

Out and About: Journeys Completed or Contemplated

The Unreliable Narrator

When memory is your only source, the past has a fluid truth of its own.

by Pam Mandel

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I could not have taken the ferry from there — there is not, nor has there ever been, a ferry dock at that particular location. Not only that, the landscape is completely different. It is not the arrowhead-shaped flat bit of land that I remember; it would have been a rocky coastline instead. It's like my memory has redrawn the story so it fits what I see now when I look at a map of the Sinai Peninsula — a triangle shape of land in the fork of the Red Sea.

I'm not lying, not in the literal sense of the word anyway. There's no benefit to a lie. I just want to tell this story set in a geographically specific place that is, perhaps, easy for you to picture

if you are the kind of person who likes maps, who knows them. When I unspool this memory for you, I only need you to know that I was in this place, and it looked a certain way. I don't need you to think better or worse of me; perhaps my only goal is vanity. "You were where, when?" I might want you to ask, and I might want you to think me especially adventurous, which I did not feel at the time.

The editor told me how wrong I was; she was an expert on the geography of the region. "You could not have been there, and plus, it is far from flat." She named the place it would have been, the place it still is, and I looked it up, and of course she

was right, because she was working in the present and I was working from memory only.

I have spent the past year working on a memoir about some travel I did in the early '80s. I have very little to go on. A few letters sent to a high school friend; he returned them to me after some recent house cleaning. They are useless, flirty, frivolous ramblings that say very little about what I am actually doing in the Middle East, in India. A stack of photos, browned with age but free from any kind of notation.

The letters from my travel companion are gone, destroyed in a bid to erase his fingerprints from my past. I had not yet

decided I was a writer when I made this trip, so there is no journal. Any letters I sent to my father are long gone, tossed in the numerous moves he and his wife made before he died. The same with those I sent my mother. She kept my letters from later years, but from this particular era, there is nothing.

That leaves me with memory as my sole source. My story wants to be comprehensive, but it wants to focus also; it cannot include every single anecdote, every moment. My story wants mostly to be kind. Even if everyone doesn't come off looking like a hero, it wants to show a certain understanding of the forces that make people do less-than-honorable things. My story wants

to be of its era, so it has a certain coloring, an anchoring sound track.

If this is vague, well, try squinting back through 40 years to see the border crossing between India and Pakistan. Am I lying when I tell you that the train conductor invited me into the engine to see where he shoveled the coal into the blazing fire and then handed me a drink of pepper and lime? We were waiting for the all-clear from customs to continue on to Amritsar, and I was bored, and it was hot, and I paced the platform until this lanky man in a turban asked me if I would like to see the engine. Was his turban blue or wine colored? Blue, I think, though I cannot be sure.

When I am done, my story will not be quite true, but it won't be false, either. It will be the truth that my memory allows me to write, as close to true as I can make it. My readers will have to trust that the parts at the center of the story, the parts that matter, the parts excavated to reveal the foundation of who I am today are true. Some parts I can fix through research or through the words of an editor who says, "No, the port is north of there, and it has a different name." I can look at a map for that.

For the rest, I have only what I remember to be true. And it will be true enough. ♦

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