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Resource material for the NAMW Teleseminar:

The Secret of Writing Fast, Writing Deep: A Mini-Workshop for Memoir Writers

Hi NAMW Members,

I'm delighted to have an opportunity to talk with you in an NAMW teleseminar. When I teach the material that I'm sharing, I always take breaks so that students can write briefly after each major presentation point. That's a great way to learn and see the process we call Writing Alchemy in action.

Of course, in a teleseminar that isn't possible. So I've put together some materials that will help to fill the gap. I asked one of our Writing Alchemy students, Stephanie Dalley, if we could use her class assignments and she was delighted to let you see them. She knows she has more work to do, but she's making good progress.

What she has written will make sense after the teleseminar and you may even want to wait to read this until you are listening to the teleseminar. I'll make references to these examples during our time together. So you might want to print this PDF or just have it open on your screen.

Here's what you have:

Section 1. In Section 1, you'll find 5 separate views of a scene in the memoir Stephanie is writing. Each time she looks at this scene, she focuses on just one of the five elements of writing—Characters, Emotions, Dialogue, Five Senses, Time/Place. Looking at a scene this way is what we call Deconstruction and I'll talk more about that process in the audio.

Section 2. In Section 2, you'll find Stephanie's story for this scene. She put it together using a process we call Construction. Again, don't worry it this doesn't make

sense right now. I'll talk about the entire process and show you how to get started using this revolutionary new approach to writing. We'll have lots to talk about as we look at what Stephanie's done with the material she developed during Deconstruction.

Section 3. At Women's Memoirs, my partner Kendra Bonnett and I have three free ebooks and some writing videos that you may find helpful. To make it easy for you to get them, we've put them together on a new page just for you. It's called: <http://WomensMemoirs.com/namw> And at the end of the teleseminar, I'm going to tell you about a special offer if you decide you want to pursue using Writing Alchemy. In fact, you will be the first to know about the offer as we haven't even told the regulars on our website.

Matilda

Section I.

DECONSTRUCTION #1: Character Descriptions

ME.

I have long dark hair which I wear in a tight bun in the back of my head, dark complexion often mistaken for Mexican or Native American the truth is I'm an Italian girl from New Jersey. I am of average height and weight, wear no makeup and no jewelry. For the first interview I usually dressed casually in jeans, sweater and tennis shoes. Later in court and for interviews with the police I will up my wardrobe slightly to wearing nice pants, a jacket and pumps. I carry a large bag to hold the collection of clipboard, notebooks and pens that I typically take with me on an interview. I am experienced and yet I am not experienced with young children. I feel slightly out of my element, but at the same time pleased to be trusted with the assignment. I like to be confident as it gives me courage. After all, I am knocking on a stranger's door and it is always a little bit of a risk. I like to be methodical, being trained by one of the best it is imperative I don't form opinions, just ask the questions, listen for the answers and never pass judgment.

NURIA.

Nuria is Elena's mother and she answers the door at the first knock. She seems pleased to meet me -- almost excited I am there as if it was a social invitation. She is in her mid-

thirties although her face looks a lot older. She has long straight dirty blond hair, threadbare tee shirt, jeans and is shoeless. It is hard to recollect what she looks like as she seemed to be in constant motion, playing with her hair, foot taping, fiddling with her nails, and even we though the three of us were stuffed in this tiny trailer she had trouble sitting still for more than a couple of minutes, and would slide out from behind the table to reach over my head to a cabinet. She swore she had left something there. Turned completely around in a circle and then took her seat again. She was talkative, loud, interruptive and almost rude. When it looked as if Elena and I would have a minute to interact she would bounce in quickly to muddle it up.

ELENA.

Elena was the victim -- the designated client. She was small for a nine year old girl --the right size for the tiny trailer, not the right size to be a victim of sexual assault. She had a round pale face; hair like her mother's long straight not as dirty, more blonde. She studied my face as I came into the trailer; she rarely showed any emotion; she regarded her mother quietly accepting of her behavior, their gypsy lifestyle and sadly accepting of the incident that happened to her.

