I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it. Although it lingered in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist. Houses have crumbled in my memory as soundlessly as they did in mute films of yore, and the portrait of my old French governess, who I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast, now that it is engulfed in a description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own. The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle.

A large woman, a very stout woman, Mademoiselle rolled into our existence in December 1905 when I was six and my brother five. There she is. I see so plainly her abundant dark hair, brushed up high and covertly graying; the three wrinkles on her austere forehead; her beetling brows; the steely eyes behind the black-rimmed prince-nez; that vestigial mustache; that blotchy complexion, which in moments of wrath develops an additional flush in the region of the third, and amplest, chin so regally spread over the frilled mountain of her blouse. And now she sits down, or rather she tackles the job of sitting down, the jelly of her jowl quaking, her prodigious posterior, with the three buttons on the side, lowering itself warily; then, at the last second, she surrenders her bulk to the wicker armchair, which, out of sheer fright, bursts into a salvo of crackling.
Even the name “Memoir” suggests memory and by extension suggests two places in time, that of the person remembering and that of the person who is featured in what is recalled, usually, the “I” of the story.

I chose an excerpt of Nabakov’s “Speak, Memory” because of the way the narrator decides to work with this temporal split. As you probably noticed the first paragraph is the person looking back and in that section the narrator is in past tense: “I have often noticed...” but from the section that begins with the delightful “There she is,” we are in present tense. Our goal in this course is to read as writers, meaning that we want to look at the technique used by the narrator and ask, why? Why did they decide to do it that, when they could have done it so many different ways? And I find this particularly exciting because Nabokov has inverted what would normally be the case where the present time, the vantage point where the author is reflecting might be present and the events remembered in the past.

Before we answer that question let’s set forth some descriptions that will allow us to talk about elements of craft with greater precision. At the Writers Studio we separate the two temporal stances into the older narrator, which would be the person looking back, and the younger narrator, which refers to that younger version of themselves featured in the scene remembered. Additionally, we say that in prose and poetry, as indeed in memoir, there are four building blocks: summary, description, action and dialogue.

For the purposes of Nabokov, we don’t need to concern ourselves with dialogue since he doesn’t use any in this excerpt. But he does use summary and that is very important. We will define summary as either opinion, or exposition, maybe even thought, but as that part of the prose or poem that does not exist in a physical scene. Often it feels subjective, as it does here in Nabakov’s opening where he is describing a very peculiar development that he
has noticed. He tells us in the opening paragraph that when he borrows attributes from someone he knew in real life and gives those attribute to a character in his novels, from then on, those attributes attach more to the invented character than to the person he drew them from.

What we are getting in that opening paragraph is summary. An older narrator is telling us about a phenomenon from a vantage point quite distant from the scene he will give us with Mademoiselle. The implication is that he has over time processed what happened back then and is giving us the perspective that developed as a result of thinking about those times. This approach is essential in memoir since most memoir gives us the story of someone, the “I” character, who over a period of time, came to understand events that profoundly affected them during their life.

I say “I” character with great deliberation because when we talk about memoir we are invariably talking about a first person Persona Narrator. As you know Persona Narrator is the term we use at the Writers Studio to describe the storytelling voice. And when we talk about all first person Persona Narrators we talk about what we consider to be the most important objectives in first person writing: namely to create a voice on the page. To give the reader the sense of a personality that is speaking to them and one which hopefully the reader wants to continue to hang with, because they are charming, or quirky or insightful. The second objective we talk about is the notion that the Persona Narrator is always revealing the “I”. And a third objective or inquiry is to look at how the Narrator showed the vulnerability of that “I”.

At this point a disclaimer is in order. Nabokov is an unusual case. The actual title of the book is “Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited.” Unlike most memoirists we will look at Nabokov was already famous by the time he wrote this. He had published “Lolita” and was a renown and controversial figure in literature. He did not, therefore, need to earn
the attention of the reader in quite the same way others do. People read “Speak Memory,” because they already knew who he was and wanted to know more about him. I think the ramification of this is that Nabokov was not under quite the pressure to either reveal the character or to demonstrate vulnerability as others have been.

