

**Anna Sokhrina. A Man's Memory:
Eight Interpretations of One Story**

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The male memory has fundamental differences; it is completely unlike ours—women's. Thus, about the same event we tell very different stories.

The first time I thought about this was when my husband, thanks to the global web, found on one of the social networking sites, his former first love, Lina Sandler. Linochka had immigrated to Canada thirty years ago and is currently teaching at a university. She lives happily in her home near her children and grandchildren—a quite successful and fulfilling fate.

After an emotional correspondence and exchanging news—and believe me, a lot of news had accumulated over the three decades since they had lost touch with one another—and finding out who is with whom and who is doing what, Linochka sent her childhood friend a photo. Against a blue swimming pool on a terrace overgrown with red roses, sat a plump, round-faced matron surrounded by grandchildren. My husband was shocked.

“And this is Linochka?!” He ran around the apartment all night in terrible agitation looking at the photo again and again. “But, it cannot be.”

“What?” I said surprised. “She's a nice woman—well groomed, well, a little overweight...with age.”

“What do you understand?” cried my husband, sadly raising a hand to the sky. “A nice woman! This was an angel. A reed with a thin waist and long legs! And her violet colored eyes, and her red hair! You never even saw her...” There was such sadness in his voice...

“My dear, she is 58, not 22. What do you want, after all these years...”

“What do I want?” My husband froze, and looked at me with lost eyes. He unconsciously rubbed his chin. “I myself don't know...”

“Look carefully in the mirror and compare a photo from forty years ago...”

My husband pouted, wilted, and went to watch television. All evening long he was depressed, and in a silent state. Men are strange people. They for some reason think that their first real love does not get old, does not change, and escapes time as it runs on. Concealed somewhere in the depths of memory, imprinted in the depths of the universe, she does not age, she is not covered in wrinkles, but instead stays the same, as she was in her youth—thin and gentle, with violet eyes...

25 years later, at one of the literary gatherings in the House of Writers, where I accidentally ended up, having arrived for a brief trip to St. Petersburg, I met an old friend. 30 years prior, when I had been an inexperienced journalism student, he had headed the department of a modern fashion magazine, and it seemed to me this was unattainable, almost celestial. Now, he was an old, tired, and casually dressed man. That same day, when I walked into the gathering, I seemed liked an outsider in most people’s eyes. I was elegantly dressed, with a fashionable haircut and from the prosperous and well-fed West.

Elderly writers, yesterday’s masters of thought, amazed me with hardly concealed poverty and disorder. Everything has changed in this world. Ideals, illusions, and values, which blossomed so brightly in my youth, have completely disappeared into a black hole of greedy capitalism. Who needs naïve discussions about the eternal in a world that is defeated by money? The writers obviously, impatiently expected the end of loud, official reports so they could approach the set table. And when the pause, finally, had been declared, and everyone started grabbing pies and sandwiches, I understood that many of them were simply hungry.

“How is this possible?” I asked the friend with which I had come, worried. “I did not think that St. Petersburg writers were in such a sad position.”

“What did you expect? Pensions are tiny and the books practically do not bring profit,” he explained, chewing vigorously. “Well maybe a tenth of the most promoted authors. But printed books don’t sell; the Internet gobbled everything up.”

And at this time, the former head of my department spotted me. “Oh my! Is that really you?” he yelled with joy. We walked along the evening boardwalk illuminated by yellow spots of carved Petersburg lanterns and talked. “And I thought you had forgotten about me. Who was I back then? A stupid little girl?”

“You were a beauty,” he said seriously. “Actually, what do I mean ‘were’? You are still pretty. But back then you were a blinding beauty; one couldn’t take their eyes off of you. I was even afraid to look at you.”

“Why didn’t you come and say that to me?” I was sincerely surprised. “What? I could have approached you?”

