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Memoirs of an Amnesiac

IT ALL BEGAN WITH a little notebook McNab bought to jot things into, quotidian things like shopping items, appointments, and so on. For a while before this he had started to notice that things had begun to slip his mind, and it was irritating, particularly because these things would often come back into his thoughts when it was too late to do anything about them. He'd get back from the store after driving home and walk in the door, muttering angrily, having just that moment recollected some item he had neglected to buy, the very thing he had gone to buy in the first place. And he would be forced to brood all evening and do without the item until the following day; it was either that or retrace the long journey to the store.

It was worse when he started to get the phone calls from snubbed friends or business people, insulted, aggrieved, demanding to know why he had missed their appointment, whatever it was, or why he had not apologized for not making it to dinner. Had he been unwell? Was anything the matter? What explanation could there be for his behaviour? At first McNab went into denial. It was impossible that he had forgotten to meet a friend for lunch. He liked nothing better than having lunch with friends. But after a time his increasing forgetfulness became notorious among all his friends, and when they met, particularly if he encountered more than one at the same time, they taunted him. "You'd forget your own head, if it wasn't screwed on," they'd all laugh loudly, and this was intolerable. His standing among his business acquaintances was affected too. He began to acquire a reputation for unreliability, whimsicality even. When his bank manager actually gave him a

notebook to help him remember things, McNab seethed with resentment over this patronizing gesture, and threw it in the nearest garbage bin. However the following day, having returned home with his pockets filled with unposted letters, he reconsidered the bank manager's suggestion and bought another, which he started to use.

For a while the situation did improve, even though he often neglected to make the notes in the book that he intended, or forgot where the notebook was, or where he had used it last, and all of this was irritating. Eventually he was forced to resort to the expedient of placing a notebook in every room in his house so as to always be sure of having somewhere to write the item he wished to remember. Of course, besides the problem of the notebook, there was also the problem of a pen or pencil, because often he would remember to write something in the notebook in the room he was in, but if there were no pen, by the time he had fetched a pen from another room he had forgotten what it was he wanted to write in the notebook. Another difficulty was that McNab's house had quite a number of rooms and it was not that easy to remember to look in all the notebooks, nor to remember which notebooks he had looked in, and which he had forgotten. He considered the possibility of maintaining a "master notebook" which would provide a kind of inventory of all the other notebooks, with a dated column in it for a daily record of which notebooks he'd looked in. However, McNab realized almost immediately the main flaw in this plan was that should he forget to look in the master notebook he would inevitably forget to look in the others, and if for any reason his absent-mindedness about this book continued for some days, he might forget about the existence of the other notebooks completely. Nevertheless, despite all of these impediments, and his having to set aside considerable time for looking in, or making notes in notebooks, his friends and acquaintances were once again assured of his reliability, his daily needs were met in terms of purchasing the necessary items for his household, and all went well for a time. The notebooks proliferated and he began to file them away in a large cardboard box in his cellar.

This respite was short-lived however, for as time passed his memory deteriorated still further. He kept all his appointments but he now began to forget personal details about his friends, sometimes even their names, and what distinguished them from the bank manager, or people in stores. He started larger notebooks,

filled with biographical sketches of his friends, illustrated where possible with a photograph. He listed the subject matter of their conversations when they met, the friends' personal qualities, preferred style of clothing, distinguishing features and so forth, and continued to do this long after it became plain, even to McNab himself, that the task was impossible, infinite, that he could never rely on remembering to write these details down, to remember which friends' biographies were in which notebooks, where the notebooks were at any given time, even allowing that he could remember whom he had been talking to by the time he returned home. He felt his life being swept from his grasp in a tidal wave of senseless, disconnected information. He could no longer rely on his instincts to guide him in these matters either, so he kept writing in his notebooks in a desperate attempt to maintain order in his life, even though the system of recollection, of which details went where—the household details and personal appointments in the little books, the important and intimate details in the big books—even though the entire system had broken down, lost its coherence, its *raison d'être*, if indeed it had ever had any.

McNab's life was now an embarrassment. He became reclusive. He managed to provide himself with his daily requirements of food, but otherwise even the simplest details of his life now needed to be written down. Recipes for making toast, coffee, boiling an egg, using a towel, tying shoelaces, paying bus fares (he could no longer trust himself to drive), sophisticated transactions such as making bank withdrawals or sending letters, all required a record, and it was in making these records that McNab passed most of his day. It soon became impossible to engage in matters of any complexity, and as a result he avoided contact with people.

Now at this point a *dea ex machina* enters our story, in the form of the bank manager's daughter.

One morning McNab received a phone call from the bank manager. After a lengthy preamble to establish who the bank manager was, that they had frequently met before, that they knew each other quite well in fact, from the canoeing club they both belonged to, the conversation turned to the subject of McNab's failing memory.

