

My Memory Told Me a Secret

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To Lester, for making it all possible.

ONE

*Time sweats in the middle of the night when all the
other dimensions are sleeping.*

— JOY LADIN

London smelled of nothing, which is to say it smelled of everything melded together into an indistinguishable aroma. It was mid-Autumn and, on the tube, a man with soft features gazed at the advertisement boards hanging above the heads of the passengers sat opposite.

THIS IS THE END OF DATING. WE'RE SERIOUS.

Yea right, thought Austin, reading the sign plastered over a particularly dire-looking set of nine-to-fivers. When did dating apps start marketing on the underground?

He opened his bag and pulled out a notebook. Keeping a diary was an on-again, off-again habit

developed over years of on-again, off-again therapy. Like years of counselling, journaling became both a comfort and distraction. The oilcloth book had the familiarity of an old lover of the sort you meet for sex and cognac but with whom you never get too attached.

He began a nervous flicking of the pages. It was a catch-all of meeting minutes, reminders, diary entries, and doodles. Not quite professional, not quite personal. And there a quarter of the way through between a grocery shopping list and notes on a client brief, was the entry he had been looking for. Fourteen names, fourteen dates which had all gone nowhere. That wasn't fair, really. A few progressed to a second date and one or two others progressed to the bedroom. None had been the end of dating.

As passengers shuffled in droves on and off the train car, Austin did a mental rifle-through of the dating profile of the man he matched with: late twenties, muscly, works in the public sector, likes include Italian food and hip-hop music. As a thirty-four-year-old, ectomorphic criminal barrister, this new potential was exotic, a break from Austin's everyday routine. He got a little giddy as he reached for his iPhone to shuffle through smiling selfies and posed portraits. But what am I doing? he thought. He had let himself be taken in by

low-quality photos of what could/might/potentially be a somewhat/possibly handsome fellow. He didn't operate on certainties these days. Realising this about himself was scary. Very nearly making up his mind to alight at the next station and ride the train going in the opposite direction, he heard the announcement: *Next stop: London Bridge*. Too late then. This was his stop.

Some guys set out to make their mark on the world by being truly good at something. These are the guys that will things into existence. A better job? Work a year or two in a crappy position at a big-name place; doors will open. A gorgeous girlfriend? Date a string of not-so-hot women to make the others jealous. These are men of action. Then there are guys like Noah Hakim. Shit mostly happened *to* Noah. That was how he saw it, anyway. And those were the thoughts swirling around his head as he stepped into the pub opposite London Bridge station forty-five minutes before his date.

Noah never matched with anyone even remotely attractive on dating apps. He swiped right on easy boys, girls out for a fun night, people of both sexes that never wrote back after the first hello. It

had all gotten old. As such, it was all too familiar terrain when he got a quick 'Hello there' from a man called Austin a few days back. Sure, Austin didn't appear to be the average Tinder variety of gay — in most of his pics he wore a suit or polo shirt, the hairs on his head never out of place — in sum, he looked uptight. But Noah was smarter than this. He knew how easy it was to FaceTune a photo, to stage success, hell even to invent interesting facts about yourself. He kept his own profile a simple mix of unedited photos shot on his old two megapixel camera mixed in with one or two identification card-style images he mopped from a mate down in the HR department of the Midwifery Council where he worked. Still, seventy-two hours went gone by and Austin was still responding to all Noah's messages. That was something.

'What can I get you?' asked the bartender.

'Pabst Blue Ribbon and a shot of tequila,' said Noah taking one of the barstools.

'At the same time?' asked the bartender, confused. Right away he sensed his present customer was distracted. A guy like that, you ask him what he wants, he should ask for a good English pint. Not a PBR, not a shot of tequila, and definitely not back-to-back. Bartenders are keen observers of human nature.

Noah grunted. The bartender went about getting the drinks. Returning, he could see his customer mumbling words to himself, almost as though a conversation was being rehearsed.

