

# Jersey Devil Press



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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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## Editor's Note

Most wonderfully revived from the miracle elixir of our recent temporal holiday to the Victorian era, we now return to our regularly shed-yuled monthly programme with this ripping box of delights. Happy September, darlings!

— Laura Garrison

# Change

Mahesh Raman

It begins with the smallest of things. I stand in front of the window, looking through the books on the windowsill for my tattered copy of *Animal Farm*, because I want to quote a line from it in a paper.

“Sweetie,” I call out to my wife Rachel, who lies on the couch reading a magazine, her back to me. “Where’s *Animal Farm*? I can’t find it.”

She twists her body around to look at me. The sun collides brilliantly against her blonde hair. Her green eyes are lit up like emeralds. “You gave it away last year to Kate, remember? She wanted to read it. She took it with her after the party.”

My memory isn’t terrible, but sometimes—if I am preoccupied at the time that an incident occurs, or if I don’t think about it again for a while—I tend to forget things. Rachel, on the other hand, never forgets a thing. It’s almost as if an infinite tickertape lies spooled in her head, inching forward as it records steadily and infallibly.

I remember this party vaguely, but I do not remember giving the book to Kate. It was a valuable possession; it was one of the first books I owned. On the inside I had written my name in a childish scrawl.

“Are you sure? I love that book. I can’t believe I gave it to her.”

Rachel turns back to her magazine. “She said she would return it in a week. But I think both of you forgot.”

I feel a surge of irritation. I don’t know what to direct it at. Puddle rubs against my shins, almost like a cat, though she is a

fifteen-pound Shih Tzu. I push her away with my foot; she grunts unhappily, and I feel bad, so I bend down and kiss the white patch on her forehead. She looks at me balefully with her one eye; the other one is closed up permanently. We brought her home from the shelter that way. I tug at her ears the way she likes them tugged. She inclines her head, pressing her ear flaps against my fingers. I used to find it endearing until the vet told us she had itchy ears due to a recurring infection.

Rachel isn't paying attention anymore and I give up looking for the book.

The next morning I am on the toilet when I realize that Rachel is buying new toilet paper. I don't like it. I am a creature of habit.

"Rachel!" I yell through the half-open bathroom door. "Rachel!"

"What? What happened?" She calls out from the bedroom.

"The toilet paper. It's different."

"What?"

"You bought different toilet paper."

"No. Of course I didn't. It's on an Amazon subscription."

"No, it's different."

"It's not. It's really not."

Later I wash my hands, grab a roll of the toilet paper, and march over to where she is sitting, doing something on her laptop.

"See. It's too thin. It's not the same one."

She looks at it, frowning. "It's the same one."

"It's not."

"I'll show you." She opens a tab on her laptop, goes to Amazon, and in a minute or two—while I stand there unhappily—she brings up our Amazon order history.

"Look. Same brand all the way for the last five years."

I scan the list. "Maybe they made a mistake. It's different from what we get normally. It's thinner."

"I can't tell the difference."

I'm unhappy but I don't know at what: the fact that the toilet paper is too thin, or that something has changed in my life, or that my wife does not believe me.

I stomp off into the closet to find something to wear. Puddle raises her head and looks at me with what is either concern or a hope that I will take her out for a walk. I shake my head no at her emphatically and she drops her head back on the floor and sighs loudly, a shockwave of fat radiating down her body and ending with a swish of her tail.

The next morning I realize that the shower-head is different. It has five jets instead of three. I know it used to have three jets because I researched shower-heads for a week online and bought this one from a startup in Menlo Park trying to save the world by building more efficient bathroom fixtures. I walk out of the bathroom swaddled in a towel and open up my laptop, dripping water on the living room carpet.

"What happened?" Rachel asks.

"Nothing, just checking something."

The picture on the startup's website shows a shower-head with five jets.

"What the fuck," I say.

Rachel looks at me with what is either concern or a hope that I will go for a walk with Puddle.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yes, yes," I reply.



I take my phone out and make a same-day appointment with my doctor.

He is a little chubbier than I remember him. And he isn't bald anymore.

"Things are not as I remember them," I tell him.

"Forgetfulness," he writes on his notepad.

"No, I mean, things are different. I just remember things differently."

He looks up at me. "Okay. We'll run a bunch of tests. We'll have the results in a few days."

The next day the brand of soap is different. After that it's the color of the curtains. The white squares on the bathroom floor become black hexagons.

