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Editor's Note

We love March. Probably because, as a certain disappearing tabby once observed, we're all mad here. In that spirit, we've invited quite the eclectic group of guests to our little tea party this month. Our fifty-second issue opens with "Little Monster," a tale of slow burning from Aida Ibisevic that will give you chills. Next up is Vajra Chandrasekera's "By Good Angels Tenanted," a story of two unusual sets of genitals—each terrifying in its own way—and the people who live with them. [Insert "teabagging" joke here.] Then the fun just keeps on keepin' on with Christopher Cassavella's amusing metafiction narrative, "Joe's Theory." That one is followed by "The Memory Thief," a bittersweet zombie flash-fiction piece from Brianna Gielow. Lastly, William Blomstedt introduces you to the roommates you never knew you wanted in "The Scuttlebutt on Pluto."

So pull up a chair and hang with us for a while—there's plenty of unbirthday cake to go around. If you forgot to bring a hat, you can borrow one of ours. And don't mind the dormouse; he always sleeps in there.

— Laura Garrison

Little Monster

Aida Ibisevic

(Sarajevo, the winter of 1992-1993)

The winter came quietly, uncalled for, and alone. The UN plastic on our windows froze, while the barbed wire holding the remains of our crippled balcony rusted and hung. More of our friends left the besieged city every day, and even the pigeons, those old citizens, disappeared along with the cats.

The city was beautiful only on the first day of snow, when the crisp, white blanket camouflaged the dirt and holes. Every other day, its neighborhoods fell under the weight of manmade storms. Set on fire, the city flared up and glowed, but in our building the temperature stayed below zero.

The cold, bold and angry, crawled inside us.

There was a communal silence. When we talked, we talked quickly, sometimes just to say a word, and watch it freeze. To survive the war was important. But first, we had to survive the winter.

I spent the time reading in the corner of the dining room. Bookshelves hung around me like a protective kiosk. Wrapped in blankets from dawn till dusk, I read story after story, book after book. I paused only to get a new one, or to make a cresset after all the candles were gone. *As long as there are books, the war can go on as long as it wants*, I thought. Losing myself in words, I was free. I was Alice in the land of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I lived in Pearl

Buck's fishing village and then sailed the seas with *The Old Man*. I crossed *The Bridge on the Drina* on my way to meet *The Egyptian* and his pharaohs. I was everywhere, except where I really was.

Each night, Mama made the bed for us on the living room floor. She put it together with all kinds of ingredients from comforters to heavy coats. The five of us slept together for safety and warmth. Brat and Sestra slept on one side of me. Mama and Tata slept on the other. As I was the warmest, friendly bickering ensued each night to persuade me which way to lean.

To melt the frozen feeling and fall asleep, the five of us rubbed our limbs and rode imaginary air bicycles. We exercised, did aerobics, shook together, and spun around. But the cold was relentless.

One evening, Mama and Tata told us a big shipment of wood was coming to us, enough timber to keep us warm for the rest of the winter. But each morning it was to arrive, instead of the wood, more snow came.

Betrayed, the three of us spiraled into evil. I slammed doors and spoke only in *yes* and *no*. Brat shivered, sneezed, and caressed frosty fingers whenever one of them passed him by. Sestra feigned illness. By the end of the week we forgot about the wood. I returned to my book corner, to Kiš and Kafka, to Fitzgerald and Flaubert.

In bed, a line of separation was drawn. I had chosen my side.

The wood arrived weeks later when a small truck paused in front of our building and left behind almost a hundred bags filled to the brim. The five of us spent the day dragging them up floor-by-floor, like stubborn canines. That night, we proudly admired

our rows of neatly stacked wood until Mama and Tata reminded us that we did not have a wood stove.

When at last they announced that the stove was on the way, Brat, Sestra, and I waited for it with the excitement reserved for the arrival of a new sibling. Our stove would be a locomotive that would cook four meals and bake two loaves of bread, while keeping all the rooms warm at the same time.

But from the moment the stove arrived to our doorstep, and Mama and Tata struggled to bring it in, we hated the thing.

This metal chest was a black box barely standing on four rheumatic legs that threatened to disintegrate at any moment. When moved, it squeaked like chains of a rusty swing and had to be raised on bricks just to reach the improvised chimney in the kitchen. It had a small oven, and below the oven was an even smaller opening for the wood to go in, and then there was a stovetop that could maybe hold a skillet or two. Even standing on a pedestal of tiles, this stove looked like it couldn't keep a family of squirrels warm.

Brat, Sestra, and I laughed hysterically.

"Tata went to the surrealist market again."

"Where is the gypsy that made off with our real stove?"

Mama and Tata tried to make the best out of the situation; the stove was all we could afford. They were set on setting up the fire. But after several hours, all they had to show for it were bloody hands and bruised spirits.

By the nighttime we admitted to ourselves that the winter had won. We now knew it was a matter of days until we would wake up too numb from the cold to call for help, just like Mr. Moustache,

our warm-hearted neighbor who froze to death at the beginning of the winter.

We bundled up together again and fell asleep listening to the mortars work their way from one end of the city at *Čaršija* all the way to *Ilidža* at the other end.

Deep in the night, sharp flashes of light woke me up. I thought about getting the five of us ready to run to the shelter, but everyone was awake and staring at the ceiling.