'Do you wanna talk about it, mate?' He said this carefully. The bartender did not want to come off as some kind of South London creepy Lloyd from *The Shining*.

There was silence for a few moments. The bartender began wiping down the countertop.

'It never gets any easier,' Noah said finally.

'Tell me about it,' the bartender said, not as a question. He understood Noah's struggle. In his position, he felt he could understand anyone's struggle.

'I've got a date, round the corner in half an hour or so.' Noah took a final gulp from the beer bottle and slid it across the counter. 'Hit me with another, will ya?'

'What's she like?' said the bartender, putting down the bottle.

Noah smirked, considering his options. Why bother with details? Surely the important thing was to get sufficiently buzzed before meeting Austin.

'She's great, yea, I mean really beautiful like.' Noah threw back the shot of tequila and reached for the PBR.

'Sounds like you got nothing to worry 'bout then, mate.' The pub began to fill up, as bars tend to do around that time of the afternoon, and the bartender needed to see to his other clientele.

'Yea, right,' said Noah. 'That's right.'

He swallowed the remainder of his second beer and stood up. He noticed that the bartender was rather attractive with his scruffy facial hair and ball cap on backwards.

'How do I look?' he said, putting out his arms and doing a little spin that seemed to the bartender to be awfully camp.

'Smashing, mate. I'm sure you'll wow her.' He said this last bit rather more loudly to emphasise the point to any of the other customers listening on.

Noah sat back down again. 'But I want to look *fabulous ...*'

He was getting loud now, and the bartender put down a large glass of tap water in front of him.

'... like don't-you-want-to-fuck-me or how about run-off-with-me-somewhere. That kind of hot.'

The bartender winced. 'Drink the water, man. You need to get it together.'

Austin propped up against a concrete pillar outside the café. Bad quality profile pictures were all he had to go on, and he was sure to miss Noah Hakim if he waited indoors. But as Noah approached him with a warm hello, Austin realised it would have taken an icicle's chance in a forest fire to miss someone like him. Noah's eyes swirled like liquid gold with hues of amber and green, never quite settling in one place. The redbone tint of his skin, the thinness of his physique, and the closely cropped hair on his head and face all called out to Austin in some primal, subconscious way, Austin being the exact opposite in both looks and confidence. Both men dressed in denim. Both wore black hats. But where Noah came off prepossessing — skinny jeans, fitted cap — Austin appeared the Northwest London chap he very much was — boot-cut slimline jeans and one of those little caps that sits on the top of the head, very French in its felt fabric construction.

Noah ordered a double mocha, something that before today Austin didn't know existed, his own choice generally limited to a filter coffee or, if he felt posh, a cappuccino.

'So how do you define yourself?' Noah said, swerving a little as he sat down.

Never much for the sort of open-ended question that can lead down rabbit holes, Austin shot

Noah a double take. 'In relation to what,' he said, 'my work, my personal life, ...?'

'In relation to yourself.' An unheard *obviously* was attached to this.

Austin paused for several seconds, stumbling over thoughts morphing into words. 'Hey, let's discuss our jobs? Or something easier to settle into?'

'Yea, okay, fine.' Noah looked amused. 'Your profile said you do a lot of work representing less fortunate people in court.'

Austin nodded, happy for the change of pace.

'I tried studying law, so I'm kind of keen on social justice issues,' Noah continued. 'I dropped you a message hoping you would agree to meet for a hot drink based on that. Like that was the sub-text or whatever you want to call it. But I think it is fair to say I'd be lying if I said I didn't think your profile pic was alluring.'

The way the last word — *alluring* — was said, as well as Noah's awkward sentence construction, gave Austin pause. It indeed became clear to him within the span of a few minutes that there was no easy collaboration between Noah's interests and his own, and ordinarily that would have — or should have — been the end of it. They'd make small talk whilst finishing off their coffees and head their separate ways, likely to never speak

again. But Noah kept talking past the first cup of coffee, and then past a second and third. And now Austin felt stuck in.