DECONSTRUCTION #2: Emotions

ME.

passionate
empathetic
calm
dedicated
strong and brave
resourceful
methodical
sad
angry
disgusted
uncomfortable
frustrated
uncertain
distressed
questioning
doubting

resentful

NURIA.

nervous
anxious
needy (for attention)
flashy
uncomfortable
distracted
jealous

ELENA.

nervous
sad
embarrassed
occasionally hopeful
frightened
melancholy
defeated
lonely
uneasy

DECONSTRUCTION #3: Dialogue

“Good afternoon Elena, I’m from the Victims Assistance Board”

“You remember that I told you, I told you Stephanie was coming?” Nuria interrupted

“You remember when we talked about what happened to you at the barn and I told you someone was coming to talk to you? You remember I told you it happened to Agnes too? Elena this is Stephanie. Stephanie is that woman who’s gonna help you.”

The only conversation I have with Elena is through her eyes acknowledging that I am there and that she knows who I am. Finally I find a place on the table to open my notebook and ask, “Elena would you be willing to answer some questions for me?” A very brief nod, her eyes are holding mine.

“Have you been to the place where this happened before?”

“Yeah, every day.” Nuria jumps in. “I go there to pick up Jimmy, you know Jimmy works for the tree service and all those guys get dropped off at the end of the day at that yard. We show up to pick up our men and while we’re waiting all the kids they go play in the barn.”

“The barn? The barn is in the yard?” I am looking at Elena but again Nuria answers.

“The barn’s at the back of the yard. That’s where the kids have a tire swing.”

I turned finally to Nuria this time with my question and ask, ”And can you see her from where you are?”

“Well the kids,” she says “the kids run into the barn, and then, and then, no I can’t see them inside the barn.”

“Elena is that where Mr. Gomez was on the day he hurt you? Did he also come into the barn?”

There is no verbal ascent just a nod of her head, as it sinks to her chest. Nuria is blessedly silent. But the baby sleeping behind my head starts to cry.

“I have the address of the yard and the barn,” I say wrapping up this visit. “I’m going over there to take a look at it tomorrow.” I start to say that I will call them and schedule another appointment and then I realized there is no phone and the only way to communicate is through the trailer park office. Rather than engage them I pull out my appointment book and ask Elena, “Can I meet with you the day after next?”
No surprises really. Nuria answers immediately, “Yes, yes, she can. Elena she can be ready for you Stephanie anytime.”

DECONSTRUCTION #4: The Senses

SIGHT:

It is gray, cloudy and depressing. The trailer park I have pulled into is mostly empty, that is because this campground is on a flood plane right next to the river and the rains will

start soon. The manager's office is a little brighter than the rest of the day, the manager herself couldn't be described as bright however, as I explain who I am looking for. She seems stuck, then after running both Elena and Nuria's name by her she points to the trailer. It is faded turquoise blue, one small window with two plastic chairs sitting outside and a stroller parked at an angle almost barricading the small door entirely.

I leave my car and walk across the park towards the river.

SOUND:

We are close to the road as well as the river and so traffic can be heard. In the trailer a couple of doors down there are several children playing, seeming to be having fun as it is laughter I last hear as I step inside the trailer.

SMELL:

There is always an earthy smell when you get close to the river. I know as I live near the river myself – farther off. There is also a smell of grease ... breakfast sausage, I think, that seems to linger between the campers and a smell of laundry detergent coming from the small laundromat.

TOUCH:

I am out of my car and the air touches my face and hands. As I am knocking on the managers glass window to get her attention – I feel the bump of my tote bag on my hip. As I walk across the pavement, I feel the gravel under my feet through my sneakers as I walk towards Elena and Nuria's trailer.

DECONSTRUCTION #5: Time and Place

It is mid-November in Northern California, a month before the rains come even though it is gray this particular day. There was no sun or warmth. The trailer park is next to the Russian River, which heads out to the Pacific Ocean from here. Actually the coast is less than 30 minutes away, although from this trailer park it could have been 500 miles away.

