

## **A Man's Memory**

### **Translated by Valentina Kozina**

A man's memory has fundamental differences, is completely unlike that of a woman's. And because of that, the stories we tell about the past vary greatly.

The first time I noticed this was when, thanks to the internet, my husband ran across his old schoolmate and first love, Lina Sandler, on some social website. Lina had moved to Canada about thirty years ago and was now teaching at a university, happily living next-door to her children and grandchildren. A pretty good life...

After an emotional exchange of messages and news—which had piled up over the thirty years since they had lost touch with each other—Lina sent her old friend her photo.

On a rose covered terrace, in front of a pool sat a chubby, plump-faced matron surrounded by grandchildren.

My husband was shocked.

“This? This is Lina?!...” He spent all evening worried, pacing the apartment and constantly glancing back at the photograph. “But, this can't be right!”

“And why?” I asked, surprised. “A pretty woman, well, a little heavy...but with age.”

“You don't get it!” he shouted, throwing his hands in the air, “Pretty? She was an angel! Such a thin waist and long legs! And her violet eyes and red curls! You just, you just never saw her...”

And his voice was so sad.

“My dear, she's already 58, not 22. What did you expect after so many years?”

“What did I expect?” My husband froze and looked at me, lost. He started mechanically rubbing his scraggly chin. “I don't know...”

“And you?” I started getting angry, “Look at yourself and compare that image with a 40 year-old photograph...”

He got upset and went to watch TV. The rest of the day he spent crushed and depressed.

Men—are odd. For some reason they seem to think that their first true love never grows old, and unlike everyone else, doesn't change with time. Conserved somewhere in the depths of their memory, she doesn't grow old, doesn't get wrinkles, doesn't gain weight, but instead stays like she was in her youth—thin, gentle, with violet eyes...

25 years later I was visiting St. Petersburg and ran into an old friend at one of the gatherings for literature at the “Дом писателя”. When I was just a journalism student, he was the head of a popular literary magazine and appeared to me almost god-like. Now he was elderly, tired and sloppily dressed. Most people probably saw me as the more god-like that day, with elegant clothes and a fashionable haircut, come to this evening from the West.

Elderly authors, yesterday's leaders of the mind, startled me with how disheveled they had become.

Everything had changed in this world. The ideals, illusions and values in which my youth had flourished disappeared into a black hole of greedy capitalism. Who needed naïve discussions of eternity?

It was obvious the writers were waiting impatiently for the end of the official speeches so they could eat. When a break was finally announced and everyone began grabbing knishes and sandwiches, I realized that most of them were probably just hungry.

“How is this possible?” I asked my friend bitterly. “I didn't think that their situation was in such a sorry state.”

“What do you expect? Pensions are tiny, and books make practically no money,” he explained, continuing to eat. “Well maybe a few of the most popular authors do...but editions don't make it anymore, not with the internet...”

And then the former department head saw me.

“Oh my god, is that you?” He burst out happily.

We went for an evening stroll along the riverbank that was lit up with yellow spots from the streetlights and talked.

“And I thought that I was long forgotten...who was I then? A foolish little girl.”

“You were gorgeous,” he answered me seriously, “although, I don’t mean ‘were’ when even now you’re beautiful. But then—you were blindingly gorgeous. I was afraid to even look at you, but it was impossible to look away...”

“Why didn’t you just come and tell me?” I was completely shocked.

“What, as if I could just talk to you?”

I began to remember myself back then and my first naïve steps in the literary field, which I made under the guidance of this brilliant and talented man.

“Remember, how the poetry editor used to come by and say,” I frowned and lowered my voice trying to replicate the familiar intonation: “My dear, be careful of authors. Authors are dangerous people, they don’t so much think about sleeping with women as what they would write about it.”

“Of course I remember. You can’t even believe how well I remember all of this...”

And he stated telling me about the past, and with such detail, as if he was watching a film with the same plot line, heroes, and sets.

This strange characteristic of a man’s memory—remembering the details, colors, smells, which would have since left a woman’s head with the passing of time—I noticed only recently.

Once, a friend and I went to an international conference in a beautiful vacation city in Bavaria. Russian professors from all over the world were in attendance. Half the day we listened to reports and lectures, as well as participated in round tables and discussions. The rest of it was spent wandering the clean, tiny German streets, window-shopping and enjoying life.

I was ecstatic. I had lived in the cold ocean of another language, whose dreariness was already becoming routine, or among immigrant speech, full of dialects and the occasional Ukrainian or Moldovan word thrown in. It had been for so long that when I found myself amid the wonderful, proper and descriptive literary speech of experts and patrons of the “great and powerful,” it was pure bliss. Much like in my youth, I listened to lectures from the lauded professors of literature at the University of St. Petersburg.

Anyway, my friend, a professor of the Russian language, and I, along with some other participants of the seminar went on a tour of the most important places of the city. The tour guide was an intelligent young woman and told us about famous Russians that were buried in the Wiesbaden graveyard.

Next to us stood Simon Lentz, who is originally from St. Petersburg and is now a professor of Slavistic philology at some American University.

“Excuse me; I didn’t catch that, who else besides the prince is buried here?” He asked.

When she heard his voice, my friend hesitated, went pale, went up to the professor, and carefully looked him over. “Simon, is that you?”

After a long pause, staring at the sixty-year old woman in front of him, he finally started, “I’m sorry... You... I don’t recognize you.”

“Little country,” she said. They were Magic words, a password to their youth.

“Belka, is it really you?!” he shouted excitedly, and instantly hugging her. “Belka! Dear! Really?”

The voice is an instrument of the soul. It doesn’t age. And this was how she recognized him.

My friend Bella turned out to be the American professors first, most important and unforgettable love. When they were still students they played “Little country” in the university orchestra together, took walks along the Neva River and kissed on the benches of the Summer Gardens.

That was their bright youth, which nothing that happened later could possibly compare to.

And the last two days of the conference, before they had to leave to two different sides of the continent and go back to their organized and regulated lives, the graying professor, as if a young and charming teenager, chased a—let’s be honest, aged and faded woman, and remembered, remembered, remembered...

His memory saved the most outlandish details—a thin engraved bracelet she used to wear:

“Oh yes, my dad brought it for me from a business trip to India. Nobody else had one like it...”

And the extraordinarily fashionable at the time pantsuit that all her friends had been jealous of, and the pinstripe hairclip over her ear and the flowery scent of the perfume, “Charlie,” which she used to wear.

My friend was surprised...inside his mind, Bella stayed that same charming girl that she could barely remember herself.

Not that my friend could not recall their young love. She remembered it, just in a completely different way. Most of the little things were wiped from her memory, like sand on sea cliffs, leaving only the big moments.

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

I watched the recollection of their romance unfold before my eyes and was a little jealous.

Youth is so short...

And only the memory of a man in love will keep us young and beautiful.

I would give much to be able to transport myself into my youth on the wings of someone’s memory, as if everything happened yesterday.

And for someone, forty years later, to remember what my perfume smelled like...