## The Madeleine from Remembrance of Things Past

## **Marcel Proust**

**NOVEL EXCERPT** 



The first-person narrator of Marcel Proust's novel recalls the circumstances surrounding his recovery of a critical childhood memory. For many years, the narrator says, he thought little about Combray. He remembers the moment his memory returned to his childhood:

One winter day, when he comes home chilled, his mother offers him tea, which he rarely drinks. At first he declines, but then, for no special reason, he accepts. His mother sends out for one of the little cakes called "petites madeleines." Tired and gloomy, the narrator sips a spoonful of tea with a bit of cake soaked in it.

No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place.

The narrator feels an exquisite pleasure but has no idea what is causing it. Suddenly, he no longer cares about life's uncertainties, disasters, or shortness. This new sensation is like love filling him with a precious essence. The essence, however, does not just fill him; it becomes him. He no longer feels ordinary or mortal. From where does this all-powerful joy come? He feels that it is linked to the taste of the tea and cake, but it is so much greater. What does it mean?

I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic.

It is clear to the narrator that the answer to his quest is not in the cup but inside of him. The tea can only call up the same feeling in him—which is weaker each time—but it cannot explain it. The narrator can't explain this feeling either, but he hopes to call upon the tea again to understand it.

I put down my cup and examine my own mind. It is for it to discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create.

The mind, the narrator decides, in this moment is struggling to confront something that does not yet exist, something that it alone can make real.

He asks himself what this forgotten emotional state could have been. It was not rational, but it was happy, it was real, and it dominated other emotional states. He decides to try to make it happen again.

**1. Combray** French village where the narrator grew up.

This version of the selection alternates original text
with summarized passages.
Dotted lines appear next to
the summarized passages.
NOTES

I retrace my thoughts to the moment at which I drank the first spoonful of tea. I find again the same state, illumined by no fresh light. I compel my mind to make one further effort, to follow and recapture once again the fleeting sensation.	NOTES
So that nothing will interrupt his attempt, he first closes his ears to all the sounds around him. But he feels his mind grow weary, so he forces himself to enjoy distractions to refresh it. Then, he clears his mind a second time. He focuses his attention on the still-fresh taste. He feels something starting to happen deep within himself. It tries to rise, like an anchor from the seabed. He does not know yet what it is, but he senses its slow rise as it fights against resistance across a great distance.	
Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind.	
But this image or memory is too distant and confused for the narrator to clearly experience it. He cannot grasp how it relates to the taste of cake soaked in tea. He cannot ask it what special circumstances from his past life are involved.	
Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has traveled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell.	
Now, he feels nothing. It has stopped and gone down into its darkness. Will it ever return? Ten times he must try to reach it, he tells himself. But each time he is stopped by the natural laziness one feels when attempting something difficult. This laziness, the narrator says, urges him to focus instead on everyday hopes and fears, which involve no mental effort or distress.	
And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Leonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of real or of lime-flower tea.	
The sight of the madeleine had not recalled anything because the narrator had often seen such cakes in pastry-shop windows without tasting them. Their image was no longer linked to Combray but to more recent memories, themselves scattered. So the form of the little pastry had lost the power to take up its place in his mind. But when from the long-distant past nothing else survives, the narrator says, the smell and taste of things remain to remind us. Amid the ruins of all the rest, they bear in their tiny essence the vast structure of memory.	
Once he has recognized the taste of the madeleine soaked in his aunt's lime-flower tea, the old gray house where she lived rises up in the narrator's mind like the scenery of a theater. (Although, he says, he does not yet know and may not know for a long time why this memory made him so happy.) And with the house comes the garden, the town, day and night and in all weathers, and the Square, the streets, and the country roads. They all begin to take form.	

So in that moment all the flowers in our garden and in M. Swann's <sup>2</sup>
park, and the waterlilies on the Vivonne <sup>3</sup> and the good folk of the village
and their little dwellings and the parish church and the whole of Combray
and of its surroundings, taking their proper shapes and growing solid,
sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea.

2.	M. Sw	ann	Monsieur	(Mr)	Swann	friend	of the	narrator's	family	

IOTES		

<sup>3.</sup> Vivonne river in Combray.

<sup>&</sup>quot;The Madeleine" from Remembrance of Things Past (1913) by Marcel Proust