I followed the collective gaze upward and froze. A fire engulfed the walls. It licked them with dizzying speed, encroaching on us. It was too late to go anywhere.

Terror shook us for several minutes as we waited for the end.

After a long while, we were somehow still alive. The flames were content dancing on the ceiling and the walls. There was no indication they would be coming down for us.

We finally realized that what we were watching was only a fire's reflection originating from the stove. After we fell asleep the stove, which we named Little Monster that same night, worked itself into frenzy until it was orange. The entire night it churned, burned, and sweated until its color illuminated every surface from the kitchen through the hallway, until it finally reached the living room to wake us up.

For the first time that winter, we were warm enough to uncover, pull away from each other, and find our own space on the bed. Quietly, we waited for the morning to arrive. Brat smiled at me, and the smile leapt from one face to the next.

Shamans were not as happy as we were that morning.

The rheumatic beast quickly became the pet of the household and the topic of every conversation.

“Did you clean up the ashes? Does it have enough wood chunks? Did you sweep the chimney?”

Most of our neighbors acquired a Little Monster of their own. “Our stove cooks the soup in twenty minutes!” we’d hear them say in passing.

“Then you need to see ours! For soup, it only takes seventeen and a half!” we bragged.

Ugly Little Monster became the measure of beautiful. It thawed us. We started to play cards. We shared stories. Brat pulled out his guitar and we sang. Before, we had spent time together as strangers. Now, we introduced ourselves to each other once more.

One would never guess it by its size, but Little Monster had an insatiable appetite. As if it were some prehistoric god, we sacrificed fifty, sixty wood chunks to it every single day. This problem overshadowed everything else, because January was not yet over but the wood dwindled to a few bags, and so did the fire. We now started it only once a day, to cook the food when all of us were at home.

“We need to burn other things,” I told Brat and Sestra one morning.

“Like what?” Brat asked.

“Let’s start with old shoes,” Sestra recommended.

The burning of unnecessary objects turned into a movement over the next few weeks as we scorched things with increased intensity.

At first we targeted old things no one would miss: old toys, shoes, clothes, and mismatched housewares.

But then we burned the objects that had no purpose for the times we lived in. These were the tennis rackets, skis, picnic furniture, and a Ping-Pong table.

We moved on to the wooden vases and wooden jewelry, vacation souvenirs, fruit baskets and pickling buckets, old fabrics and curtains. And some rugs Mama kept for the renovation after the war.

There was also an old fence we sacrificed, some broken-down shelving, plastic bottles and carts, and finally the picture frames.

Except for water, everything burned.

Then we figured to get rid of the ironing board, drawers from inside the dressers, smaller shelves, and the extra chairs.

Things burned too quickly, so we moved on to an old gramophone, hundreds of vinyl records, an old radio, and a computer keyboard.

Next, we burned the rugs from all rooms but the living room.

And while we were at it, we burned the tables, side tables, bedside tables, and coffee tables . . . even regular tables, plus one small couch.

In the end there was nothing else left to burn, but there was still plenty of winter left.

Delirious with the cold, one morning we gave in to the thought that abused us for days.

“The books . . . we can burn . . . the books.”

We paced ourselves at first. We burned only the tourist guides and How-To's. Then we burned children's stories, fables, and fairy tales. H. C. Andersen stuff.

We set all of our magazines on fire. Detective novels, comics, and love novellas were next on the list.

Fast reads burned fast. Pocket books provided enough fire for a coffee or tea.

The encyclopedias and dictionaries were enough for one meal. Thick tomes and school textbooks were our favorites. Due to the quantity and quality of their paper, these books sometimes cooked two meals each. Some books were so thick that we only needed a chapter or two, or from “A” to “C,” to prepare the dinner.

“I will write a novel on how to bake a bread with two chapters,” Mama used to say.

“Good. Then I’ll burn it to cook the rest of the dinner,” Sestra joked.

Our needs murdered the guilt. Stories in the books were not as important as our Little Monster and its wood habit.

During the night, as I was lying in bed between Brat and Sestra, I listened to the lively sound of fire. In those moments, I enjoyed life for the first time in a period of many gray days. Maybe there would be an end to the winter after all.

It’s night again. It’s frigid. The stove is lit, but the room is dark. I hear shuffling. Slow, sinister steps. I rise to check the front door. Before I reach it I see several unknown characters in the kitchen and a horde of strangers barging into our home.

They see me. I see that they see me, but they say nothing. I scream, but all that is coming out are gasps. Terrified, I run back to bed to wake everyone up. Mama and Tata will know what to do. But they are in a deep sleep.

The strangers follow me. They climb over our bodies as if we are a human staircase. They go for the shelves. With bare hands, they take out hundreds of books.

After emptying out the library, they float over to the stove. They shuffle the books and spread them open. Here and there they read a poem or a few paragraphs. Then they tear the pages out and flick them into the fire.

I crawl behind them and watch them from the floor. I'm growing weak. Every book that's ripped apart, every page that meets the fire, weakens me more. Even I am surprised at this pain.

Book by book, story by story, the paper gets ripped up and set on fire. As Little Monster is warming up, I am bending over in agony. The word heat is vicious.

I finally recognize some of them.

It's Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Zola, and Hesse. They are sitting around the kitchen table like gambling buddies, deciding which book to get rid of next.

Near the corner of the stove, leaning on a burning brick, The Count of Monte Cristo is shaking with fury. Next to him, Anna Karenina is holding two of Yesenin's baby dogs.