'Right, so to answer your question,' he said after growing comfortable enough to return to Noah's initial line of inquiry. 'The obvious: I'm a white man, middle-class. Mum's American, father was a Brit. But those descriptors don't say much and don't express how I feel. I mean, those are only the immutable characteristics that shape who I am because of what I'm around or how I was born. This society we live in shapes our identity, you know, in the same way that being mixed race would shape your identity, I'd guess.'

Austin sounded a bit pompous, and he stopped to take stock of his date's reaction.

But Noah wasn't fazed. 'Go on,' he simply said. But before Austin could, Noah got up and went to the loo.

'Sorry,' he said returning to the table, 'I drank a lot of fluids today.'

Austin said it was no problem and tried to get back on track with his thoughts.

'I think what I'm trying to say is that it's not easy to put into a few adjectives how I define myself. I define myself in relation to others — all human beings do — but I also think that to know oneself takes years of practice.'

Noah's eyebrows raised.

'Working on yourself, understanding what you want, where you are, your limitations and your strengths — that sort of thing. Humans are often faced with competing alternatives: we are vulnerable and emotional beings.'

This sort of talk often met Austin with the confused looks of dead-eyed colleagues, accustomed to hearing another of his quasi-academic monologues. But Noah only sat there, still vaguely amused.

Emboldened by not having been interrupted yet, Austin continued, 'In one of my favourite books, *Mrs Dalloway*, the husband of this titular Clarissa Dalloway buys his wife some flowers and he thinks up how he's going to give them to her and tell her that he loves her. But when he gets home, Richard — that's what he's called — is unable to get the words out. I felt let down the first time I read it, ashamed for him and sorry for her. But then the script is flipped because Clarissa takes the flowers and knows what Richard means without his saying it. It's the perfect unity of thought and deed that creates real identity; it is a moment of true vision.'

Austin had begun to ramble — to 'wax philosophical' as his mother would call it — so he stopped. Noticing Noah was somewhat taken

aback, he asked, 'What about you? How do you identify?'

Noah sat still for a moment and then said, 'I've thought a lot about how I identify, and I've decided that I don't. Not in some "I don't do labels" way but in a sort-of "I'm complex and can't choose any easy descriptors" kind-of way.' He uttered each word, taking time to think over any future consequence.

Austin's pulse shot through this throat. 'So, I've spilled my guts and fought for the right words, for you to say that?!'

Noah smiled, nonplussed. 'And what about sexuality?'

'Oh.' Austin's turn to be taken aback by the frankness of the question.

Noah smirked. 'It's not a test.'

'Of course, it's not, I just don't find this is something most Muslims want to talk about.'

'And you're assuming I'm a Muslim?' Noah retorted, making Austin realise his earlier comment about Noah being of mixed race hadn't been ignored or forgotten.

'Well your surname is Hakim, for starters, so I'm pretty sure you've got Arab parents, right?' He treaded lightly now and stared down at his coffee mug as though the brown liquid held answers.

Noah's mouth begun to turn down and Austin thought he'd gone too far when Noah said, 'So that makes me a Muslim because I've got a Bengali father?' It was a self-effacing statement. The dramatic turn on Noah's face gave him away.

'Sorry, I didn't mean any offence, it was only a supposition, a guess —'

'No offence taken, man. As a matter of fact, I am Muslim, or I was raised one, but I'm not practicing, not in any real way. I believe in Allah and I follow the ethical guidelines. But in any case, I want to get back to the question at hand. What's your sexual preference?'

'This is a call to self-reflection,' Austin said. His eyes darted into the space beyond his interlocutor's head.

'Why's it so difficult for you to answer the question, mate?'

