

Piece of Mind

by Benjamin Matvey

Samuel wondered if Megan could hear the brains humming, but like so many of the questions Samuel had for Megan, it was difficult to find the right moment to ask. Samuel had to remind himself that they worked in what was possibly the only place in the world where such a question could naturally introduce itself into a conversation. After all, all around them towered shelves where large, flaky, grayish brains stewed in cloudy jars of formaldehyde.

Samuel was staring at a diagram of the *medulla oblongata* in his Anatomy book. He was supposed to be studying for a midterm, but instead he was letting his eyes lose focus until the *medulla* grew fuzzy and seemed to skitter across the page like a reptile. It frightened him, so he looked away.

He looked up at the clock; it was 8:01pm, fifty-nine minutes until the museum closed for the night. His eyes meandered around the room. His sister had taught him the gentle art of seeing someone from head to foot with a brief, inconspicuous glance, so Samuel looked out the basement window, far above and to the right of Megan; all the while he sucked her image in through his peripheral vision. She was sitting on the stool next to him, legs crossed, sucking on a pen cap and reading a textbook about trees that was balanced on her lap. Her hair was thick and black, with shiny curls that fell in a shadowy landscape around her head. From the times she inadvertently brushed against him, he knew the shampoo she used made her hair smell like raspberries. Her features, her nose and ears, her feet and waist, were small, as if scaled down by a dollmaker. Her skin was fair, almost transparent, and he could see the fragile bluish veins of her wrist rising from the cuffs of her big black knit sweater.

It hurt a little to look at her; he wanted to kiss the underside of her arm, her ear, her occiput, but he knew it mustn't happen. Ever since he started working at the National Museum of Health and Medicine (AND OF HUMAN BRAINS, he always wanted to add,

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despite the fact that these words were wisely left out of the title), he felt a barrier (a “blood brain barrier,” if you will) growing between himself and other people. He was certain no one—**no one**—felt like he did, no one wanted what he wanted. And, therefore, he was to be alone, possibly for the rest of his life.

But, still, he hoped...

All life is connected, Megan cogitated to herself as she looked at a diagram of a complex forest root system in her textbook. Trees can scream, in a sense. When some trees get sick they release an enzyme into the soil that “warns” other trees of the coming plague. In this way, trees can moan across great distances.

Megan smiled to herself for a moment. If they could tell each other when they weren't feeling well, could they share other things? Could they, like schoolgirls, pass notes about a cute conifer or a handsome weeping willow.

Megan paused. When she caught herself thinking thoughts like those she always wondered if God read your thoughts all the time or just at random intervals, popping in to have a look from time to time. If the latter is the case, there is a pretty strong chance that She thinks Megan is a moron, Megan thought.

She lifted her eyes ever-so-slowly from her book. She looked out at the almost empty stacks, with all the jars and display cases of brains and misshapen skeletons, lit by frosted yellow light bulbs, and was glad that the museum no longer gave her nightmares. Only one patron was in Samuel and Megan's section of the museum that night. He was fat, with red thinning hair and a mustache, and he was wearing a trench coat that he held as tightly as possible to his body. He was staring intently upwards at the brain of a criminal executed in 1882. *Our section attracts all the freaking weirdos*, Megan thought.

She swept her eyes casually around the Help Desk, quickly took in Samuel and looked back at her book again. He was sitting on the stool next to her, his book propped up on the desk, staring out the window, again. His clear gray eyes were so vacant and far away

underneath his thick-rimmed glasses. His hair, as usual, looked slept in, with impressive cowlicks creating peaks and valleys, neighborhoods and pavilions in the topography of his head. A few strands dropped down in front of his eyes, but he never seemed to notice them, or anything else for that matter, least of all Megan.

Megan scolded herself. She had fallen in love with the smallest boy in the class again. Not that he was literally the smallest; though he was quite skinny, he was fairly tall. And not that he was literally in her class; she was a sophomore and he was a senior. But he was the polyester-clad embodiment of the soft-spoken outsider. He was the kid from grade school who sat in the back row, eyes down, and drew pictures of spaceships and superheroes all day, rather than experience the terror of communicating with people who wouldn't understand. Megan suspected that, maybe, Samuel was thoroughly aware of all things around him. But if this was true, he simply had to know how she felt about him; it must vibrate off of her skin and reverberate against his in waves. But would he ever act on it, after all these months? Did he realize that Megan was now single, again? Would he realize that he cared, too? Would he, she thought wickedly to herself, get to learn her darkest secret?

“Why did you decide to get a job at a brain repository?” was a simple enough question to ask, Samuel thought. He could just spit it out, catch her off her guard and maybe he could get the answer he was looking for.