Freud's Ego and Super Ego are baking in the midst of two heavier bricks. Id dies laughing.

I hear Roman legends recited in the sandy rivers of Egypt. I hear a samurai sword clanging as a hero prepares to deal with a lost fight.

In the background, I see Dreiser and Huxley. Steven Zweig too. They chat indifferently. Sarajevo is no place for their stories anymore. Now, they form a line for the stove. Fearlessly, these three walk into the fire.

The others follow them. An endless line of characters, heroes, artists, and writers hold hands. One by one they walk into the licks of flame.

Everyone is burning. They are disappearing in the blaze that doesn't have an end. As soon as one line ends in smoke, another line starts. All of them are in a hurry to leave our home through the chimney.

I try to pull them out, but they are smoke before I reach them. I drag my body to the water containers as quickly as I can, but they also vanish. I can't save these people.

Little Monster is scarlet red. The intense heat is shaking its tiny legs, pushing them to angles they cannot sustain. They are threatening to take off.

I'll never get to know these characters, these people, these artists, so I rush to at least touch them before they're gone. I meet them. They meet death.

I am barely standing.

Suddenly everything stops the way it began. Everyone is gone now, and the fire is extinguished. Remaining is the ash-storm stronger than even the winter, more cruel than the war, and the five of us, we are choking.

AIDA IBISEVIC was born and raised in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She lives and plays in the USA.

By Good Angels Tenanted

Vajra Chandrasekera

The girl at the bar at the Cabane Bambou tells me she has a vagina dentata.

I do not tell her I already know, or that I had followed her from Ouaga to Abidjan over the last few months. Instead, I smile and say I do not mind. It is past midnight, hot and loud, and the music is a terrible, jittery remix of *Ziés Dédjas*.

“They all say that, did you know?” Fatoumata says. She laughs with her eyes, but not with her mouth. “Men always want to find out what it’s like.” She does not speak Jula, so we are speaking French. She is not ouagalais, but I do not know where she was from before she got there. I am lucky to have noticed the report in the newspaper about what happened to some fool would-be rapist, and to have understood what it meant.

She is not tall. She wears short hair and big gold hoop earrings. Creamy brown skin, a shade paler than mine. Excitement coils and unfurls in my lower belly. My skin is electric, and the thing inside me wants to have her now against the bar, in front of all these people.

I raise my eyes to Heaven and sucker-punch myself in the balls.

If you are a woman, or a man who has led a charmed life, I should tell you that being hit in the balls does not hurt the same way it hurts to get punched or cut. It hurts like you are a bell, and someone has rung you. You have to wait until the echoes die down.

Fatoumata helps me up, laughing. She is asking a question I cannot hear with the ringing in my ears. My eyes are gummy from tears. I wipe them and down my drink without feeling it. None of the people around us give me a second glance.

I am used to ringing my own bell. Sometimes it is the only way I can think straight. After the echoes fall silent and I can stand again, there is a blissful, bruised silence from my libido.

"Okay, Aristide," Fatoumata says. She has no fear, only curiosity. I think it is a side effect of what she is. "I told you my secret. I think you have something to tell me too, no?"

"It is my cock," I say, wretchedly. "It is haunted."

Fatoumata is good in bed. Hungry. She fucks like someone who knows what they are. I used to know what that was like. I no longer get to dance to my own music.

The sheets were probably white once, but they are yellow now. The room must smell like cigarettes, but after a month I cannot smell it any more. All I can smell is Fatoumata's sweat.

She will not let me go down on her. She says it is weird.

When we fuck I can feel the teeth sometimes. Not scraping, but still disconcerting.

"It's no different from a blow job, no?" she points out. "Men never worry about that."

After, she asks if I have a cigarette. When she lights up, she says she does not smoke.

"Only after sex," she amends. She is poking around my toys, naked and curious. I watch her breasts, soft and heavy. He inside

me should be sated, but there is a quiver of interest all the way up my spine when they jiggle.

"All this stuff, what is it?" Fatoumata asks. "Like this?" She holds up a device, two curved pieces of wood held together with adjustable screws at the end. Suitable for holding something between them, squeezed tight.

"It is called a humbler," I say. "Fifty dollars on eBay."

"I think there're things you haven't told me yet about your ghost," she says.

I do not know his name or hear his voice. I am not possessed. Whoever he was, the part that was a person has gone wherever dead people go. I do not know if he literally exists only in my genitals. Sometimes I imagine him as wispy threads of ectoplasm all strung out through my nervous system, wrapped around my spine like cotton candy, extending tendrils into my nerves and my glands, maybe even all the way up into the brain. I have spent a lot of time on the Internet trying to understand how my insides all connect to each other, and I do not. But my genitals are his home in every other sense, because that is what he is: hunger and lust.

Every minute, every hour, every day for five years, I have done nothing but sate his lusts as much as I can and punch myself in the balls to get some peace and quiet.

"Damn, Aristide," Fatoumata says. She pats my balls. He likes that, I can tell.

The toys and the occasional punch are about as much discomfort I can put him to when I want to subdue him, which he tolerates because he is not in real danger.

“Or maybe he likes it,” Fatoumata says. I stare at her in horror. “No, no,” she says, catching my expression. “I’m sure he hates it.”

“I do not even like sex very much,” I say. “No offence.”