Mate?! thought Austin. 'It's not difficult. But it is a very direct thing to ask and I'm trying to choose my words carefully.' He could see from Noah's face he wasn't going to back down. 'Sexuality is not a black-and-white thing, you see. I could say simply I'm gay but that's not the best way to describe who I find attractive. I've been in relationships with men and women but prefer men these days. Though I know they are more trouble.'

This was not altogether true. Austin found a girl attractive, once, when he was nineteen and very drunk at a university house party. Ever since, he fancied himself something of a bisexual. It became a convenient way to dodge questions of this variety.

Noah laughed. 'Are they now?'

'Absolutely. My experience. What I want to say is to deal with oneself and with the challenges to self-identity is a prerequisite for any sort of meaningful relationship.'

He had used this line a dozen times, always on the back of the bisexual bit.

'Even friendships?' Noah asked, more to the air than to Austin.

'Yes, even friendships. If I don't know myself, how can anybody else know me?'

'Sometimes another person can know you better than you know yourself. My mother used to say to me: "I know you better than you know yourself, Noah."'

Recalling his own mother, Austin smiled. She would say nearly the exact same words every time he would catch a cold but pretend to be alright so that he could play with his neighbourhood friends. 'Sure, I think most kids hear that from their parents at one point or another.'

'So,' Noah asked, 'doesn't that negate your point?'

Despite the sudden wave of nostalgia over what he perceived as a less-than-happy childhood, Austin gave a coy smile. 'Maybe on some level it does. How much do our parents know us though? Sure, they know the basic things we need for survival as children and perhaps they are in touch with our material needs or wants up until a certain age. They know what toys we want or what cartoons we like watching on TV. What do your mother or father know about you now, though? My mother has no idea what I do for a living, what my hobbies are, or anything else meaningful. I don't bring these things up and she doesn't ask. If you go ask her now, maybe she would say she knows me, but she doesn't, not in truth.'

The reality of Austin's adolescence returned to him. His insides coiled into a ball made of rubber bands, bouncy but with little elasticity.

Meanwhile, Noah took a moment to think things over as his mouth turned slightly downwards. 'And what you are saying is the relationship with your mum is superficial?'

'This conversation is getting off topic, isn't it?' Noah's expression remained unchanged, so Austin continued: 'Well umm, yes, it is superficial but it's also indicative of what I said earlier about know-

ing yourself before you can know others — I don't desire that kind of deep relationship with my mother, so I don't let her in, don't explain to her or let her see the "real" me.'

Beginning to get nostalgic over his own upbringing, Noah countered, solemnly, 'Muslims are supposed to respect their parents above all else.'

Austin's mental images fast forwarded to his university philosophy class on world religions. He could picture the lecturer, his long scraggly beard and ruffled suit, every bit appearing the part of the hippie socialist he professed to be. He remembered this lecturer challenging the only burqa-wearing student in the class; how he felt sorry for her at the time. Not because she was being attacked for her religion, something she had more-or-less no choice over, being only eighteen and a first-year undergraduate recently moved out of her parents' home and into the dorms, but because he knew what it was like to not be able to change some essential part of who you are.

Thinking of his classmate, Austin replied, 'I'm sure there are many Muslims who believe that, yes ... Look, I've not turned my back on my mother, but I keep her very much at a distance.'

They carried on talking about relationships with parents and knowing oneself in relation to others for several more minutes before Noah ex-

cused himself to use the loo again. Austin was glad for the break in talking, as he felt most of the weight for carrying the conversation sat on his shoulders. He tried using those few minutes to make sense of what was happening. A coffee date turned into a dialogue on identity, ranging from race to sexuality and relationships. He welcomed this level of conversation, not often finding someone he connected with on a philosophical or academic level, but he also wondered about motivation — Noah's and his own. It didn't take more than a few minutes for Austin to put a deceptively simple label on his feelings for Noah: love. This was love. As cliché and improbable as it sounded in his head, Austin sensed a deep bond with Noah that intensified precisely because he was asking these deep questions mere minutes after meeting. It was too much for Austin's cup-half-empty mind to expect Noah to feel the same way, or to label it as such, but one question floated across his mind repeatedly that afternoon: Is Noah attracted to me in any way?