Maybe it was just coincidence; this was a relatively new feature of the museum, after all, and it needed Help Desk attendants. Only a year ago, Samuel recalled, each of these brains and sundry body parts had been under lock and key in the basement of the museum. Scientists had collected them in the 19th century back when they believed that brain size determined intelligence, that sex caused insanity, and that children started out with the competency of Mongolians (assumed to be dim despite that whole conquering the world episode) and then progressed upwards towards that pinnacle of human progress, the European male. In other words, back when

“science” was dumb. They collected many of these “abnormal” brains in order to study them, but with the state of the art of the time they could do little more than weigh and pickle them. The brains of the 19th century, like a good lot of the ideas, were sensibly relegated to the dustbin of history.

However, when the museum administration realized that attendance had plummeted to disheartening levels, they decided to spice up the act. They looked into their archives to retrieve all the collected body parts and brains to put them on display. They assumed there were only a few sordid items. They were surprised and delighted to find a treasure trove of dusty, marinated and mothballed human bits in their archives: misshapen hands, ears, and feet, whole severed heads, abnormal spinal columns, one gigantic and unattributed penis, and dozens and dozens of human brains in jars. Perhaps a little self-conscious of their own pandering, they dedicated a small basement of the museum to these medical oddities. This was Samuel's kingdom.

Whenever he thought of the peculiar history that brought him here, Samuel's eyes darted away and connected again with *the* jar, sitting on a shelf several rows from the desk: the brain that still seemed to crackle with the electricity of neurons firing a billion times per second. That brain was different. It didn't just hum, it seemed to glow. In life it had been part of a man named Charles Julius Guiteau, The Guy Who Shot President Garfield. He was considered crazy in his day, but Samuel refused to believe it. Unexceptionable minds have often considered the better-brained crazy.

A fat, red-haired man was staring up at the jar with similar awe, reading the informative tablet below it. Perhaps he, too, had a so-called abnormal brain, one more finely tuned than most, that could pick up the signals of far-off satellites, quasars, and particularly powerful gray matter wherever it may be found. The man realized Samuel was looking at him; their eyes connected. He looked at Samuel with the panic of someone caught doing some unspeakable evil, and hurried to exit Samuel's kingdom. Samuel was pleased.

Just ask him, Megan thought. *He'll know what you're getting at.* Anyone who looks so at peace in such a solitary life—anyone who can stare out into space with such a look of joy on his face—would have to understand.

“Samuel?”

He looked over, clearly a bit startled by the break in the silence; they didn't speak often. “This might sound silly...” she paused to calm herself. “Do you think...do you think all life is connected? I know, it might sound trite, but I am reading about the root system of trees and they all...connect, even when they don't, actually...touch. It's like one massive organism instead of a whole bunch of trees.”

She kept talking but it sounded so stupid when she said it aloud. In her head it sounded so profound. Megan hoped God had not chosen this moment to look into her head. Why didn't she just ask him if he liked food or movies or...but wait, he was nodding, he was leaning in and nodding and stroking his stubbly chin with his index and forefingers. He was understanding it—not only that, Megan hypothesized, he was understanding that they were connected. Air, like earth, is a medium, one that carries smells and sounds and heat. Could he feel her right that very moment?

Samuel was astounded. He knew exactly what she was talking about: neurons! Neurons branch out and form infinitely complex networks—nerve clusters, ganglia, primitive animal brains—and, ultimately, they form the supreme piece of machinery in the universe: the human mind! She was talking about brains! And how complex they are and how some of them are so complicated, so refined, that they can pick up and transmit waves of pure thought across space, across time, across the cosmos!

“I think I understand exactly what you are talking about,” he said and a smile burst across her face. She then talked about the signals that animals give, how elephants can produce subsonic sounds that can travel for miles, and how whales communicate in songs that

resonate across oceans. Was it possible? Could she hear the brains humming, too? Better yet, could she hear *his* brain humming?

This is incredible, Megan thought. His eyes were so wide right now; his attention towards her was total. Her words seemed to hit him bodily, and he almost writhed with pleasure and excitement when she spoke of whales.

They spoke for what felt like half an hour. He was animated, talking about synapses and electricity and...Megan felt herself becoming aroused, her heart pounding and her breath deepening. It had been building up for so long, ever since she first met him in that psychopathology class, ever since she met his gorgeous and mysterious ex-girlfriend Rachel, the one he dumped just days after taking this job (a job in which he, nobly, never complained of being consigned to the dusty basement of nauseating oddities. Megan had always admired him for this). Megan wanted to walk over to his stool, take off his glasses, straddle his lap, run her nails through his shaggy hair, and suck on his lower lip.

She felt the same she felt the same she felt the same she felt the same! Samuel's head screamed. But he had to be sure. He paused for one second and closed his eyes. Megan started working with him in this section of the museum about a month after he started. There were, literally, hundreds of other departments she could have worked in all across DC. Why did she choose the one department that seemed to frighten everyone else away?