“You’re good at it, though,” Fatoumata says, but this has a sheen of positivity I distrust.

I flop back on the bed. She drops the toy to come sit by me.

“Anyway, I tried taking a meat cleaver to my cock,” I say. “But I cannot. That is the kind of danger he understands, and he will not let me swing the knife.”

“Exorcism?”

“It appears he is not religious.”

“Negotiation?”

“He does not talk.”

She sighs. “Well, then. Are you sure?”

“I have been looking for someone like you for so long.”

She straddles me, and I can feel him rise like an ocean wave, all through me and into her.

She kisses me, and bites down hard.

VAJRA CHANDRASEKERA lives in Colombo, Sri Lanka. His work has been published in *Apex* and *Clarkesworld*, among others. You can read more of his work at <http://vajra.me>.

Joe's Theory

Christopher Cassavella

Joe tells me to close my eyes.

I do.

Then Joe tells me to picture someone who is plain-faced.

I say, okay. Eyes still closed, I picture actor Mark Ruffalo.

Joe says there's a firm rule in place for whomever I have just pictured. The rule is they have to be zany or they have to do something zany or that something zany has to happen to them. He tells me I get to choose which of these scenarios I like best and then gives me the gift of adding in all the *zany* details.

Okay, I say.

Make sure it's all very unlikely, he tells me. Make sure whatever happens they —

I fucking got it, I say.

I choose choice three: something zany happens to them. I picture my plain-faced Mark Ruffalo becoming a homeless leper and traveling around America, desperately trying to convince people he's actually Mark Ruffalo. He forces his autograph on people, begs for scraps of food, and loses a limb in every state.

I have everything pictured, I say to Joe.

He says for me to keep picturing whomever I've made up and to now add a few people into the scenario like some family of my plain-faced person and maybe throw in a couple of strangers he's met through his zaniness. Now, Joe says, we have a good set of characters and they're talking to one another and this is extremely

important because this equals dialogue, and dialogue and what's happened to my plain guy (Mark Ruffalo) births a byproduct called conflict. The outcome of this conflict leads to a moral, a lesson, a truth. Finally, Joe says, picture your plain guy either smiling or crying at the end of all the mishap and then add in some other obtuse element. I picture my Mark Ruffalo crying and holding a grapefruit.

Then Joe tells me to open my eyes.

Now, after all that, he says, the viewers, the readers, the listeners, me, have all been entertained and come away with some meaning which relates to their life. We've just made up a story, Joe says. Simple shit to do, he claims. Every story that has ever been made follows this exact formula.

Of course, this is just his theory. Joe has a lot of these awful things. Another theory of his concludes a handsome man has never once gone bald in the history of the world. My favorite of his theories, though, states people actually live forever because the time before your birth and after your death aren't time at all, time is only a thing when you're living. It's the only theory of his that might be true.

"Think about it," Joe goes on. "Name one story where some sort of zaniness doesn't play a major role. Or a story where something highly unlikely doesn't happen. All surrealist writing, all that horror bullshit, sci-fi, is crap. That's easy to write. Give me a book where nothing at all happens to anybody, that has no dialogue and has no description, that's the book I want to read. I should try to write it. It'd be a challenge and nobody has the cojones to take it on."

"I'm sure there are stories where crazy things don't happen but I can't think of any off the top of my head."

"If this was a story, I'd take out a gun and hold this restaurant up."

"Lower your voice."

"Everybody would panic. Maybe I even kill a person or two. Then throw in some suspense, some boring outcome and there you have it. And because it will cause conflict and entertain whoever is watching or reading about me doing this thing it will get their mind off their terrible existence which is the very definition of entertainment. And if the story is successful enough they'll learn a thing or two and maybe see the world a little differently. But I wouldn't do any of that because this is real life, and nothing in real life ever happens."

"Okay, so I guess we should add that to the pile of stupid things you've said? Things happen all the time." I don't know why I argue with him. But then, interestingly enough, I think: dialogue.

"Happens to who? To people you don't know, right? To people you've read about online or saw on your tv." He leans back in his chair. "Who knows if those assholes exist? I don't even know if ninety-nine percent of the world exists out there. The Pacific Ocean might be a gag, all those little Russian villages across the world with their fucking matryoshka dolls fitting inside one another might just be someone having a good laugh on us, having us think the world is this big place when it's not any bigger than what our eyes can see. What's ever happened to you? I can't think of anything ever happening to you. I know nothing has ever happened to me. I'm proof with a heartbeat that nothing ever happens to anybody."

“We’re going.”

I shake the last drip out and say, “All right, give me a second.”

“We’re leaving and we’re not paying is what I mean. It’s my new thing. I don’t pay for food in restaurants anymore. If I told you before we ate, you would’ve never came out with me.” He shakes his head and wrinkles his nose. I’m not sure if it’s because there’s a bad smell in the bathroom or if he’s just getting more pretentious as the days go—pardon the pun—down the toilet.

“No, we’re paying,” I say. “I’m not doing that to them here. I’ll pay for the two of us, can’t be more than twenty bucks for a pie and two sodas.”

“I just can’t let you pay. I haven’t paid for food in three months. Here’s your coat. Let’s go.” He takes a bite of his folded ‘za and stares at me.

“Why? Why do you do this all of a sudden?” As I put my coat on, I decide I don’t want to hear Joe’s latest theory. “No, tell me later.”

