

A Night at the Memory Motel

By
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You think you would know your own mother, right? Most of us spend our entire lives with them, until they're gone, of course. Then you can't ask those pesky questions anymore. This is a story of my mother that I never knew anything about. Parts were tricky to process, other parts were just fascinating. I learned a lot. The names have been changed to protect the innocent (Although *nobody* is innocent in this story!)

After two years getting my Associates Degree in business management from Atlanta Metropolitan Junior College, I graduated to run my mother's business. My mother passed away about five years ago from a long bout with brain cancer.

Mom and I returned to Atlanta when I was about five. A hippy, in the true sense of the word, she beat an old blue and green pickup truck to death, traveling, seeing and experiencing the country, and singing in bars. For reasons I never asked about, she loved Atlanta, and that's where we settled when I started kindergarten. Actually, she loved Savannah but said that she couldn't afford to live there, so she opened a hotel here. I always suspected that there was history here, but this story will explain just how much history.

So, one winter afternoon in January, three British gentlemen and one large African-American gentleman entered the Memories Motel on Route 41. They stuck out like sore thumbs around here. They were dressed like the rock stars they are, all in their 50's I would say. The quiet one maybe a little older. The Black man's eyes never settled anywhere. He was constantly looking around and never said a word. I knew the three Englishmen immediately. Who wouldn't?

"Can I help you gentleman?" I asked over the counter in our front reception area.

“Yes, young lady,” one said with a familiar British accent. “We need four rooms, please, for at least a week. Preferably next to each other if possible.”

And so began my journey through a completely unknown chapter in my mother’s life.

Being a single “mom and pop” hotel, not one of the big chains, we were almost always pretty slow, so four rooms at the end of the upstairs hall was a very easy request to accommodate. I got them checked in, grabbed extra towels, and made sure they had everything they needed.

I had just started to settle back into some paperwork, when the gentleman who had requested the rooms returned. He was now dressed in jeans, a plain t-shirt, ballcap and sunglasses. As he approached me, he removed the glasses and looked around, seemingly to make sure no one else was around.

“Excuse me, young lady. I was wondering if you could help me with some information.”

“Certainly sir, what can I help with?” I asked, to be honest, slightly intrigued.

“The name of your establishment here, is it a chain? Are there others, perhaps in the Savannah area?”

“No, sir. I know there used to be a *Memory* Motel in that area, but it closed many years ago. My mother started this hotel in the early 1980’s when I was a little girl. I know it’s technically a hotel, but the M’s work well together.”

He looked taken aback. “Your mother?” He thought for a second, looking almost confused. “Her name wasn’t Hannah, perchance? Sang and played guitar, very pretty?” he asked.

My turn to be surprised. “Actually, it was! Did you know her?”

“I did. I did. Wait, you said *was*. Is she, gone?”

“I’m sorry, yes. She passed away about five years ago. She had brain cancer. How did you know her?”

“I’m very sorry to hear that. We, ah, had a brief relationship. Ah, can I ask something else?” obviously changing the subject.

“Sure.”

“I am looking for some property around here. It’s an old school building. It’s on the corner of Eighty-Eight and Elm. Do you know it?”

“I don’t, but I can call you a taxi to take you there. That work?”

“Yes! That would be perfect. Let me consult my friends, and I’ll call down for the taxi when we’re ready. Thank you,” and he turned and went back up the stairs.

A brief relationship? I thought, as I returned to my paperwork. *Did Mom have a fling with. . .? Wow!* I smiled, not surprised at all.

“My friends and I are in need of some assistance while in your beautiful city. We would like to hire you as a guide for the week. Is that possible? Can some associate cover your duties?”

I had to think for a second about logistics. January was not a busy time of year, by any means, and the idea of helping and being around these guys was an opportunity that I couldn't resist. Then he told me how much they'd pay me. I was in! I called Suzie in to cover for me. Suzie had run day-to-day while I was in college, after mom died.

It was just him and I initially. We took my car. I picked him up out front, and we headed toward the address he gave me. I knew where it was, I just wasn't familiar with that part of the city. As we drove, I said, “So, full disclosure. I know who you guys are. I have a thousand questions, but I’ll be very professional since you’re paying me. My name is Savannah.”

“Thank you for your discretion, Savannah. My colleagues and I appreciate it more than you know. Please call me Mike,” he said with an infectious grin. He was amazingly charismatic. I smiled back. “Savannah, can I make a personal comment?”

“Sure,” I replied as I drove.

“You have your mother’s eyes. Hazel. A very fetching color.”

“Thank you. She was very special.”

“She was. I remember our brief time together quite fondly, and I’m saddened by your news of her passing. I too have lost ones dear to me, and I know the pain.”

We sat in silence for a while, both lost in thought.

Finally, I broke the reverie. “Ah, Mike, can I ask a question concerning your business in Atlanta? Where are we going?”