That night, Austin dreamed he was flying. He recorded the memory in his notebook the next morning.

My arms move like I am swimming, but swimming through air. Flying is not easy, I put effort into it, but I manage to lift from the ground and pass over buildings and trees. Everything is beautiful. The things about London I ordinarily find ugly have new life, such colour. I see the grey smog and revel in its ability to mask the harshness of the pavement running in all directions. I notice the very top spire of St Paul's, its clear and defined tiers of masonry. I see my mother. She smiles from the steps of the church. Her hair floats in the breeze. Such potential realised. It was brilliant. Sad to wake up today.

A recurring dream; he could recall having it as early as ten or eleven years old. The dream, its vividness and its strength, was something he connected with his mother. Where other children took pride in the professions of their parents, he took pride in his mother's appearance, especially her lovely long hair. Is your mum coming to pick you up today? He heard his teachers ask this many times, as they too propelled toward the magnetism of Millicent Smith, once even asking her to remove the pins from her hair so they could see the well-kept mane. But when she cut it off a few years later, everything snapped. His mother's

magnanimity was inexplicably linked to the length of her hair. When it became short, no one paid her any mind and she became like all the other mothers. Austin resented her for it. And the dreaming began.

The British royal family are legendary hunters. So culturally and economically important was their taste for the kill that eight Royal Parks were built within London alone to accommodate this proclivity. Beginning with Greenwich Park in 1427, these 4,900 acres became the domain of king and kingdom until with the increasing urbanisation of London, they were preserved as freely accessible open space and were converted to public parks in the 19th century.

It is The Regent's Park, first opened to the general public in 1835, which most impressed Austin. The south, east, and most of the west side are lined with elegant white stucco terraced houses. Streaming through the northern end of the park is Regent's Canal, an artificial waterway so breathtaking Austin could imagine he was in Venice or Amsterdam and not murky Northwest London. He knew this park with its lowly gardens and high-reaching hills well. It's where he ran twice a

week, three if he could find the physiological petrol.

Running up Primrose Hill with its lush edges and clear rounded skyline, Austin grew tired and lost the will to do another kilometre. He didn't feel like nodding his head to the beat pounding through his wireless earphones, an involuntary tick whenever he ran, his feet and head connecting in one rhythmical stroke. Finally, he gave up. Descending the hill at a slow pace, he noticed with agitation he was being watched. More than watched, stared at. By an older man who had made for himself a pallet of old blankets on a grassy part of the downward slope. Austin thought at first the man was homeless. His top was a tatty tartan and his shorts looked like they'd been cut with scissors and came up too high on his thighs so that bits of his butt cheeks peeked out if he moved even a little. Austin hated to see this. Homeless people not taken care of. Though he could never work out if the disdain he felt was directed to the government, with their clear and ignored responsibility to do more, or if it was a blame he assigned to the homeless themselves. Austin thought all this while still breathing heavily when the man called to him.

'Hello there —'

These words were crisp, almost melodic. Austin glanced in the man's direction and then immediately regretted doing so.

'— Yes, you there.'

Austin took out his earphones and folded them into the pocket of his running shorts. 'Excuse me?'

After all that staring and calling out, you would imagine the man, who Austin could see now was not wearing any ordinary tartan but in fact donned Burberry, would have something important or at least interesting to say.

'I said, "hello there" and I meant to follow it up with a hearty how are you ...'

Memory can play tricks on you. And this is ever truer when one is exhausted from running seven and a half kilometres around and up and down the expanse of Regent's Park on an unusually warm Saturday morning. Consequently, Austin put his head down for a moment and wondered if he knew this man. A former client? Maybe an old mate from school? He didn't want to be rude. He fiddled with the listening device through the pocket of his shorts and then reached for his iPhone, a nervous tick. It must have appeared as though he were preparing to walk away when the man spoke again.