I reach into my pocket for my wallet. It isn’t where it should be.

Joe is holding it and smiling. “I’m not giving this to you,” he says.

“We’re not fourteen. We can’t be doing shit like this,” I say, “just give me the money.”

“Not a chance,” he says. “I swear to you, there isn’t a thing you could do to get me to hand it over.” He begins to walk out of the bathroom.

I can’t believe we’re actually going to do this. But I think: conflict.

“Come on, Joe,” I plead one last time, “this is stupid. Let’s just pay.”

He shakes his head and I know he cannot be reached. He is the dead person behind that cheery voicemail. As he opens the bathroom door, from behind us comes a voice.

"You ain't really gonna leave without paying, boys?" says this voice.

It's the plain voice of a man, and it's coming from inside one of the stalls. We can hear the stall door unlatch. I'm not sure if Joe is as frozen as me because terror gets an A+ at making you forget about everybody else in the world.

The stall door swings open. I feel like this stall door swings opens slowly, like slow motion is employed here for the benefit of people that aren't me or Joe.

I watch as the man steps out. I find my eyes to be useless, only able to stare at his boots.

Uninterestingly, I think: suspense.

His boots are black and muddy. As my eyes go up, slowly, they scan unimportant *details* like his tucked-in checkered button-down, the tattered wool peacoat, a belt buckle that is in the shape of Texas, but then I see he's missing a hand. In the hand he still has, he's holding his once-attached hand. Finally my eyes reach his plain face.

Of course it's
Mark, fucking, Ruffalo.

At least I think it's him . . . his face is dirty and pale. He has a big, ugly bruise over his left eye, and most of his hair is missing, and in the places he does have any left it's very long and white.

"You two planning to dash and dine?" he says.

Joe comes forward and says, "I think it's called dine and dash."

"I don't give a fuck what it's called!" he says. "Throw me the wallet. And then lock the door."

Joe does as he's told. Mark picks up the wallet and shakes his head when he sees how scrawny the numbered bills are.

"All right, then," he says. "You boys know who I am, right?" He takes turns looking to me and Joe.

"I think so," I say.

Joe says, "No. Should we know you?"

"Seriously? You've never seen one of my movies? I've been in a lot of them. I know you've seen some. *13 Going on 30* was a decent one, I was a chubby little kid in the beginning of that one. How about that one where I played a brain doctor on Shutter Island? Or do you need me to fucking prove who I am? I will. You'll see."

"No, Mr. Ruffalo. We're sure it's you," I say.

Joe, being an asshole, shrugs.

Mark doesn't notice Joe's shrug. "Good to hear that, because I really am him. You really don't want me to prove it."

"No," I say. "It's you."

"All right, good. So, who's got the pen?"

"A pen?" I say. "Oh, I have one, in my coat pocket."

"Well, take it out."

I listen to him. With the pen in my hand I hold it up.

Mark inspects it. "It's red?"

"Yes," I say.

"I prefer black or blue. Even green is all right by me." He shakes his head and mutters something to himself. "You know something? It's fine. Red ink is okay. Who wants to go first?"

"For what?" Joe says.

"My autograph. Which one of you wants it first?"

"Not me," Joe says.

"What? Why not?" Mark says.

"I don't ask anybody for their autograph. And I won't accept it, neither," Joe says.

"What?"

"Joe, not now," I say. "Just take his fucking autograph."

"No, I can't accept another human being's signature. I won't allow myself. No offense, I'm sure you're whoever you say you are, but I don't need another man's autograph."

By now my mind has settled and it's started thinking a little better. I think: just a big coincidence, right? But this is much too *zany* to be some stale coincidence. This is all just a little too like the scenario I made up in my head back at the table before.

"I'm not happy to hear that. Usually, people just take it. But I don't want to get all nuts like that big green guy I played. How about something to eat? Could you do that for me? I've barely eaten anything in days. Last thing I had was half a grapefruit. If you do that for me, we'll be even." Mark says.

"That I can do," says Joe. "We still have some slices left on the table." As Joe leaves the bathroom he mouths, "Who?" to me.

Mark and I look at each other. "What about you?" he says. "I'm signing something for you. What do you want me to sign?"

"You could sign this, here." I give him a pamphlet I was handed when walking to the restaurant.

"Good." He smiles as he scribbles his name down with the only hand he has attached anymore.

I take the autograph and thank him.

Joe comes back with two cold slices and gives them over to Mark. He places his unattached hand on the floor and eats in a hurry.

"Can we go?" I say.

"You really want to leave?" He thinks about it. "Sure, I guess you could. I thought we'd talk about some of my movies. But okay, have fun dashing and dining. Don't you dare sell that autograph, though!" He laughs, but I know he is serious.

Joe and I leave the bathroom. We have to leave without paying, because Mr. Ruffalo has my wallet. Outside on the street, I tell Joe that was all too close to the scenario I made up in my head before.

"A coincidence?" he says.

"I don't think so. I made most of that shit up when my eyes were closed. The long hair, the missing limb, begging people for food. I'm telling you it was almost exactly how I pictured it all. I mean, it was the same fucking guy."

Joe is silent as he ponders what I've said. "That is pretty zany, then. I still never heard of him though. An actor?" He shakes his head. "Maybe my initial theory about nothing ever happening in life isn't right." Joe says. "Unless . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Well, I think we just learned coincidence is another gimmick of story."

