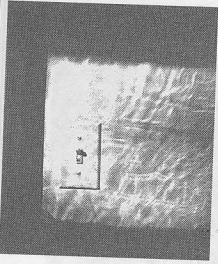


One

When the Subject Is "I"



Personal narratives are stories that tap into an individual's life experiences. In such stories, writers recapture memorable moments—trips, accidents, first loves, family stories. Whatever the subject matter, personal narratives have one thing in common—the story is told with “I,” the first-person point of view. Why would anyone write about events they have already lived? How do these stories of self get told in effective ways? To begin, read the following excerpt from Isabel Allende's autobiographical work, *Paula*.

from *Paula* by Isabel Allende

← Response notes →

I place one hand over my heart, close my eyes, and concentrate. There is something dark inside. At first it is like the night air, transparent shadow, but soon it is transformed into impenetrable lead. I try to lie calmly and accept the blackness that fills my inner being as I am assaulted by images from the past. I see myself before a large mirror. I take one step backward, another, and with each step decades are erased and I grow smaller, until the glass returns the reflection of a seven-year-old girl. Me.

It has been raining for several days; I am leaping over puddles, my leather bag bouncing against my back. I am wearing a blue coat that is too large for me and a felt hat pulled down to my ears; my shoes are sodden. The huge wooden entry door, swollen by rain, is stuck; it takes all my weight to pull it open. In the garden of my grandfather's house is a gigantic poplar with roots growing above the ground, a scrawny sentinel standing guard over property that appears abandoned—shutters hanging from their hinges, paint peeling from walls. Outdoors it is just getting dark, but inside it is already deepest night. All the lights are off except in the kitchen. I walk through the garage toward the light. The walls of the cavernous kitchen are spotted with grease, and large blackened saucepans and spoons hang from iron hooks. One or two fly-specked lightbulbs cast a dull light on the scene. Something is bubbling in a pot and the kettle is whistling; the room smells of onion, and an enormous refrigerator purrs in a corner. Margara, a large woman, with strong Indian features and a thin braid wound around her head, is listening to a serial on the radio. My brothers are sitting at the table with cups of hot cocoa and buttered bread. Margara does not look up. “Go see your mother, she's in bed again,” she scolds. I take off my coat and hat. “Don't strew your things about; I'm not your slave, I don't have to pick up after you.” She turns up the volume on the radio. I leave the kitchen and confront the darkness in the rest of the house. I feel for the light switch and a pale glow barely fills the hall with its several doors. A claw-footed table holds the marble bust of a pensive girl; there is a mirror with a heavy wood frame, but I don't look because the Devil might be reflected in it. I shiver as I climb the stairs; currents of air swirl through an incomprehensible hole in the strange architecture. Clinging to the handrail, I reach the second floor. The climb seems interminable. I am aware of silence and shadows. I walk to the closed

from *Paula* by Isabel Allende

door at the end of the hall and tiptoe in without knocking. A stove furnishes the only illumination; the ceilings are covered with the accumulation of years of paraffin soot. There are two beds, a bunk, a sofa, tables and chairs—it is all I can do to make my way through the furniture. My mother, with Pelvina López-Pun asleep at her feet, is lying beneath a mountain of covers, her face half-hidden on the pillow: straight nose, high cheekbones, pallid skin, finely drawn eyebrows above closed eyes. “Is it you?” A small, cold hand reaches out for mine.

“Does it hurt a lot, Mama?”

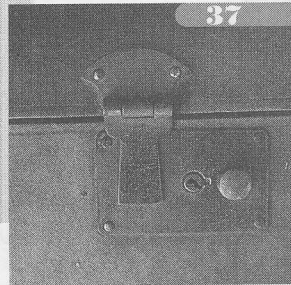
“My head is bursting.”

“I’ll go get you a glass of warm milk and tell my brothers not to make any noise.”

“Don’t leave. Stay here with me. Put your hand on my forehead, that helps.”

I sit on the bed and do as she asks, trembling with sympathy, not knowing how to free her from that crushing pain. Blessed Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, Amen. If she dies, my brothers and I are lost; they will send us to my father. The mere idea terrifies me. Margara is always telling me that if I don’t behave I will have to go live with him. Could it be true? I have to find out, but I don’t dare ask my mother, it would make her headache worse. I mustn’t add to her worries or the pain will grow until her head explodes. I can’t mention it to Tata, either, no one may speak my father’s name in his presence. “Papa” is a forbidden word, and anyone who says it stirs up a hornet’s nest. I’m hungry, I want to go down to the kitchen and drink my cocoa, but I must not leave my mother, and besides, I don’t have the courage to face Margara. My shoes are wet and my feet feel like ice. I stroke my mother’s poor head and concentrate: everything depends on me now. If I don’t move, and pray hard, I can make the pain go away.

← Response notes →



◆ Begin with a word that accurately describes the strongest impression, image, or reaction that you had while reading this incident. Then, write about how that word helps explain what you find most interesting and effective in Allende’s story.
