just need to identify the important pieces of information. Which parts of your story absolutely must have close-up detail, and which parts can you condense?

In a Moth story, the teller uses three elements to get us from beginning to end:

1. **SCENES** illustrate parts of the story that are both compelling and critical to the arc. The climax of the story is almost always a scene.
2. **SUMMARIES** move us through the time line and connect us to the next step ("three weeks later," "after a lot of trial and error," "I completed my master's degree and was finally ready," "two kids and a mortgage later . . .").
3. **REFLECTIONS** share your feelings and insights about what you learned, concluded, deduced, decided to change, or accepted.

In Jackie's story, outlined earlier, she opens with a short scene of the inciting incident that sets the stage for the rest of the story.

In 1979, I was standing in the dining room of our western Nebraska farmhouse, and I was crying. I was telling my mom and dad that I was pregnant.

Her opening scene places us firmly in the moment and introduces the stakes of the story right out of the gate. She goes on to

summarize her father's reaction and then takes us quickly to the next scene.

It was my father who brought my daughter to my bedside, and he placed her in my arms, and he said, "Jackie, here's your daughter, and you do the very best you can with her. But no matter how hard you try, you're going to mess her up." He said, "We all do. But if you love her and you let her know how much you love her, she'll forgive you."

She reflects on her feelings.

The easy part was loving this baby. From the minute I held her, I loved her more than I loved life itself. And I knew that she and I were going to fight our way through this world.

She then summarizes the context of the life that she settled into.

I'd get up in the morning and I would do chores, and then I would go off to band practice and to school. And I would race home after school to see her before I went off to work at Wendy's. At night, I would come home and I would do the chores for the night and start my homework. And I would learn to sleep with that little baby right here in the crook of my arm. It wasn't easy, but I felt like I was keeping my head above water until that wave of hospital bills hit, and they were enormous.

She provides context and important backstory about how she was raised.

My dad was the kind of man who loved democracy, and he loved children, and he respected people who made an honest living with their hands. But he hated capitalism, and he distrusted institutions, and he was scornful of a wasteful society. So he had said that

making a list of bullet points that includes not only specific moments but also the backstory and important thoughts or realizations that lead you to the climax and resolution at the end.

But remember: Moth stories are *not* all plot (this happened, and then, can you believe this happened?); they always alternate between action and reflection. The action may take the form of a specific moment (or scene) or perhaps a series of moments. Reflection may include reactions to what is taking place (i.e., thoughts and feelings), or it may be background information that helps us to better understand the action and the stakes involved.

Each of these beats is a potential stepping stone in your story. It's a little like an outline; every step is important to the narrative flow. If you leave any one of them out, the story will be tough to follow.

Have you ever heard a story and thought, *Wait, how did they get there?* Were you confused by some detail that suddenly seemed important to the story? Chances are the teller missed a narrative step. If the story starts with you flat broke in Detroit but in the next scene you are suddenly shopping for fancy perfumes in Paris, the audience will be confused. You have to include the scene where you get that big unexpected tax refund right after your girlfriend tells you it's her dream to see the Eiffel Tower.

As you share the story, it's as if you, the storyteller, are driving a car, and we, the audience, are in the passenger seat. You know exactly where you're going, and which turns to take. Some houses you just drive by en route to the next turn. But sometimes you slow down and stop to tell us about what we're seeing and maybe how the person who lived in that house was the only person who really *saw* you for who you are.

You do not need to literally include every step of the journey or every turn you took along the way. Jump cuts are allowed! You can tell us about the car ride without including that you got in the car, put the keys in the ignition, started the car, put it into reverse, and backed out of the driveway. You just need to think about the important steps that will take us through your story. What info do we need to know to understand the bigger picture?

For example, take Jackie Andrews's story "Feedlot Calves," about getting pregnant at sixteen and struggling to make ends meet, but succeeding with the help of the community. The stepping stones might go something like this:

- Jackie opens in her family's dining room, telling her parents she's pregnant and wants to keep the baby.
- Next, we are in the hospital, where Jackie is holding her newborn daughter for the first time, realizing how much she loves her, and how determined she is that they will make their way in the world together.
- She gives us the context of her daily life, successfully juggling high school, chores, and a job at Wendy's, all while caring for her daughter.
- She explains how her ability to care for her daughter was challenged when a wave of hospital bills started to arrive, and she couldn't pay them on her salary at Wendy's; she had to find another source of support.
- She provides context and backstory that show how she was raised by a fiercely independent father who would not allow her to seek public assistance.
- Then she introduces her father's detailed plan to rescue newborn calves from feedlots, raise them, and sell them at auction (including important background info on how feedlots work).
- She tells us the farm crisis hits, and the price of cattle plummets (important context that raises the stakes).
- In the end, she takes us to the auction, where the mood is ominous. But when Jackie's father tells other farmers about her efforts to pay her bills, they are deeply impressed. Despite their hardships, they bid high, and Jackie earns the money she needs.
- The resolution comes when Jackie is able to pay all of her bills and expresses her deep and lasting gratitude for the community who rallied to help her.

DIRECTOR'S NOTES

- Ask yourself: What are the stakes of your story? What did you feel you stood to lose or gain as a result? What did you most want/need/must have/couldn't live without? Remember, stakes show us why you care, which tells us why we should care.
- Does your story go beyond anecdote? You might have dramatic details or a string of amusing events, but it must go deeper! Ask yourself why this moment left a lasting effect on you so you can transform your anecdote into a story.
- What is the arc of your story? Who were you at the beginning and who were you at the end? How were you changed? How do you live your life differently as a result of the events in the story?
- What is the story ultimately about for you? How would you distill it down into one sentence? Remember, you can tell various stories using similar events—boiling it down to one sentence will give you the focus and clarity to guide and shape the story you want to tell.

CHAPTER 5

THE MATERIALS

When I first speak to a new storyteller, I ask them dozens of questions. We talk through what stories they might want to tell, and I want to hear every detail. I sometimes refer to this as “dumping their bag out on the bed.” We sift through everything, then decide what to keep and what to toss.

—CATHERINE BURNS

As you continue to build your story, you'll need supplies. Good news: You have everything you need, but you're going to have to scrounge around in the beautiful junkyard of your memory to find the pieces. Get out your metal detector. We're digging for treasure, but we'll hit a lot of pennies and bottle caps along the way.

NARRATIVE STEPPING STONES

You may know where the story starts and where it ends, but between those two points are a thousand choices. What critical pieces of the narrative puzzle do we need in order to follow along? Try