"But this isn't a story," I say.

Joe looks at me. He opens his mouth, "Just entertain the idea we might be in a stor—"

"No," I say. "No more of your stupid, fucking theories tonight. At least not until we've had a few beers." But then interestingly, I think: plot twist.

Joe shrugs me off.

I find myself walking along beside him. I am smiling and holding Mark Ruffalo's autograph on a Chinese take-out pamphlet.

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The Memory Thief

Brianna Gielow

Martha's cravings were strongest for brains. Her infected roommate bit her on the face, and her brain was the first major organ to start decomposing. She soon lost her grandmother's name, her multiplication tables, and all memory of second grade. It was devastating. She set about acquiring new brains immediately.

Word was spreading with the disease. When she got out of her building and onto the street, people were crowding around the televisions in restaurants and bars, watching the six o'clock broadcast. Some people were laughing, holding their arms out in front of them, pretending to drool. The televisions hadn't yet mentioned that the contamination had reached the city.

Martha's first kill was a teenage boy she ran down on Exchange Street. He had a noticeably high forehead and a funny little flip of hair that turned upward above his face, like an advertisement. His friends stood in the doorway of Treehouse Toys, watching and shouting but coming no closer as Martha worked her way through his skull.

His brains were soft, all emotion and very little knowledge. Martha devoured his ideas of love. Along with memories of popularity schemes, the wrinkled hands of a grandfather, and a proud red bicycle, most of the brain she tasted was peppered with romanticism. When she had swallowed the last scrap, the boy's memories were still with her. They hadn't mentioned that in the warning on the news, either.

After consuming her second kill, a young woman who wore a cross around her neck, Martha began to get nervous. The new brain had *Thou Shalt Not Kill* burned into almost every tasty morsel. The guilt was so strong that she stumbled back to her apartment and didn't eat brains for a whole week. But her hunger was excruciating, and eventually an advertisement for an Alzheimer's treatment on TV sent her back to the streets.

Martha found her next brain outside of The Roxy. His head was filled with bad pickup lines and midnight trysts which her other minds took no pleasure from. There were some surprises, though, like a crystallized memory of a departed mother, and a very funny joke about a whale and a tourist.

Meanwhile, Martha was losing the smell of her father's cologne, the words her first boyfriend had said to her, the history of ancient Greece and her natural distaste for intimacy. But now she had the image of a sunrise over a desert in New Mexico, even though she had never been west of Niagara Falls, and she knew the taste of ice in the Himalayas, even though she had never climbed a mountain.

She became unstoppable in her hunger, and not even the fear of damnation could keep her from lusting after the brains of a man who had studied paleontology, or a child who still believed in the Tooth Fairy. No mortal with a memory was safe from her.

When they quarantined the city and the numbers of uninfected brains available were dwindling, Martha had to become more resourceful. Her younger sister, Kim, trapped and hiding in her apartment in the East End, didn't hesitate to open the locks for her. The distorted image in the spyhole of her door must have hidden any change in Martha's face. Kim did fight back once she saw Martha's filthy clothes and slack jaw up close: in the struggle,

Martha forgot her last name. Luckily, Kim was able to remind her of it again.

When she was finished, Martha sank onto the stained couch. Scraps of memories glistened in the moonlight that came in through the windows, but what was left of Martha's curiosity was satisfied, and someone else's laziness kept her from gathering up the leftovers. It didn't matter that the original Martha had almost rotted away, or that she couldn't remember where the apple tree in the photo on Kim's coffee table was from. The branches outside the window were beautiful enough.

BRIANNA GIELOW was born in 1992 and began writing six years later. Her first genre was Harry Potter fanfiction. Over the years she has dabbled in other genres, including science fiction, magical realism, creative nonfiction, and love letters to Jorge Luis Borges. She studied creative writing at Bard College at Simon's Rock and currently attends Columbia College Chicago, where she will be graduating this spring with a BA in Fiction Writing. Check her out at briannagielow.virb.com.

The Scuttlebutt on Pluto

William Blomstedt

Having a Señor Frogs in the house didn't turn out to be a great idea. During one of our emergency financial meetings, Whoopdale proposed that this 'casual' and 'laid-back' chain could open a branch in the closet in his room, claiming it would help pay the bills as well as improve the social life of the house. Though there were some detractors, Whoopdale's impassioned speech swayed the fence-sitters gently down onto his side without any limb-breaking falls, and when the vote came in a big YES, Señor Frogs jumped at the opportunity. They had been looking to corner the spring break market in our neighborhood and had not been able to break the ice (or Styrofoam and pine-pitch) with the pack of Walruses next door.

Once they set up shop the first few weeks were fun, as they always were at a Señor Frogs, but when we ran out of money it wasn't possible to board that plane to escape with hangover and a horrendous sunburn. There was no escape. We had to continue everyday life with the pumping music, the sweaty, inebriated couples making out in the bathroom and the mysterious shots that under-dressed waitresses continually forced down our lips.