'... I only wondered how you are. That's all.'

'I'm fine, thank you. Just fine.' And then, tucking his hands into his pockets: 'Do I know you? I'm sorry my memory is —'

'No, we don't know one another. Yet.' The man stood up. His denim shorts were more precariously short than they first appeared. Apart from his behind, his considerable manhood hung in the visible balance between his rip-cut jeans and thighs.

'I'm sorry,' Austin said, with typical regret. The readiness of the English to apologise for something they haven't done is remarkable. 'I'm not getting you.'

The man took two steps closer now. 'Come sit down. I feel sure we will be on better terms soon.'

The earphones found their way back into Austin's head then and he turned to walk away.

'No, don't go,' the man called out. He took another three steps forward and latched gently onto Austin's forearm.

Austin shook the man's hand loose. 'Hey, I don't know what you're on about.'

The man sat down now. Anxiety covered his face. 'You look so fit, I thought we could get to know one another. Let's see what we can get into this afternoon.'

The thought of looking fit made Austin smile but this was soon replaced with repugnance. This

was not how you went about getting someone's attention. It felt dirty.

'Mm, well, sorry,' he said, 'I'm on my way home.' He started off again and then turned and called to the man behind, to be sure things were clear: 'No, you cannot come with me.'

A tiny rush of wind greeted him as he turned the key into flat 83. The balcony doors had been left ajar. There was a little bit of genius in this oversight. The gust had a refreshing effect on Austin, which he much needed after an arduous run and a run-in with the pervert on Primrose Hill. As he stripped off his sweaty clothes and stepped into the shower, he tilted his head up and let a little of the water into his mouth. He felt more alive these days, and it was all thanks to Noah, or rather to that surprisingly enjoyable first date. Austin marvelled at how much transformation could take place in forty-eight hours. You can go from cynic to Pollyanna. The change could even be noticed in his appreciation of Abbey Road which he could see by straining his neck out the small window on the wall behind the shower and down the five floors below. The road was no longer the threat he always imagined it to be, replete as it was with tourists waiting in queue to make silly motions on the famous zebra crossing.

He smiled when he saw them now and felt lucky to live on such a historic thoroughfare.

Good moods always precipitated action in Austin. Whether this was because he found himself in a good mood so rarely these days or because he was the 'man of action' his tutors and colleagues always claimed he was proved immaterial. He would do it now. He would make the next move.

Reaching for his mobile phone, he sent Noah a message.

-- Hey there. Would you be up for meeting again? X

-- Yea, sounds good.

This hadn't been the raving with excitement response he hoped for. In the recesses of his mind, Austin expected Noah to write back some undying confession of love ... or at least respond with more than three syllables.

-- I mean, only if you are sure ...

-- I feel like, you know, getting to know you.

Austin knew! But thought, 'play it cool.'

-- I'd love to get know more of you as well.

-- Tomorrow evening? There's a bar in Bloomsbury ...

Oh, I'm so glad, he thought and practically smiled his face off. He sat in silence for a moment, letting the breeze do the work of filling the dead space with subtle noise. When the gale calmed, he turned on the television and began flicking through Netflix. He stopped on a cover image of two boys staring into each other's eyes with what could only be described as lust. One boy was white and the other had a lovely brown complexion reeking of exoticism. It wasn't hard for Austin to imagine himself and Noah as these two chaps engaged in a soft, playful romance precipitated perhaps secretly at first and growing in depth and magnitude over time. As the preview played on, the camera panned to a violent eruption between the boys and cut back again to a sex scene bordering on soft porn. The final scene showed the boys as men, walking hand-in-hand down a long country road. It reminded him of a line from a poem: *There is such a shelter in each other.*

It had been a fine afternoon.