I get the scans done at the hospital. The parking lot is on a different side of the hospital than it used to be. The air dancer at the car dealership next door is orange instead of blue. As I lie in the CAT scan machine, I think worriedly of all the things it might be. Perhaps I have some kind of brain tumor. I wonder what Rachel will do without me. Perhaps she will marry again. Afterwards I want a cup of chai and go to the Indian place on El Camino opposite the hospital, but it does not serve chai and has never done so, the boy at the counter assures me.

On day 10 the walls of the house are a deeper shade of blue. I pull up old photos of the house from my external hard disk. I hold the laptop with the photos in full-screen mode against the wall. The colors match perfectly.

The doctor calls me in to discuss the results.

He now has a bushy beard that it must have taken a year to grow.

“Perfectly normal,” he says. “No signs of a tumor. Nothing at all wrong with you.”

I feel an odd mix of relief and anxiety.

“I was worried it might be Alzheimer’s.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Alzheimer’s. My father had it. I was worried it might be that.”

“Can you say that again?”

“Alzheimer’s. A-L-Z... Alzheimer’s.”

“Hmm. Haven’t heard that one before. Maybe it has a different name in Northam?”

“In what?”

He looks at me with what is either concern or a hope that I will walk out of the door. He scribbles something on a note. “Nothing neurologically wrong with you. Here is a therapist referral. Go talk to her!”

At home I open up Google to find out what Northam is. Page [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) not found, it says. I turn to look at Rachel.

Her hair is brown. She has a tattoo on the back of her neck.

On day 18, my appendectomy scar disappears. On day 22, Puddle looks up at me with two wide, trusting, amber-brown eyes. On day 24, she turns into a French Bulldog. I start a journal of these changes. “Today there is a tulsi plant in the yard that wasn’t there yesterday,” I write.

The next day when I open the journal to add an entry about the color of my socks, it says: “Today there is a coriander plant in the yard that wasn’t there yesterday.” I walk outside and examine the plant. It smells like the curries my mother used to make.

I walk back to the bedroom, where Rachel is still asleep on her side of the bed. I get back under the covers and examine her

carefully. It occurs to me that all her parts are different: her breasts are larger, her lips thinner, her hair no longer curly. I lie in bed with a stranger. Yet this is the same person I married. This intrigues me in a ship-of-Theseus sort of way.

I reach out and touch her. She stirs slightly. I lean into her and kiss the tattoo on her neck. She turns her face to me, her eyes still closed. She's smiling softly. I kiss her on the lips and sink into her body. The woman who was my wife did not like me touching her as she slept. The woman who has taken her place wants me in her.

We make love every day. She becomes something else: raven-haired, coffee-eyed, sapota-skinned, a giver of gifts. Her voice is low and throaty. Sometimes I do not like the changes; but I remind myself, this too shall pass, and soon it does. I pour myself into her, fitting her strange contours.

When I talk to her I am careful and non-committal. Rachel now has a brother she did not have; he lives in a city I have never heard of. She has strange hobbies and interests, and sometimes she disappears for the entire day into the outside world. I do not leave the house; I am not sure what lies outside anymore. Puddle is now a parrot, so I do not have to walk her. I stop working on my papers. I do not see the point; tomorrow I might have a million dollars in my bank account, or zero, it does not matter what I do today.

I wake up eagerly each day, scanning for changes. I run my hands over Rachel's body, looking for deltas, tiny or large: piercings, tattoos, the shape of her nose or the curve of her eyelids. I walk around the house, searching. There is always something.

"I love you," I say with my eyes closed one morning. I say this a lot now to the sequence of women who are Rachel.

“What?” says a thin, high-pitched voice that is at once intensely familiar and deeply alien.

I open my eyes and look to my right, where Rachel lies. Her eyes are wide open; they are jade green, twin pools in a landscape of pale sandstone.

“Nothing,” I say calmly. I sit up, step into my bath slippers, and walk to the bathroom. I step around Puddle as she snores, one good eye slightly open and fixed on me. In the bathroom the roll of tissue paper is soft and thick. It falls noiselessly on the tiny white squares that tile the bathroom floor.

**MAHESH RAMAN** is a bicoastal writer and computer scientist. His work has appeared previously in *Necessary Fiction* and *Corium Magazine*.

## What Big Brains You Have

Louis Wenzlow

“What big brains you have,” they kept announcing over the loudspeakers. It was some twisted inside joke that seemed to portend continued struggles—to say the least—ahead.