But were they really so mysterious? Or even forced? No one could avoid seeing the cans of paint thinner and crates of Paul Newman salad dressing they picked up from the loading dock every morning. And we could have worn a sort of preventive pacifier or even a knight's helmet while walking past Whoopdale's

room, but we often needed to use our mouths for other things during the day and lifting up a heavy, metal visor just to blow bubbles was a drag. Furthermore, no one really needed to walk past Whoopdale's room—it was at the dead end of a hallway. But the Paperclipery was sort of nearby, and whenever you needed a fresh paper clip (for once you get used to fresh ones it's almost impossible to go back) you found yourself only a few minutes away. Then, just thinking you would inquire on Whoopdale's health, the blowing of the whistle would pull you in, followed by the shot, the dancing, the whistle, the shot, the whistle ad infinitum, or until your wallet was empty, whichever came first.

The whistling was the final pin in the balloon. Even Whoopdale admitted that the frequent use of cheap plastic whistles was probably irritating to those in nearby rooms, specifically the library, the meditation room and the silent debate arena. It's a well known fact that constant whistling can destabilize even the strongest mind, and Señor Frogs employees often burn out after only a few months to join the ranks of marching band leaders, gym teachers and life guards in whistling disorder support groups. This is also why most birds are insane.

After enough underhanded comments and overhand serves were directed at him in the Breakfast Nook, Whoopdale decided to put an end to the Señor Frogs and evicted them with an industrial fire hose. Then Frank arrived with a yak-sized dose of Lysol and after a few hours of scrubbing it was back to being a normal closet.

But since Whoopdale didn't own any clothes other than what he wore—a tight-fitting giraffe-skin suit—he decided to outfit the closet with a blanket and a lava lamp and find a roommate to fill the social void left by Señor Frogs, which at that point felt vast and

unquenchable. Soon we opened the local newspaper and found our standard ad highlighted in the classified section:

Wanted: Adventurous spirit to live in a house among many others. Neighborhood is tepid but the school system beyond repute. Rooms remain uncountable and omnifarious. We hold family meetings regarding all decisions, and these often end with water balloons, square dancing or both. Sometimes we have fun, but mostly we debate serious world issues and clown farts. Those with experience in fountain maintenance and mariachi appreciation are given preference. Do not inquire if allergic to shellfish, the color orange or Jackie Chan. The house recently had a check-up and is considered habitable for those with a strong constitution. Construction workers frequently ogle its foundation and interior decorators will immediately mention the curtains. Generally speaking, we embolden the philosophy of the beanbag chair.

Only two days passed before we got our first applicant, a guy by the name of Dyson Bartlett. Along with his resume, he sent a studio-taken photo with a laser-beam background, a list of his favorite fruits/Nicolas Cage movies and a crayon drawing of a palm tree on a tropical island. Whoopdale was pretty impressed. He hadn't asked for artwork as a part of the application, yet here Dyson sent in a fine piece which showed a sensibility of palm fronds and the glint upon the water was well beyond the halls of any preschool. But despite the impression made on Whoopdale, Dyson still had to go through a house screening process before he was formally invited to live there. This was where things got a little ugly, for he had to go through the preposterous, turbulent, unseasonable process known as the rumor mill.

The rumor mill was something we weren't proud of but, like the liver or xiphoid process, it couldn't be extracted without many

serious, painful surgeries. Doctor Heartguts claimed he knew the procedure, but he probably just meant lobotomy which is his solution to everything from ringworm to a sore throat. So, as soon as the name Dyson Bartlett was cast from Whoopdale's mouth to a casual passerby, the cruel yet fascinating horror of the rumor mill began to creak into motion:

"Dyson Bartlett," said Gary, "Wasn't that the name of the guy who stole Mickey Mantle's left hand before the final game of the 1992 Stanley Cup which the Broncos lost in twelve?"

"My sister knew Dyson Bartlett," said Sarah Bows née Bowson. "And he never used a chair. Not once. He had these beady eyes and big ears and constantly looked around, always hanging upside down squeaking and screeching about the number of mosquitoes he caught using echolocation. A real pain in the butt. She also said he lived in the upper part of the barn out back."

"Dyson Bartlett, Dyson Bartlett . . . " Grandpa said. "Sure, I knew a Dyson Bartlett when I was just a lad. Lived in the same neighborhood as me, and he'd come over some afternoons and we'd go fishing, or he'd come just for my mother's corn pie because she had the best corn pie in town, everyone said so, even the good Pastor Kettington who was allergic to corn, blow up like a fish if a kernel touched his lips, but he couldn't resist when my mother put a slice on his plate and we always had to call the doctor. My mother, bless that woman, she'd always have one just coming out of the oven when we were done with the whippin's, for we didn't have school back in those days, just a good whippin' every morning from about about six o'clock to eleven o'clock and then sometimes from twelve-thirty to one o'clock, or until Pap's arm got tired, and it didn't often, for he thought that that a whippin' did us

a trifle better any summin' or capital-namin,' and afterwords we'd go fishing and I couldn't even sit down, because of the whippin,' and that other lad would be laughing at me and my sore keister the whole time. Actually, to think of it I never really did like him . . . what'd you say his name was again?"

"I've heard about Dyson's mother," said Merv. "Just bar stories, dirty old men having a laugh over a beer, and you know how they exaggerate. But if even half of what they say is true . . ." (shakes his head). "What I've heard, it's pretty, how do I say, adult. Not for kids. Apparently back in the day she was really something, but now she's not as . . . ah . . . energetic as she used to be, you know? Pretty grown-up topics. Racy stuff. Don't really know if I should . . . Any kids around? No? OK, like this: cataracts. They say she's been having some trouble when driving at night and reading in low light, so she'll have to get surgery soon. Good, right? This too: the carpel tunnel is starting to bother her on the keyboard. Like I said, just bar tales, and nothing for kids' ears."