"Megan...why did you decide to work in the brain section of the museum?" Samuel asked.

It was true, he noticed everything. Samuel's question convinced Megan that he realized why she had hunted down the job in the museum and in the "brain section" (he was so cute to call it that). She was going to lay it all out:

She took a deep breath, looked him right in the eyes and said, "I requested to work here." His face looked frozen and ecstatic at

once. He shook his head ever so slightly, telegraphing the question "Why?" She nodded, answering his question silently. *You know as well as I do: it was to be closer to you.*

Samuel braced himself. She understood—she totally understood—and didn't even have to say a word. This was his soul mate, this delicious girl who had been sitting next to him all these weeks in near silence. *Oh, God*, Samuel thought, *it was so good to know someone thought the same thoughts.*

"What are you doing after work, Megan?" he asked impulsively, his heart pounding against his eardrum.

"Nothing," she answered.

"Do you want to go somewhere: grab a cup of coffee or something?"

Megan froze for a moment. "I'd love to."

"I'd love to," Samuel repeated aloud, savoring the words.

She hadn't been expecting this question so soon, but after so long she had to go with it. The time for playing coy was over. Was tonight going to be the night? Megan could feel her skin quiver and warm in anticipation. She wondered if Samuel had guessed her dark secret, if he could smell it on her, that beneath her sweet and innocent exterior she was an entirely sexual being. It had only been in the last year that she had realized this about herself, that she felt so liberated when making love that she let herself be a force of nature. She had seen the look of utter bliss on her last boyfriend, and shared her secret in phone booths, and between the stacks in the main library. All sex, all kinds of sex, were beautiful and thrilling to her, and no longer would shame or propriety hold her back. She craved her partner's fulfillment like nicotine, or heroin. (Not that Megan tried either, but they did sound sort of sexy when she got worked up like this.)

This would be the night, Samuel thought. Coffee was simply not going to cut it. After a few shots of tequila at the Tombs, everything

would come out. Megan would look at him just as she had looked at him before, eyes sparkling like sapphires, and say, "I understand: I want to eat the brain of the Guy Who Killed President Garfield, too."

Here she was, he thought, *his other lobe, as it were*. He had felt so alone; at first his hunger for the brain was just a craving that he tried to ignore, but then Guiteau's mind whispered into his cranium, "Eat me. Eat me. Are you eating me? I am feeling uneaten." He knew the brain wanted to make good, and it promised him that if he ate it, for one blissful second he would be able to hear all brains everywhere, across the entire universe, purring and mulling and calling. For that second he would be connected to every single mind all at once, and then, finally, it would all shut off. He would be cured and the brains would no longer call to him. He would have one last moment of unmatched pleasure, and then be as normal as the normalest person who ever walked the earth. He was sure Guiteau's promise applied to Megan, too.

He was delirious now, almost faint with excitement. He envisioned black and white photos of the couple stuffing parietal lobes into each other's mouths like slices of a wedding cake. His shame was over. He knew from her look that he would never be lonely again. Together they would slip into history as the couple that ate the mad assassin's brain. They would be revolutionaries, heroes, connected directly to the past through the stomach.

He looked around, nearly panting, and all the brains were starting to buzz with thought, and amidst it all was the main brain, the brain of Charlie Guiteau, amping up like a Tesla coil about to fire lightning. The brain rumbled with such excitement that shockwaves seemed to pulse outwards from it, crashing on Samuel's face and through his hair like a windstorm.

He looked over and saw that Megan was gazing at the brain with him. She could see it, too. It was the happiest moment of his life.

Samuel was staring happily out into the void again, and Megan joined him for a moment. Realizing he was not alone, he looked over to her with more life in his face than she had ever seen. Megan

blushed, tried to control her glee, and excused herself to go to the bathroom to get ready. She suppressed the urge to skip, flung herself through the bathroom door, and fidgeted through her purse. Mints, mascara, lip gloss, pepper spray, cell phone...condoms. *I am truly a modern girl*, she thought as she looked at herself in the mirror and adjusted her hair. Coffee was not going to cut it, she was going to suggest going to the Tombs for a few drinks, and then...who knows?

Would she? She had never had sex on the first date before, never even close. But this was *Samuel*. She moved her right hand beneath her gray plaid skirt. She ran her hands down her thigh to remind herself if she had shaved. Indeed she had; it was a good omen. All signs were pointing to "yes." *Take him; show him the night of his life.*

If God could read her mind at that moment She'd think she was crazy, she thought.

As Samuel waited for Megan, the humming of the brains turned to singing—the rousing chorus of "Ode to Joy" they would sometimes play for him when he was happy. His salvation was so close, his confession only moments away, and the elation in the voices of the brains reflected that. But it was somehow even more poignant, more absorbing, than ever before, because he knew he was no longer the serenade's only audience. He now knew she could hear it, too.

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