“Yes. As you probably know, we’ve been touring and recording for decades, and we’ve decided to make a big investment, not in New York or LA, but here in Atlanta, and build a recording studio. Our people have scouted out some buildings that should be conducive to our plans. To be honest, ah, ‘Richard’ and I have very fond memories of our time in the American South and are excited about the prospects here in Atlanta.”

The address led us to an old abandoned public school building. Two stories tall, the sandstone school was a big building, but small by today’s standards for a school, with the windows and cornices of turn of the century architecture.

We stood in the gym. The echo was perfect. That room would make an amazing recording studio. Even I could tell that. I knew the story of Jimmy Page and Led Zeppelin when they rented this big mansion called Headley Grange. The crew set up the drummer’s extra kit in

the foyer of the house and when John Bonham tried them out, the echo went straight up the entryway stairwell. That's what we heard in that gym!

The floor was surrounded by six foot high walls, giving the feeling of being in a pit. There was hardly any room for sidelines. Playing basketball in there had to have been tough. The "bleachers" were actually just concrete tiers that had to have been really tough to sit on for long. Pointing to the far end of the gym, and a slightly elevated stage area, he stated, "that is the perfect place for a recording booth."

We worked together for the rest of the week. I helped coordinate through a real estate agent I knew, and through my bank for the purchasing process. The guys were very appreciative of my efforts and, as "Mike" had said, my discretion.

One afternoon, I ran "Richard" to the property. He had a small amplifier and a guitar case with him. He plugged in his guitar and amp, as I nosed around a bit in a side room, still full of old chairs and desks left over from years past. He turned the amp up a little and started playing. I stood spellbound. He turned the amp up a little more, and a little more, and a little more. The sound was phenomenal. I also couldn't believe I was the only one in the room lucky enough to listen to him play guitar!

On the way home, Richard turned to me and asked if I minded if he smoked in my car. I told him it was fine. He cracked the window and lit up. Then he turned to me and said, "He's right. You do have your mother's eyes. Cool color. She was a sharp one, that Hannah. She certainly had a mind of her own, and she wasn't afraid to use it. She could sing like a bird too! Great voice. Cool chick."

"Did you two, ah, you know?" I asked before I realized what I was asking.

He didn't miss a beat. "No, no. Shame that. Singer got there first," he said with a wry grin. "Woulda liked to, you know." He took a long drag from his cigarette. He began speaking again without really exhaling, the smoke just leaking with his reply. "No, we were just buddies, really. Played guitar and sang some songs. She was just cool to talk to. We were right at the beginning of that massive '75 tour. We all knew it was going to be a slog, so it was cool to just hang out around the pool and catch our breath. After we left here we did something like ten thousand miles through fifteen states." He took another long draw. "I remember your mom was headed to Boston to play. She was excited to get the news about a gig in some bar." Another drag. "Hard to believe that was twenty years ago now," and he laughed his smoky laugh again.

"Fancy a drink?" Mike asked on our way back to the motel. He sat next to me, the other three in my backseat.

"Sure," I replied, not being able to resist. We dropped the three off at the hotel, and I took us to a quiet place off the radar. Mike appreciated that.

"I don't have a lot of memories of our brief time together. Playing music and singing mainly. She was very pretty but in an unconventional way. Her nose was a little crooked, teeth were too. I've known a lot of ladies. Your mum was a rare breed." He smiled at the memory, looking right at me.

"We spent that first night around the pool, all of us, smoking and drinking beer, playing music. It was a magical night. I think we even wrote some things that night too. The band did a warm-up gig at the university the next night, and afterward your mom and I went down to the beach. It was late, but I remember a huge moon. You could read by it; it was so bright." He looked lost for a minute, then began speaking again. "The ocean was wild that night, like her.

She insisted we play in the surf. Scared me to death. Not like chilly old England at all. I just remember her with her moonlit hair wet from the ocean spray.” He took a sip of his beer. “The next morning, we took her truck back to the motel. The band and I got on a plane for Baton Rouge, and she headed to Boston. We never saw each other again.”

That week was a whirlwind. I carted them, one or all, back and forth, sometimes several times a day. I arranged whatever they needed. We talked mainly about business, and Chas, the quiet one, gave me the idea of turning my little out of the way hotel into an exclusive spot for the famous when they visited Atlanta.

One trip back, with just Mike, I had to bring up something I’d been thinking about all week. “Sir,” I laughed. He smiled. I started again, “Mike, I did the math, as I’m sure you have too. I don’t want anything from you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the money this week, but more than that, I really appreciate the stories. You guys, helping me learn more about my momma. God, I miss her. Just to hear more about her has been super cool. Thanks.”

On the last day, I took them to the airport. Both Mike and Richard handed me cards with their personal numbers. We hugged like old friends, and they boarded their private jet.

The following week, I received a personal phone call from my bank manager. The mortgage on the Memories Motel had been paid, in full. It was mine.

As per Chas’s suggestion, I now cater to the music and movie celebrities who come to Atlanta. I’ve installed state of the art security and really fixed up the rooms. It still looks discreetly like the old Memories Motel on the outside, but is now making new memories, thanks to the guys and the memory of my momma.