

## **A Man's Memory**

### **Translation by Dima Ivanyuk**

It has to be that a man's memory has some principal difference from that of ours—women. That's why when we speak of the same event, we tell two different stories.

I first had this thought when my husband, by way of the Internet and social networking, located his former classmate and first love, Angelina Sandler. Thirty years ago, Angelina immigrated to Canada, but today teaches at a university, living a quiet life in a house near her children and grandkids. Quite a fulfilling life...

After an emotional exchange of messages and news—which, believe me, has piled up over the thirty years since they lost sight of each other—after all the nostalgia of who is with whom and what is what, Angelina sent her old friend her photograph. On the canvas of a blue pool on a terrace full of scarlet roses, sat a full-looking matron surrounded by grandchildren.

My husband was full of nothing but shock.

“And this is Angelina?!...” He paced around the room repeatedly throughout the evening in worry, glancing again and again on the photograph. “No, this can't be!”

“And what?” I inquired, surprised. “A lovely woman, well-groomed, a little full... all with age.”

“Well, what do you know?” he cried, hands in the air. “Lovely! She was an angel! A beauty with a thin waist and long legs! And her violet eyes and red curls! You, you never even saw her...” He said it with such sadness in his voice.

“Dear, she is 58, not 22. What do you expect after so many years...”

“What do I expect?” He gasped, with a lost glance towards me. He mechanically rubbed his outgrown beard, “I don't even know...”

“You don’t know?” I asked, irritated. “Look carefully in the mirror and compare yourself with a forty year-old photograph...”

My husband swelled, wilted, and went to go watch television. All day he remained in a quiet, somber mood.

Men—strange fellows—to them it seems that their first sincere love never grows old, never changes and is not a victim to time like the rest of us. Conserved in the depths of their memory, imprinted deep into their universe, she does not age, does not cover her wrinkles with nets, does not accumulate folds of fat, but stays in as in youth—thin, tender, with violet eyes...

25 years later at one of many literary parties in the House of Writers, where I accidentally arrived whilst on a short trip to St. Petersburg, I ran into a distant acquaintance. Thirty years prior, when I was an inexperienced apprentice of journalism, he was searching through a section of a modern literature journal and seemed to me of immeasurable status, even celestial. Now he was a senior, weary and negligently dressed. On that day, dressed in an elegant wardrobe with a fashionable haircut from the successful West for this ordinary, literary night, in his eyes I must have looked as he had to me.

Older writers, yesterday’s pioneers of thought, shocked me with their bare cover of poverty and disorder. Everything had changed in this world. Ideals, illusions and values, which in my youth shined so brightly, disappeared without a trace into the black hole of greedy capitalism. Who needed the everlasting naïve discussions in the “land of the victorious dough”?

Writers were clearly waiting impatiently for the end of the loud, officious lecture so that they could approach the covered table. And when, finally, a break was announced and everyone rushed to snatch pies and sandwiches I realized that many of them were simply hungry.

“How is this?” I asked an acquaintance I had come with. “I did not think the writers in St. Petersburg were in such deplorable state.”

“And what did you expect? Pensions are miniscule, books larger, and practically no profits are made,” he explained. “It’s possible for maybe ten years for the most promoted authors...but copies do not spread. The Internet has squashed that...”

And at this moment a former department head saw me.

“Oh my, I don’t believe it!” He exclaimed happily. We walked along the beach, lit by yellow lamplight.

“And I thought you forgot about me long ago...Who was I then? Just a dumb young girl.”

“You were a beauty...” he spoke seriously. “Although, why ‘were’ when even now you are still. But back then, blindingly beautiful. I was scared to even look at you, yet it was hard to look away...”

“And why didn’t you approach me and say that?” I asked, surprised.

“What? You could just be approached?” I started to remember my first and naïve steps into the literary world under the supervision of this smart and talented man.

“Remember how the editor of poetry would come and say,” I dropped my eyebrows, lowered my voice, and, attempting to mimic a familiar tone spoke: “Dear, beware of writers. Writers—they are dangerous people. They don’t think as much as they sleep with women, and this is what they will write about.”

“Of course I remember... You have no idea how well I remember...”

And he started to talk about the past, and so vividly, as if a cinematic film were growing right in front of him with dialogue, main characters, scenery and staging.

This masculine strangeness of memory—including details, specifics, lights, smells that would have blown out of a woman’s head long ago with unforgiving speed and blunt time—I truly realized only recently.

Together with another friend, we ended up at an international Slavic conference, which was taking place in a lovely resort town of Bavaria. Russian teachers from all over the world attended. Half the day we listened to lectures and participated in round table discussions, and the other half we

spent exploring on neat, toy-like German streets, looking at showcase boutiques and enjoying life.

My soul sang. I lived for so long among the cold sea of unfamiliar language, which settled into the everyday, irritating background among the immigrant shell of speech with an abundance of Ukrainian and Moldavian words. When I learned in magnificent waters of correct and long-sought literary language of experts and writers (magnificent and powerful), I simply swam into its bliss like in youth when I listened to the lectures by professors of the St. Petersburg university about celebrated pillars of ancient, Russian and foreign literature.

And so, my friends and Russian teachers, with the company of other attendees of the seminar set off on an excursion on the historical places in the town. The tour guide, a young, intelligent woman, told us about the famous Russians buried in the Wiesbaden cemetery.

Near us stood Simon Lenz, a former citizen of St. Petersburg and today a professor of Slavistic philology at an American university.

“Excuse me, who else other than the glorified prince is buried in the cemetery? I did not hear.” He inquired.

My friend, upon hearing his voice, strangely froze, grew pale, and then, approaching very closely to the professor, with a careful look at his face, uttered: “Simon, it’s you?” A long pause hung in the air. The professor looked perplexingly at the sixty-year-old woman in front of him.

“I’m sorry... you... I can’t remember...”

“Small World,” she said, the mysterious words a symbol of their youth.

“Bella, it’s you?!” He exclaimed happily, transforming instantly and embracing her. “Bella! Dear! Really?” Voice—the instrument of the soul—it does not grow old. She recognized him by his voice. I discovered that my friend Bella was the first, best and unforgettable love of the American professor. In their years as students, they played together in the school musical ensemble “Small World,” walked under the clear St. Petersburg night on the Neva embankments, kissed on the benches of Summer

Gardens...But what is there? That was their bright and tremulous youth, compared to a fading of what follows after.

With two days until the end of the conference, where everyone flies in different directions of the continent, back to their fulfilling, regular lives, the silver-haired professor walked with a youthful and fascinated demeanor, remembered women, and remembered, and remembered...

His memory saved outlandish details—a thin bracelet on her hand: “Yes, my dad brought me it from a business trip in India. Nobody has these...” And her pantsuit, surprisingly fashionable in those years, which was the envy of school friends, her head of chestnut curls, hair below the ears, and the flowery aroma of her perfume, “Charlie.”

My friend was struck...In his innermost memory Bella remained that previously charming girl, a person she herself had difficulty remembering.

It was not just that my friend could not remember the details of their youthful romance; she very much could, but completely differently. Much of it washed away in her memory, like fine sand on marine rocks, only leaving behind large boulders of events.

She remembered where they went, what they did, with whom they spent time. Before my eyes, I was seeing an unfolding romance of their memory and envied them a little. The era of the woman’s brightness is short-lived...we remain beautiful and young only in the memory of a man passionate and in-love...

I would give a lot to transform into my quivering youth on the wings of someone else’s memory, as if it all happened just yesterday. To have someone forty years later tell me how my perfume smelled.