

MEMORIES OF ANNA

A little more than ten years ago Anna died in Vienna as the result of a car accident. She was twenty-nine years old and blind. She is very much alive in my memory although I only spent one day with her.

A friend brought her one Sunday afternoon. The weather was beautiful. At the time we were living in a small house on the edge of the city and on Sundays like that it was common for friends with children to get stuck there the whole day. At the time we called it open house. We drank, played badminton and talked, mostly about the events of the previous week, the intrigues at the Institute, the work of the Planning Committee, the advantages and disadvantages of municipal and private kindergartens and of plans for the summer.

Anna stayed with us the whole day. Perhaps it was because of the children playing round the garden table that our conversation was broken into little portions. She didn't have a lot of opportunity to be with children.

Anna wanted to become a teacher but not at a school for the blind. Her goal was to teach a perfectly normal class of sighted children. She had lost her eyesight towards the end of her time in primary school and her whole memory of light and colour was from that period. She had completed her course at the teacher training academy, but her defiant plan to take over a class of her own had proved impossible. When we met her she was on a scholarship and studying a subject combination that was very popular at the university at that time. She was living in a hall of residence.

What was most noticeable about her were her large, watery eyes with strongly dilated pupils and that she was a fast-paced and hasty drinker. We joined her and during the afternoon our modest supply of red wine was quickly exhausted.

Anna was neither particularly beautiful nor friendly but she laughed a lot. Her conversation was - what is the word for better and worse at the same time? - lucid. Clear, full of imagination and plasticity of expression and simultaneously intimidating

and malicious. She was, naturally, the centre of attention. We all knew one another well. Anna's stories, in contrast, were new and she enjoyed the situation which, as the hours passed, became less and less a conversation with frequent asides and unpredictable by-ways and more and more a game of question and answer with appropriately ascribed roles. Her formulations were precise and to the point and it wasn't clear if what she said came from her own experience or from lessons of literature well learned. Perhaps she herself didn't know exactly, and on an afternoon like that it didn't much matter.

She left no doubt that she was well read and that, strangely, writing and not sound was central to her daily life. Of course, she read Braille but the process of transforming printed texts into Braille seemed to her to be too slow and she was, she said, dependent on the excerpts made by selection committees and editors. She had found an alternative. She knew a librarian at the university, a historian who researched the catalogue according to her instructions and supplied her with new books every week. Recently he had begun to call her frequently making suggestions and reserving books for her that she didn't want but borrowed for a week out of politeness anyway. "A nice person," she said, "a little pushy, but helpful and precise." She laughed. But what did she do with all these books? A fellow student in the hall of residence and her mother read them to her. The student during the week, her mother at the weekend. So she was able, she said, to digest huge amounts.

Her mother had become a complete reading machine. The weekends consisted of reading apart from eating meals together and short walks made at the insistence of her mother. Reading aloud was very hard for her mother because of the concentration needed and she often didn't understand what she was reading because of having to articulate the text. Anna rarely talked about these texts even with fellow students in the hall of residence simply because she didn't want to. She had enough to do and if the others didn't understand what they were reading that wasn't her problem.

Her problem was that both of them read badly. They got tired quickly and read without any sense of rhythm or melody. Instead of restricting themselves to reproducing the text, they would read dialogues 'enhanced' by school dramatics. " Their voices would drop at the end of a sentence, go up when asking a question and stupid things like that, and you can't believe how many grammatical mistakes are made when reading aloud." At the beginning, when she still paid attention to the voices, this made it very difficult.

Recently, however, she had begun to hear the writing. More and more she was able to fade out all the prosodic characteristics and hear the syllables as letters, the sentence as a line, the paragraphs as a page. "It's like this: as you talk to me now, I hear less your voice than your text. I think I can even hear the hyphens." Her exercises in hearing had developed her interest in typography. She had acquired letters of various sizes and forms from the Helvetica and Bodoni typefaces, coloured them and produced relief pictures - large format letter pictograms on paper. Some of those she described in detail must now be in the possession of her mother.

She told us of a linguistic experiment. Test persons were shown a film of lip movements in which some of them were wrongly synchronised. While subjects interpreted the sound track on its own overwhelmingly in one way, when they saw the film together with the sound they interpreted equally overwhelmingly in another. The experiment shows that one not only hears with the ears but also with the eyes. The subjects did not 'mis-hear' when they saw the film and heard the sound, rather the brain does not distinguish whether the information which is internally reflected is visual or auditory. Consequently one can hear with the eyes. And if one can hear with the eyes, one can see with the ears.

That is how her days had been since she lost the light. Sound creates space whereby it is irrelevant to the brain processing the information which sense organ enables it to enter. She could with certainty tell day from night by their sound. Darkness has its own sound, just as light could be audible from its noises. That she sometimes made

mistakes was another question. Incidentally, she liked to go to the cinema very much. She laughed because we didn't know how few film stars were in the films she heard. Many of them had the same dubbed speakers and on top of that she discovered, in tiny supporting roles, the voices of stars such as Al Pacino or Jack Lemmon.

Most of all she would like to be a stage actress. Firstly because she could easily memorise her lines and secondly because in her life, characterised by her blindness, was basically the life of an actress. "An actor," she said, "when he stands alone on the stage is blind. The lights are extinguished in the auditorium, he doesn't see who he is speaking to but everyone can see him. He is the one who is seen without seeing a single person, just like a blind person."

Of course she made music. She learned to play the piano and the flute and, as is normal for the blind, she sang in a choir. But that wasn't the music she liked. She told us about going with a friend to a concert given by an Italian female rock singer whom she much admired. When she was twenty she would have liked to be a rock guitarist and singer. In fact she had had offers to play with a Viennese band that was looking for a singer." But it wouldn't have worked. It would have been sensational for the band to have not only a woman guitarist, but to have a blind woman guitarist. But it would always have been sensational, without the potential of being not only sensational."

The problem in the hall of residence was not loneliness. On the contrary, the problem lay with the students, the male students. Apparently blind women attract a particular type of man or perhaps all men. The appeal lay perhaps in the shamelessness, in not having to feel shame because they could not be seen. Shame came not from inside, but from the outside. One is not ashamed because one is naked, but because one is seen naked. Looking is like a net which is laid over the skin and causes shame. Some find the situation liberating if it is missing.

The difference between her and the sighted was not so much the current absence of light and colour, she said, as the continuous worry about memories of past light and colour. Pictures for her were the same as voices for us. One forgets the voices of the dead very easily, and it is difficult to reconstruct them. The same was true of pictures and colours for her. They were not always available anymore and wouldn't be either — it wasn't likely that anything about her blindness would change in the near future. Of course, she had memories of colours, of artificial and natural light, just like the rest of us, but while we could freshen up our memories of a special light and a particular shade of colour every day, she had to search her memory, with the fear that it wouldn't be there any more - like the voices of her dead father and grandmother. When these memories failed, she was then truly blind.

Incidentally, nobody had described it better than Vladimir Nabokov and she would have sworn that it was Nabokov and not Borges that was blind.

Ernst Strouhal, 1999