From the section in the excerpt that starts with “There she is” Nabokov drops us into this extraordinary scene and begins to rely far less on summary than on description and action. The description is wonderful, so detailed and precise that we would have to say it feels celebratory. Look at: *that blotchy complexion, which in moments of wrath develops an additional flush in the region of the third, and amplest, chin so regally spread over the frilled mountain of her blouse.*

But while the description is wonderful it is also active. We are witnessing a most extraordinary action, the lowering of Mademoiselle’s magnificent posterior into a wicker chair. I point that out because as a piece of characterization, it is active. We often find descriptions in fiction that halt the action. “He was five feet nine with wavy black hair and a fencing scar on his left cheek.” While it attempts to be vivid, the character isn’t doing anything and therefore in contrast to Mademoiselle we don’t learn as much as about either how the “I” feels about the scene or about Mademoiselle herself.

Remember the definition of the older and younger narrator. This is something we will spend a lot of time on. What we must stay focused on here in this second paragraph is that while the scene is being witnessed by a young boy, the younger Nabokov, the description is far too sophisticated to be the way he, when he saw her lowering herself into that chair, would have been able to describe her. Not only that, the Persona Narrator gives himself the freedom to become omniscient. An omniscient narrator is one that has the freedom to change perspective and enter the consciousness of anything. Here to make the scene more dramatic and more fun, Nabakov’s PN momentarily pretends to take on the
point of view of both Mademoiselle’s posterior and the poor chair into which it will be lowered: *her prodigious posterior, with the three buttons on the side, lowering itself warily; then, at the last second, she surrenders her bulk to the wicker armchair, which, out of sheer fright.*

Continuing with this parsing of perspectives we want to ask ourselves who is inflecting the scene, the younger narrator or the older narrator? We know that the diction comes from the older narrator but so in turn does the feeling. The older narrator is generously embellishing what the younger narrator saw and that is what makes the scene so moving. The vividness of the description informs us of its importance to the older narrator. Now we learned in the first paragraph in summary but here in the description and the way it is rendered we get that Nabokov is recovering his past, a past which he has discovered is slipping away. If we had to talk about the big story, we would say this is an excerpt about the lost Eden of Nabakov’s past.

In the book Nabokov waxes about his love for recovering the past. He tells us that there are few greater pleasures for him than sitting around a recalling people and places and events in great detail. Some of the poignancy, of course, comes from the fact that he and his family had to free the Russian Revolution and could never return. He then has the intensity and nostalgia of the ex-pat.

But we are going to use him to develop our capacity for recalling the past.

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Exercise: This will be an unusual exercise because I will not only tell you what I would like you to write but also how I would like you to approach it. The main objective of the exercises is to help train you to work with your memory as a writer. The broad outlines of
the subject of the exercise is to take a scene from your past featuring a character who in the scheme of things is relatively minor, that is not your parents nor your siblings, nor grandparents but a character who nonetheless had an influence on you. Perhaps this is a coach or a priest or an older boy or girl in the neighborhood. You want someone who assisted your creation of your identity. You want to imagine them in an active scene such as Nabokov’s Mademoiselle.

But here is what I want you to do. I want you to write free-hand, i.e. not on a computer, four pages just describing that scene. I want you to capture, before you worry about shaping the scene, all the physical details. What was the light like, the smells, the sounds, all of, every last details you can summon from memory. Look for the kind of details that Nabokov finds. Think of this as a sketch.

Once you have done that, then take those notes and incorporate them into the form of the Nabokov exercise where in the first paragraph(s) you use the past tense to explain in summary what the significance of what we are about to see is. This is the perspective of the older narrator who knows whereof he/she speaks. I don’t want you to write this before you do the notes because something unexpected might come out of the notes. Then alert us to the change and switch to present tense for the description of the event. Now we don’t know that Nabokov actually witnessed that scene so you should feel free to come up with a scene the represents the truth of that relationship.

We are looking at most for two pages, double spaced.