

## **Men's Memory**

### **Translated by Anton Kuznetsov**

It seems that men's memory has principal differences, that it's completely unlike ours—women's memory. And that's why we tell entirely different stories about the same events.

The first time I noticed this was when my husband found his old college classmate and the first love Linochka Sandler on a social networking website. Linochka immigrated to Canada thirty years ago and was now lecturing at a university and living happily in her own house close by her children and grandchildren. Quite a successful and happy life.

After an emotional and lively exchange of news from the last three decades (since when they lost touch of each other), Linochka sent the old friend a picture of herself.

Sitting in front of a blue pool on a terrace surrounded by red roses was a well-fed, round-faced lady and her grandchildren.

My husband was shocked.

"And this is Linochka?!" He ran around the apartment all night in an agitated manner, looking into the photo again and again. "That cannot be!"

"So what?" I wondered. "An attractive woman, healthy looking, but, well, slightly out of shape...like most people her age."

"You don't understand!" my husband cried, sorrowfully raising his hands in the air. "Attractive! She was an angel! Tiny waist, long legs! Violet eyes and red curls! You never, you've never even seen her..."

"My dear, she is 58 now, not 22. What did you expect after so many years..."

"What did I expect?" my husband froze, staring at me helplessly. He was rubbing his bearded chin mechanically. "I don't know myself."

"What about you?" I became angry. "Look at yourself in the mirror and compare to a picture taken 40 years ago".

My husband's face became upset; he slumped his shoulders, and left to watch TV. He was gloomy and taciturn for the rest of the day.

Men are strange: for some reason they think that their first love doesn't grow old, doesn't change, and is invincible to time.

Preserved somewhere in memory, printed in depths of their universe, she doesn't age, doesn't get wrinkles on her face, doesn't get overweight, but stays just the same as she had been—slim, tender, violet-eyed...

25 years later during one of the parties at the Writer's House, which I came upon when visiting Petersburg for a short time, I met an old friend. 30 years prior when I had been a naive ordinary-looking journalism student, he had been the head of a trendy literary magazine and to me seemed untouchable. Now he was an elderly person, tired and carelessly dressed. And that day it seemed like I was the untouchable one, descending with my hair styled fashionably, wearing an elegant dress from the happy and prosperous West to this ordinary literary party.

Elderly writers, former lords of imagination, astounded me with their barely concealed poverty and unemployment.

Everything changed in this world. Ideals, illusions and values, in which I was raised so brightly, were utterly lost in the black hole of greedy capitalism. Who needs naive discussions of eternity in the "country of the victorious dollar"?

The writers were evidently impatient for big, officious reports to arrive at the already laid table. When, finally, a break was announced and everyone started grabbing pies and sandwiches, I realized that many of them were just hungry.

"But how is that?" I sadly asked the friend who had come with me. "I didn't think that Petersburg writers were in such a state..."

"But what did you expect? Pensions are tiny, and books practically no longer earn a profit," he explained, chewing energetically. "Well, except the top 10 bestselling authors...Printed copies do not sell, the Internet is taking over everything..."

And at that moment my ex-boss saw me.

"Good heavens, is that you?" he shouted excitedly.

Two of us walked together along the river, lit by yellow stains of the carved Petersburg street lights and talked.

"I thought you forgot me a long time ago...Who was I back then? Just a naive girl."

"You were a beauty" he said seriously. "Though why did I say 'were?' You still are. But back then—you were just gorgeous, no one could take their eyes off of you. I was even scared to look at you..."

"Then why didn't you approach and tell me?" I asked him with astonishment.

"Was it possible to approach you?"

I started remembering myself and my first naive steps in the world of letters and words, the world made under the leadership of this smart and talented man.

"Do you remember how the editor of the poetry section came in and said," I frowned, deepened my voice, and tried to imitate the famous intonation:

"Darling, beware the writers. Writers are dangerous, they don't think about sleeping with a woman as much as writing about it."

"Of course I remember... You can't even imagine how well I remember all that."

And he started telling me about the past, so clearly, that I felt like he had a full movie in front of him, with a screenplay, dialogues of the characters, landscape descriptions and stage settings.

This peculiarity of men's memory - keeping the details, particulars, colors, scents that would have been effaced from women's memory a long time ago—I only realized very recently.

My friends and I went to the international congress of Slavists that took place at a charming resort town of Bavaria. The congress gathered Russian language professors from all over the world. Half of the day we listened to reports, lectures, participated in round-table discussions, and the other half we walked through the clean, tiny German streets, looking at boutique windows and enjoying life.

My soul was singing with joy. For so long I lived in the cold ocean of foreign speech that became a familiar irritating background noise and amongst the immigrant dialect full of superfluous words that were brought from Ukrainian and Moldavian places, that when I found myself in the waters of the magnificent, correct, and elegant speaking style of the experts and connoisseurs of "the great and powerful," I just felt absorbed in the beatitude. Just like back in the days of my youth, when I listened to the

lectures given by the professors of the Petersburg University, renowned scholars of ancient, Russian, and foreign literature.

And so my friend and I, a Russian language professor, accompanied by other members of the seminar set out to tour the sights of the town. Our guide, a young-looking lady, told us about famous Russians buried at the Wiesbaden cemetery.

Beside us stood Simon Lenz, a former Petersburgian, but now a professor of Slavistic philology at one of the American universities.

"Excuse me, who else besides the Prince is buried at the cemetery? I didn't quite catch that," he asked.

My friend froze at the sound of his voice, turned pale, and then came up to him closely and looking into his face, she said: "Simon, is that you?"

There was a long pause.

The Slavist was seemingly puzzled by the sixty-year-old woman standing in front of him.

"I'm sorry...You... I can't remember..."

"Little Country," she said, the mysterious words a password of their youth.

"Belka you?!" he cried in astonishment, suddenly transforming and taking her in his arms. "Belochka! Darling! Really?..."

Voice is the instrument of a soul, it doesn't age. She recognized his voice.

My friend Bella was the first, main, and unforgettable love of the American professor. In the student days they both played in a music institute choir "Little Country," walked along the Neva embankments at bright nights, kissed on the benches of the Summer Garden...

Their bright and saturated youth surpassed anything that ever happened after.

The last two days before the end of the conference, when they had to fly away to the different sides of the continent, in the cells of their successful, arranged, and regulated life the gray-haired professor followed like a young and charmed teenager the - let's be honest, aged and less attractive (that's why he didn't even recognize her at first)—woman and remembered, remembered, remembered...

His memory kept some peculiar details—a narrow metal bracelet on her hand.

"How true, my father brought it from his trip to India, no one had one like that..."

And the incredibly fashionable in those days crimplene trouser suit, that made all her university friends jealous, and the chestnut-colored curls above her ear, and the floral fragrance of "Charlie," her perfume.

My friend was amazed...In his deep innermost memory Bella was still that charming girl that she could hardly remember herself.

It wasn't like she couldn't recall the details of their youth affair, of course she could, but in a completely different way. Many details got washed from her memory, like the grains of sand on sea cliffs, leaving only the large boulders of events.

She remembered where they went, what they did, who they talked to.

I looked at the romance of their memory unwrapping before my eyes and became slightly jealous.

The span of woman's blossoming is so short...

And only the enamored and passionate man's memory keeps us beautiful and young.

I would give a lot to be able to be carried on the wings of someone's memory to the days of my youth like it happened just yesterday.

And for someone forty years later to tell me the smell of my perfume...