I began to recall myself and my first naïve steps in the literary field, made under the direction of this clever and talented person. “Remember how the editor of the department of poetry used to come and speak”—I plunged my eyebrows into a frown, lowered my voice, and trying to imitate the familiar intonation said, “Dear, be careful of writers. Writers—they are dangerous people. They don’t think as much about sleeping with women as they do about what they will write about.”

Of course I remember. You cannot even imagine how well I remember it all. And he started telling me about the past, so vividly that it was as if in front of him a full-length film with subject lines, heroes, landscapes, and stages were unfolding.

This is the strangeness of a man’s memory—it leaves details, expressions, colors, and smells that would have already weathered out of a woman’s head under the deathly run of dulling time. I clearly understood this only recently.

Along with a friend, I ended up at an international conference of Slavists, which was occurring in the charming resort town of Bavaria. Russian teachers from all over the world came to this conference. For half a day we listened to reports and lectures, participated in round tables and discussions, and for the other half of the day, we walked around clean, tiny, German streets window-shopping at boutiques and enjoying life.

My soul sang. For a long time I lived among the cold ocean of strangers’ conversations, which turned into the usual annoying background, or among the immigrant talk, full of verbal layers, with an abundance of words brought from Ukrainian and Moldovan towns. When I found myself

in the waters of the magnificent, proper, and refined literary speech of “great and powerful” language connoisseurs, I swam in pure bliss.

And so, along with my friend, a teacher of the Russian language, and in the company of other participants of the seminar, I embarked on an excursion of memorable spots in the town. The tour guide, a young looking, intelligent lady, told us about the famous Russians buried in the Wiesbaden cemetery. Next to us stood Simon Lenz, a former St. Petersburg, but today a professor of Slavistic philology at one of the American Universities. “Excuse me, who else other than the almighty knight is buried at this cemetery?” he asked, “I didn’t hear.” At the sound of his voice, my friend froze in a strange way, went pale, and then, after going extremely close up to the professor and examining his face, said:

“Simon, is that you?”

A long pause filled the air. The professor stood puzzled and looked at the 60 year old woman in front of him.

“Excuse me... You... I don’t understand...”

“What a small world,” she said. These mysterious words the password of their youth.

“Belka, is that you?!” he yelled joyously, instantly transformed, and hugged her in his arms. “Belochka! Dear! Can it really be?...”

A voice—the instrument of the soul, never grows old. She recognized him by his voice. My friend Belka turned out to be the first, main and unforgettable love of the American professor. In their student years, they played together in the musical institute’s ensemble “A Small World,” walked along the Neva waterfront during clear St. Petersburg nights, kissed under the benches of the Summer Gardens...

This was their bright and vibrant youth, against which anything that befell later could not compare. And the two remaining days until the end of the conference, when they would have to fly to opposite sides of the continent, to the cells of their orderly and regulated lives, the gray-haired professor walked around, youthful and fascinated with—let’s be honest—the aged and faded (this is why he didn’t recognize her right away), woman and remembered, remembered, remembered...

His memory had preserved outlandish details—a narrow, hammered bracelet on her arm: “Oh yes! My papa brought that to me from a business

trip he took to India. No one else had one like it.” He remembered the unusual and very fashionable pantsuit she had that was the envy of all the student’s girlfriends, and the chestnut colored curls of hair above her ear, and the floral perfume “Charlie” which she’d worn. My friend was astonished...In his hidden, internal memory, Bella remained the same charming girl, which she herself could hardly remember. It was not that my friend couldn’t restore the details of their youthful story, of course she could, but in a completely different way.

Much had been washed out from her memory, like fine sand on the sea cliffs, leaving only large boulders as proof. She remembered where they went, what they were doing, with whom they communicated. I watched the novel of their memory unfold before my eyes and was a little jealous. The span of female flowering is not so long...And only love and passion in the male memory leaves us beautiful and young. Many would give anything to travel back to their youth as if it happened yesterday, on the wings of someone else’s memory. For someone to recall some forty years later, how their perfume smelled...