"I'm a cream of wheat guy myself." Zedekiah said. "And I don't mind sitting at the table with the oatmeal eaters, but as soon as they try to push their rolled or instant business on me, that's when everyone will see the ugly side of Zedekiah."

"I've heard of Dyson," said Samantha Sand. "My neighbor's cousin told me about him once. She said her mailman had accidentally delivered a package to his friend Steven, whom he once went to Jambalaya Camp with, you know, the summer camp in Port Arthur, Texas, where kids learn about Cajun lifestyle and cooking. Well, Steven got the package and opened it to find a whole bunch of dirt without any note, and the return address was smudged, but he immediately thought Dyson sent it because of

some inside joke they had going about the Pope. But then beneath the dirt Steve found documents containing some highly sensitive state secrets translated into fourteen languages, including American Sign Language. Well, red-beans-and-rice friend or no, Steve certainly called the authorities who took Dyson in for forty-eight hours of interrogation, followed by another session with my neighbor's cousin's mailman, during which my neighbor's cousin as well as my neighbor were called in as character witnesses, until they realized the whole thing was a big mix-up, the State Department had just mislabeled the box, and the authorities bought them a couple rounds of drinks at the Pentagon's cafeteria which ultimately got them to the blackjack tables of Jersey City that night with Hillary Clinton, but that's a story for another time."

These rumors hung around the house for days, dirtying the hallways, soiling the carpets and even scumming up the sink as we tried to do the dishes. Finally Miss Hattie took each one of them by the ear to the washtub for a good scrub-down, and when they came out they didn't look that bad. In fact, they appeared much like the neatly dressed, fresh-faced boy who appeared at the doorstep a few minutes before that week's family meeting was set to start. He looked a bit nervous as Frau Boobeater led him in, and why shouldn't he be when there were so many of us scrutinizing his every breath, but after perching himself on the stool he rubbed his hands on his khakis and cleared his throat to address us.

"Hi everyone, thanks for having me here. My name's Dyson, I'm twenty-two years old, not married and I write code for an accounting software company out on the beltway. It's a good job with a steady paycheck. I live at my parents' house right now, and

they're pretty cool, but I think it's time to move out, and I saw this in the paper."

A flood of murmuring washed through all of us, but that happens in any proclamation, be it a fire in the bell tower or the bubble-tape flavor of the day is grape. Samantha Sand, who was in charge of Resident Application Services, stood up and adjusted her hairpiece.

"Tell us, Dyson," she said. "What do you like to do with your free time?"

"Well, mostly just hanging out with friends and my girlfriend, Molly. Sleeping late on weekends is nice. Sometimes my friends and I get together, and we'll share a bottle of rosé while watching some crazy movie like *Ulee's Gold*. Or I know the bartender down at the Chili's off the beltway, and he'll sneak me out a plate of nachos which someone only ate half of. "

"Very good. We have now reached the question and answer session." Hands shot up all around the room and Samantha pointed at Fred Boss, Esq.

"Do you find agronomy a futile pursuit?" Fred Boss asked.

"Um . . . " Dyson scratched his neck. "My girlfriend keeps a spice garden, and sometimes I like to break off a leaf of rosemary and smell it."

Hands again, this time Sarah Bows née Bowson.

"Is your left foot bigger than your right?"

"I am missing the big toe on my left foot from a vacuuming accident when I was little, otherwise, no."

Many hands again, with some of them waving frantically. Fred Furtherschool was chosen.

"What do you think about Pluto's role in the solar system?"

“I always kind of liked Pluto,” Dyson said.

Everyone in the audience looked from face to face and knew he had said all the right things, especially with Pluto which we were fond of as well, and as group mentality is wont to do, the final wave built up and burst through the dam and we began cheering for Dyson Bartlett, the newest member of our house. The secondary mariachi band marched into the room with a spicy number and everyone began singing, dancing and laughing through a storm of confetti and streamers at this joyous addition to our fair household. Dyson looked at the scene unfold like he had won the latest five-dollar radio giveaway and received many hugs, playful slugs on the shoulder and stinging high-fives. Only when the mariachi band began their second song did Dyson begin blowing in the plastic whistle hanging around his neck, bring out a salad bottle of clear liquid and pour a hefty shot into Whoopdale’s upturned mouth.

WILLIAM BLOMSTEDT is a geographer and animal enthusiast. Currently honeybees are his number one, but he also has worked shoulder to shoulder with grizzly bears, elephants and an occasional bird. He currently lives in Edinburgh, Scotland.

On the cover:

"REVENGE"
Betsy Streeter

BETSY STREETER writes and draws science fiction, speculative fiction and comics. She once devised a way to score infinite points at Space Invaders on the Atari. She has a cartoon in the Smithsonian Astrophysics

Observatory's traveling exhibit on black holes. She is a regular contributor to The Funny Times and her work has appeared in *Literary Orphans*, *Fiction Vortex*, *Perihelion Science Fiction*, *Utne*, and many other fine publications. She lives in Northern California with her husband, two kids, a cat who thinks he's a dog, another cat who thinks he's a cow, and Ashley the tarantula (also known as Kick-Ashley or Bad-Ashley). See her work at <http://www.betsystreeter.com>.