"You did appoint me executor of your will," the bank manager reminded McNab, "so obviously I'm concerned for your welfare. In my opinion," he went on, "it's only a matter of time before you forget completely that you're losing your memory and you stop keeping those notebooks altogether."

"What notebooks?" McNab replied.

"You see—this is the very point I'm making," the bank manager said. "I don't wish to be presumptuous, but have you even washed your face today? Brushed your teeth? Have you remembered to buy yourself something to eat?"

There was no reply as McNab considered this barrage of inquiry.

"It's vital that you maintain those notebooks," he said. "And I think that you should hire an assistant to help you."

"An assistant?"

"Yes. Now, my daughter is home from university and would like to earn a little vacation money. She would be the ideal person to help you. She could come over for just an hour or two a day, so that at least you can be sure that your vital needs—shopping lists, correspondence, and so on—are being taken care of. And she'll hardly charge you anything."

McNab reluctantly agreed.

The following morning he was sitting in his living room, drinking a cup of boiling water and watching birds hop about in his garden, when the doorbell rang.

"Yes?" he said to the girl on the doorstep.

A convoluted introduction ensued before he let her in. "I hope you won't think me rude," he said, "but there really isn't much point in introductions. I doubt if I'll remember your name in even a minute from now." He showed the girl around the house. As they went from room to room she discovered several notebooks that appeared to have been neglected for weeks.

"I wonder if I ever did that?" McNab said to her, pointing to an entry in one of the dining-room books.

"I think you must have," she said. "The fact that you're here at all—well, you must have!"

On one occasion he was so delighted by an entry that his laughter rang through the house, and the girl happily joined in; on another he had reached the next room of the tour and looked back to see the girl still absorbed in reading the previous room's notebook.

"These are fascinating," she said. "Absolutely fascinating."

McNab was delighted. "Do you think so?"

"I've never seen anything like them. I think you could publish these."

"Publish them?"

“Yes,” she said. “There’s quite a magical quality to them. You’re so determined to write the thing down before you forget it, everything becomes terribly intense. You should certainly think about publishing them.”

McNab was so struck by the absurdity of this suggestion that he said nothing at all.

“So, I suppose you get the idea,” he said, after the tour was concluded. “I may have forgotten one or two rooms, but I’ll have to let you explore for yourself. Anyway, for your purposes, from now on you’ll only need to keep the one book, in one place, and I’ll just tell you what to write in it.”

“That’s fine,” the girl said. “Is there anything you’d like me to write down now?”

“Well, what is your name, anyway?” McNab asked.

“Jennifer,” she said.

“Well, put that in,” he said. “That’s a start.”

Jennifer came to McNab’s house every day. To some extent her activities were routine, as unlike her employer she began to recognize patterns in the notes, and simply prepared certain items a week in advance—shopping lists in particular. McNab explained that there were two criteria for making the notes. Either a note should record some household necessity or a duty that he had to undertake, or it should simply refer to an event or an experience that he would like to recollect at some future time, a pleasant walk for example, a conversation with a friend—one or two of whom still phoned him—or a piece of music heard on the radio. (He seemed reluctant to confide in her his private thoughts.)

“What was that piece of music called that I liked the other day?”

Jennifer would shuffle efficiently through the book. “Well, according to your notebook it was a piece of piano music by Ravel. Do you remember how it went?”

“No,” he would say, “But I do remember that I liked it!”

Jennifer later remarked to her father how poignant she had found McNab’s pleasure in this obscure, half-recollection.

As the weeks of Jennifer’s vacation passed she read her way through all of McNab’s notebooks, and when it was time for her to return to university, she brought the big cardboard box up from the cellar, filled it to the top with as many of the notebooks as she could carry, and took them all away. Needless to say, McNab did not notice their absence, although he did feel curiously sad, or

even disappointed, for some time afterwards. The bank manager arranged for a retired woman, a widow, to take over from Jennifer, although her view of McNab was much less sympathetic than Jennifer's had been.

"He's absolutely off his trolley," she told her friends. "But then he's well-to-do. Doesn't even have a job. Whereas you and I would be strapped down to a table and given electric shock treatment if we carried on like that, he can simply please himself." And she emphasized 'please himself' as if she were saying 'read dirty books,' or 'steal from charity.'

When *Memoirs of An Amnesiac* was published anonymously three years later, the literary world was divided in its judgment of the book, and there was some speculation as to the identity of the author. McNab was unaware of the existence of his autobiography, but by this time he had forgotten almost everything that had ever happened to him, as well as his own name, which he forgot every night when he went to sleep. (The widow, Mrs. Carradine, would call him by a different name every day, just to amuse herself.) He might well have seen the book at some time in a shop, but even if he had he would not have recognized the work as having anything to do with him. The bank manager had long ago given up trying to communicate with him and so never informed him of the enormous royalties being deposited into his account by his daughter. A journalist did once turn up at the door, but thanks to Mrs. Carradine McNab was using a fictitious name that day and he assured the journalist that no one of that name lived at the address.