We shuffled obediently along the queues to the kiosks at the front of the airplane hangar. There was a giant sphere-shaped structure or craft (something awesome and probably awful!) through the doors beyond the kiosks. We called it The Mystery, since no one knew what was inside.

Dissent had been crushed within days. Their microscopic fly-drones were everywhere. Three strikes and you were out! Lucky for me I was still on deck, but the streets were littered with the *live free or die*, and everyone with a strike or two had NAUGHTY BOY/GIRL tattoos carved into their faces. All it took was the slightest quiver of resistance and the drones would buzz over to brand and cull the herd. On the bright side, you could say whatever the fuck you wanted.

“These cocksuckers will pay for this,” one of my neighbors in line declared with a smile. “Just wait.”

Was this guy for real? There was clearly no hope beyond potential survival, beyond whatever lurked in The Mystery.

When I finally got to a kiosk, the screen instructed me to attach the two electrodes on the counter to my temples and then select either the word “good” or “bad” as horrifying, titillating, and even beautifully profound images flashed across the screen. It was some kind of Rorschach test that was generating content from my

subliminal mind! Amazing shit! I learned more about myself in the three minutes of the quiz than I had in the last ten years of my hum drum wasteful life.

“DON’T TRY TO FOOL THE MYSTERY, IT WILL KNOW,” flashed across the screen a few times, when I guess I was trying to game the process by projecting a better self.

The quiz wound down with a music video with me as the front man singing a song I never wrote but that was clearly mine. I could have listened to it all day, but then the screen instructed me to take off the electrodes and walk through the doors into The Mystery.

Once you got past the kiosks, it was one person at a time, just me and myself walking down the yellow brick road, I mean literal yellow bricks (fucking comedians!), down the final stretch, opening the double doors, and stepping through some sort of electromagnetic embryonic sheath into The Mystery, and just as I was stepping in, with half of my body still in the known, and the other half already in the sphere, I heard someone shout “Take this you assholes!” It was the smiling idiot from the line. And then there was an explosion. I could only imagine the carnage he caused—the rest of me had slipped away before the shower of shrapnel could reach me.

It was kind of a weird moment, inside the sphere. I could sense The Mystery reacting to the explosion, laughing at it, a bit like we humans would laugh at a funny part in a movie, without fear, just amused, no pity at all. But who was I to judge? *We are so fucking different from one another*, I projected toward its all knowingness.

I was in a space without light or darkness, neither empty nor full, except with intimacy and awareness. A cloud of shimmering mist, what I imagined as fairy dust, gathered around my body and

then swirled all over and I think into me. I could feel a tingling on the surface of my brain, not painful, for the most part. Whatever this was seemed to heighten my connection to The Mystery.

“Do you have a name?” I asked it.

The Mystery found that hilarious, just as it did almost everything. “Would you like a cigarette?” it responded.

But before I could answer, before I could say *yes, a cigarette would be very nice*, The Mystery revealed that its offer had been just another joke. *Get it?*

I wasn't sure what to think or say. I tried smiling stupidly to convey my abject subservience.

*How could you have a cigarette without lips or lungs? Get it? How to enjoy a final smoke when your body was already processed, already synthesized, already gone? Get it now?*

And I too was laughing then, both of us, all of us, as one, laughing.

**LOUIS WENZLOW's** short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cease Cows*, *Cleaver*, *Eclectica*, *Fjords*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *Jellyfish Review*, *The Molotov Cocktail*, and other places. He grew up in suburban Chicagoland and now lives with his wife and daughter in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

# The House by the Banyan Tree

Ahimaz Rajessh

Seven decades ago  
(one September)  
a storm swept a solitary house  
into the dense woods that had roots  
deep underneath the red earth  
rendering the house a blasted mess  
of concrete and wood.

As the family left (having returned and picked  
up what was intact), the girl—  
having noticed (and having wished) a floating dandelion  
settle on the same spot the house once stood—  
stopped, so did her brother.

'Yamma, look,' she said,  
'the house is growing.'

If the future is made out of the past  
and the present, the past cannot ever  
not be present, the present is the ever-passing  
past (or so the parents thought) then how is one  
to have a firm handle on the present?

They did not look back.



When the children called again and looked  
back, they were poof—gone.

The parents (it's said)  
were transformed into  
the pillars of the house  
the dandelion built.

The perplexed children  
who ran into the house  
were never seen again.

The girl (it's also said)  
climbed the banyan tree  
in the vicinity to the very  
top of its roots and the boy  
who ran through the weeds  
into the woods grew up to found  
the mobile House of Flux.

