

Growing Up Together

Family Memories I Carry

Learn...Wow! My Story - Fictional Sample Interview

This fictional interview demonstrates how a conversation about family memories can become a personal keepsake book. Susan and her family are invented for this example.

Interviewer: Susan, when you think about growing up with your family, what comes to mind first?

Susan: Our kitchen, actually. Which probably sounds funny when we're supposed to be talking about family highlights.

We had this kitchen table that was too big for the room. If someone needed to get past you, you had to pull your chair in. My mother was always saying, "Scoot in, please."

Dad sat near the window. My sister Linda and I fought over the other chair because whoever sat there could see the television in the living room.

I remember the trips, too. But that kitchen is where I see everybody first. Before we were all running in different directions.

Interviewer: What were your parents like?

Susan: Mom was the organizer. She remembered the towels, the birthdays, the permission slips. She'd have everything ready and then stand by the door waiting for the rest of us.

Dad was quieter. He wasn't someone who sat you down and talked about his feelings. He'd check your bicycle tires or come pick you up, even if you called late.

He could be impatient, though. Especially when we were getting ready to leave somewhere. Mom would say, "They're children, Frank. Give them a minute."

I don't want to make them sound perfect. They weren't. But we knew we could count on them.

Interviewer: You mentioned a beach trip. Is there one you remember especially well?

Susan: Yes. I was about eight, and Linda was five. We went to Ocean City, New Jersey. Dad wanted to leave early. He said we'd miss the traffic, although I think every other father had the same idea.

Mom packed sandwiches in a cooler. We stopped asking if we were there yet long enough to start asking when we could eat.

When we finally got out of the car, Dad had two folding chairs under one arm and bags hanging off the other. Linda wanted him to carry her.

He said, “You’ve got two perfectly good legs.”

Then he carried her anyway.

Interviewer: What do you remember once you reached the beach?

Susan: How hot the sand was. We kept trying to step in somebody else’s footprints, like that would help.

Dad took me into the water. I wanted to go, but once we were out there, I got scared. A wave hit me in the face, and I swallowed some water. I started crying.

He didn’t tell me to stop. He took my hand and said, “All right. We’ll stand here a minute.”

We stayed where I could touch the bottom. He showed me how to watch for the next wave.

I remember his hand more than anything else. It was so much bigger than mine.

That afternoon I wanted to go back in. Mom couldn’t believe it after all the fuss I’d made.

Interviewer: Did that moment mean something different to you as you got older?

Susan: Yes, especially after I had children.

You want your children to try things, but sometimes you’re in a hurry and forget how big everything feels to them.

Dad let me be scared for a minute. I don’t think he planned some lesson. He just knew I needed him to stand there.

He’s been gone a long time now. I’d forgotten about that part of the beach trip until we started talking.

[Susan pauses.]

Sorry. I wasn’t expecting that one to get me.

Interviewer: We can take a moment.

Susan: No, I’m okay. It’s a good memory. I’d like that in the book.

Interviewer: Let’s talk about the amusement park. What happened there?

Susan: That was a couple of years later. Our little brother, Michael, had arrived by then, and Mom spent part of the day pushing him around in a stroller.

Linda and I wanted to go on everything. Well, I said I did.

There was a ride that looked fine from the ground. Once we got closer and I could hear people screaming, I changed my mind.

Linda said, “You said you weren’t scared.”

That settled it. I couldn’t let my little sister win.

Dad went with me. I held the bar so tightly that my fingers hurt afterward. He kept laughing, which annoyed me at the time.

When we got off, he asked, "Again?"

I said, "Maybe later."

There was no later.

Interviewer: Was there a favorite part of that day?

Susan: Dad trying to win Linda a stuffed dog.

He kept missing, and Mom kept telling him we could probably buy one for less money.

But he'd decided he was going to win it. You could see that look on his face.

He finally did, and Linda carried that thing around for the rest of the day. She wouldn't let anyone else hold it.

I remember being a little jealous. Not of the dog, really. More that she'd had this whole moment with Dad.

That sounds petty now, but I was a kid. Later he bought me an ice cream and we sat together while Mom took Linda to the bathroom. I was fine after that.

Interviewer: You mentioned Michael. What do you remember about becoming a big sister again?

Susan: I was nine when he was born. Old enough to understand there was going to be a baby, but not old enough to understand how much would change.

Linda and I stayed with our grandmother while Mom was in the hospital. Grandma let us stay up late, so initially we thought the whole arrangement was pretty good.

Then Dad came to get us. He said, "You girls have a little brother."

I remember asking what his name was. Michael. I said it a few times in the car. We didn't know anyone named Michael, so it sounded very new to me.

Interviewer: What was it like meeting him?

Susan: Smaller than I expected. That's what I remember.

Mom was sitting on the couch when they let me hold him. She put a pillow under my arm and stayed right beside me.

I was afraid to move. He made this little face, and I thought he was about to cry, but he went back to sleep.

Linda kept touching his sock.

I remember saying, "Can he stay here with me?"

Mom said, "For a little while."

I felt very grown-up sitting there. Then he needed changing, and I was happy to hand him back.

Interviewer: Was adjusting to a baby difficult?

Susan: Sometimes. There was more waiting. Mom couldn't always come when we called her. We had to be quiet when he was sleeping, which felt like most of the time.

One afternoon I wanted her to help with something for school. She said, "Just a minute," and that minute went on forever.

I told her she only cared about the baby now.

I can still picture her face. She looked so tired.

Later she came into my room and sat on the bed. She asked me to show her what I needed help with. We worked on it together.

I don't remember whether either of us apologized. I remember she stayed until we finished.

Interviewer: What do these memories make you notice about your mother?

Susan: How much she was doing.

When you're little, sandwiches appear in the cooler. Clean clothes appear in your drawer. Somebody knows where your shoes are.

You don't think about the person making all that happen.

I wish I'd asked her more about herself—what she liked before she had us, what she hoped to do. We talked a lot, but mostly about whatever was happening that week.

My daughter asks me questions like that now. Sometimes I tell her I don't remember. Then something comes back while I'm washing dishes, and I call her.

Interviewer: Why do you want to put these stories into a book?

Susan: My grandchildren know me as Grandma. They know I had parents, obviously, but I don't think they picture me as a little girl arguing over a kitchen chair.

I'd like them to know those people. Their great-grandfather who carried too much to the beach. Their great-grandmother who made sure everybody had lunch.

We have photographs, but some need explaining. There's one of Linda holding that stuffed dog. Without the story, it's just a little girl with a toy.

Interviewer: What would you like to say to your family at the end of the book?

Susan: I think I'd say... thank you for letting me tell you these things.

Some of them might sound small. They weren't small to me.

And take pictures of ordinary days, too. Somebody at the kitchen table. The kids getting ready to go somewhere. You don't always know which picture you'll be glad you have.

I wish we had one of all of us around that table. We probably thought there was no reason to take it. We were there every day.