SECTION 2

Justice in the Making

Stephanie Dalley

She held my hand. That was my job, I thought. I was the hand-holder, and the hand I held that day was very small. It was my job to make Elena feel safe in the large, noisy courtroom that morning. She held tight to my hand, like we had planned. This was the day, and she was ready.

But then we'd had time to get ready. It had been almost a year ago, late November in Cloverdale, a small town in California on the Russian River, when I first walked across the campground parking lot to meet Elena and her mom Nuria for the first time.

My name is Stephanie and I'm in my 30's, a recently divorced woman with long dark hair that I usually keep in a tight bun at the back of my neck. With my dark hair and dark complexion, I'm often mistaken for Mexican or Native American; truth is I'm an Italian girl from Jersey who relocated to California about ten years ago, in 1982, because at the time it seemed easier than getting a divorce. For the most part, I had fallen in love with Northern California--the weather, the redwoods, and the coast--not so much with the easy, laid-back California lifestyle. I still held on to my Jersey accent and attitude, which was why I was good at this job as a hand-holder, a safeguarder, a champion, a buddy.

After my initial conversation with Nuria over the phone, she thought that my interview and questioning of Elena would be better handled at home, where Elena would feel comfortable and safe. On this late November day, the campground was mostly deserted, the sky was gray and holding back the rains that would come soon. They always do. And then the river floods; it always does--probably one of the reasons that the campground was so empty.

Nuria had given me vague directions: "It's the 4th trailer, past the rec room, site number 171." To my surprise, I found it easily--a small turquoise travel trailer circa 1950's. I could just picture it brand new and shiny with Lucy and Ricky Ricardo taking their first vacation. But I have a rich imagination. In fact, what I really approached was a small,

battered, faded blue trailer, with one small window covered with layers of dust. Outside were two plastic chairs and a stroller parked at an angle as if they were barricading the small door entirely. And maybe after the incident with Elena, that's just what they were doing. A sexual trauma is very hard on the victims, but also on the parents, who feel lost, uncertain, and unsure. I felt a little uneasy myself, as I had never worked with a client this young, and yet a little pleased that the manager of our agency had chosen me to take the case.

I navigated around the stroller and knocked on the door. Nuria opened it immediately. She seemed almost excited that I was there.

“Come in. Come in, Stephanie.” Nuria remembered my name from yesterday’s phone conversation, and she continued to use it throughout the visit as if it was the name of a superior court judge who’d come by for the visit and not me--an advocate who’s only claim to fame was having a lot of passion for what I did. What I did, I told myself, was put the bad guys away.

Once I stepped inside, I realized there was nowhere for me to go. In front of me was a large table covered with paper, crayons, baby toys, and cigarettes. A bench ran along one side of the table, and tucked in the corner of this bench, almost hidden behind a box of cookies, sat Elena. I smiled and started to introduce myself. “Hi Elena. My name is Stephanie, and I’m from the Victims Assistance Board.”

“You remember that I told you?” Nuria chimed in. “I told you that Stephanie was coming to help you. You remember right, Elena?” But she didn’t stop there. “You remember when we talked about what happened to you at the barn? And I told you it wasn’t right?”

I was beginning to feel uncomfortable. I am the one who came to do the interview, but already Nuria was taking over, putting words in her daughter’s mouth. I was worried that if I didn’t take control--and now--Elena would shut down entirely, which to be fair, I wondered if she hadn’t already done so. Other than a slight nod of the head when I came in, Elena had not said a word.

I grabbed the moment. “Elena first of all I wanted to thank you for your willingness to help me.” I tore off a sheet of paper from my notebook--one I had prepared in advance--and handed it across the table. “Elena, this is my name and phone number. I want you to contact me at any time, with any concerns, and please put it somewhere where you won’t lose it.” I handed a second, similar paper with the same information to Mom.

I sat down on a wooden crate across the table from Elena, and looked directly into her eyes in a effort to slow the pace down. “Now Elena in a couple of minutes I’m going to be asking you several questions, but first I want to answer any questions you might have.”