**AHIMAZ RAJESSH**, a Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee, has been published in *Jellyfish Review*, *The Aironaut*, *Nanoism*, *Strange Horizons*, *Pidgeonholes*, *7x20*, *Cuento*, *200 CCs*, *Flapperhouse*, *Malaigal*, *Thalam*, *Manal Veedu* and *Padhaakai*. His writing is forthcoming in *Milkfist*, *Liminality*, *Surreal Poetics* and *unFold*.

# Stay a Little While

Nicholas Siegel

At first, I thought I was wet, but it was just cold air. I stood up from the couch to trace where it was coming from. All the windows and doors were closed. I made my way around the room, feeling at the walls, until I got to the fireplace. It felt like I was in a meat locker.

I popped my head inside and looked up, but it was too dark to see anything, and my glasses fogged, so I went back to the couch. My mug of coffee was starting to cool down, but I sipped at it anyway and waited, watching the fireplace. Eventually, I saw her bare feet, tinted blue, drifting down. It took her a while to land. She had always been dramatic about her entrances. She grasped at the top of the fireplace with her hands, her nails chipped and black, and ducked into the living room. She was dripping, but the carpet stayed dry.

"Why now?" I said. "You could at least give me a call first or something." She had only come back once before. I found her curled up in the bathtub. She must have come up from the drain.

"John, I miss you," she said. "When are you coming?" Her irises had faded so that her eyes looked almost entirely white, like eggs.

"How am I supposed to know that?" I hadn't stood up. I didn't want to encourage her. "Why don't you stay where you're supposed to and wait until I get there?"

"What have you done to our living room?" She was looking over at my liquor bar. "I knew you'd drink more once I left. Is that Scotch? Where the hell is all the bourbon?" I'd never liked bourbon

much. I thought that would be one thing I could get rid of after she left.

“It reminds me too much of you,” I said.

She approached me, and my glasses started to fog again, so I took them off.

“You look nice,” I said. Her hair was wild, sticking out in every direction. She had always kept it straightened even though I made sure only to compliment her when she didn’t.

“I haven’t eaten in years,” she said, and she spun around, fluttering her black dress. I felt a drop of something hit my cheek, but when I went to rub it away it was dry. The room now smelled like a harbor—of sweaty men gutting fish in the sun.

“Look at us,” she said. “We’re both here. We’re here right now. I can see you, and you can see me. This is enough.” She coughed more black onto her hands.

“You think you’re here, but you’re not. Look at your feet.”

She looked down, squinted, and wiggled her toes. “They still move,” she said.

“The carpet isn’t wet, honey. You’re wet, but the carpet isn’t. Go back up the chimney. Be patient.”

“I just want to stay a little while.” She coughed again but kept her hands at her sides, and the black faded before it landed like water freezing in mid-air. She stepped toward me, and spiders scattered from where she had been standing.

“You know we can’t touch,” I said. “Remember last time?” It had been a nauseous pulse—like the south poles of two magnets repelling each other. I’d never seen sadder eyes in my life. They’d still had much of their color then.

“Then I’ll watch you,” she said. “Until I have to leave.” She sat in the La-Z-Boy on the other side of the room and watched me with a smirk on her face until I was finally able to fall asleep on the couch. Before she left, the first time, she was never the last one to fall asleep. I’d have to drift off to her snoring each night. She’d always been the heavier sleeper in the relationship.

I woke up around three in the morning and saw that the chair was empty. I’d somehow managed to kick off one of my socks, and two of the couch pillows had fallen onto the carpet. I peered back up into the chimney but didn’t see anything. The cold in the room had left—so had the smell. I made a few rounds around the house, and retrieved some firewood off the back porch. I’d need it to fall back asleep.

**NICHOLAS SIEGEL** is a graduate of Spalding University’s MFA in Creative Writing program in Louisville, KY. His work has been published in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Bird’s Thumb*, and *Literally Stories*. He is a lover of bourbon, coffee, music, and animals. You can find his work at [nswriter.com](http://nswriter.com).



## On the cover:

### “Kneel”

**SETH SIMON** is a New Jersey-based photographer and sound composer. In his photographic practice, he uses vintage film cameras to achieve unique images that preserve a sense of history. His photographs have been selected for numerous print journals and exhibitions. He is also a composer of sound for experimental films that have been screened at major museums and festivals worldwide. You can see more of his photo work at [www.coroflot.com/sethsimon](http://www.coroflot.com/sethsimon) and his film projects at [www.jeannettelouie.com](http://www.jeannettelouie.com).