Elena was unresponsive although it seemed like she sat up a little bit taller as if to say I’m ready. I asked first about some safety concerns she might have.

“Do you feel safe at home?”

She gave a small nod of her head.

“And what about the classroom. Do you feel safe there?”

Again, all I got was a nod.

Finally I move a few items on the table and make enough space to open my notebook. With my pen in hand, I continued, “Elena are you ready to answer some questions about that day?”

Nuria who had managed to be quiet for a few minutes now suddenly remembered something she needed, and it was in the cabinet above my head. So for a few minutes we waited as she rooted around only to fall back onto the bench her hands empty. As small as the trailer was, I sensed she could not sit still for more than a few minutes, flipping her hair and tapping her nails on the tabletop. She is, I think, about the same age as I, although her face looks older. She is in jean shorts, a threadbare tee and barefooted. Not able to filter well, she asks in front of her child, “Well, have they arrested him yet?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “It takes a lot of good evidence if they want to prosecute him, and that’s what my job is here today, to assist Elena, to give me her story, and perhaps we will uncover some evidence that will put this guy away.”

Jeez, sometimes I sounded so Jersey it was ridiculous.

“Elena, have you been to the place where this happened before?”

Nuria jumps in, “Yeah every day. I go there to pick up Jimmy, you know Jimmy works for the tree service and all those guys get dropped off at the end of the day at that yard. We go to pick up our men and while we’re waiting all the kids they go play in the barn.”

I look at Elena again, “And the barn? Is this barn in the yard?”

Nuria doesn't disappoint me. She is snapping gum, shaking her head, and pointing in the direction of what appears to be the yard in her mind. "That's where the kids have a tire swing." Her answers are rapid fire. She takes no time for a breath.

I change my approach and direct my next question to Nuria. I turn and look directly at her and ask, "And can you see her from where you are?"

Nuria pauses for a minute. "Well, the kids..." she says. "The kids run into the barn and then no I can't see them at all." She has lowered her voice, I feel her spirit slacken, troubled.

It starts to make my skin crawl thinking about how some monster sneaked up on these girls while they were playing in the barn.

I brought my mind back to the job at hand. I had to get Nuria to allow me to work directly with Elena. I decided to be understanding but direct. "Nuria, I know how overwhelming this must be for you. The system moves slowly, and you want him put away yesterday. Frankly so do I, and like I said a lot depends on Elena helping me by remembering that day." I wondered how much more I would need to spell it out for her; she needed to let me do my work. Then she stood turned around in a complete circle and then sat back down again. She reminded me of a dog searching for just the right spot on the floor to nap, going around in a circle only to lie back down in the exact same spot.

I had always prided myself in being methodical in my interview process and in building a bridge between myself and the client. So far this case had me questioning my skills.

"Elena was Mr. Gomez in the barn the day he hurt you?" There is no verbal assent just a nod that sinks her chin into her chest.

"Can you think of anything unusual he was doing when he came into the barn?"

A slight shaking of her head.

"Did other people see him come into the barn?"

A small shrug of her shoulders.

What did you think would happen if you didn't go sit "with" him?

"I don't know," she said in a tiny voice.

Her answers continued, all one line whispers or nods of her head. I knew reliving this experience was a hard thing to do. Today was just the beginning. We would have to do it over and over again until we were ready.

A baby who had been sleeping overhead started to cry. I closed up my notebook. “Your sister?” I asked. Elena shakes her head no, and for the first time speaks up in a strong voice, “My brother.” And just like that, I can hear the love, and realize that she will do just fine. It will be a lot of hard work but we will be ready.

Section 3. Feebies for You

To check out our free ebooks and videos, just go to:

<http://WomensMemoirs.com/namw>

You can sign up for as many or as few as you want.

Linda Joy and I have been friends since 2006 when memoir writing brought us together. Because of this friendship, I’m going to let you know about a special Cyber Monday offer before anyone else knows about it. Below, I’ve given you a line where you can write the url link so that you can go check it out. I’ve give you the link at the end of the teleseminar.

Special offer link: _____