

# The Brain



*Toby Olson*

Because of an awkward splashing, brought on by an urgency that had recently come to plague him, Roger found it necessary to sit down while urinating, and in time he found this posture quite pleasing, those brief moments of contemplation.

The toilet was in the far corner of the basement, and he rushed away from the work table where he had been dealing with the old lamp he had only recently acquired, holding himself until he reached the throne.

He'd purchased the lamp at a second hand shop in the town center. It was an elegant thing, a tall hollow pewter cylinder above which a gathering of glass tulips, each fitted with a small white light, sprayed out in ascending circles, topped with a pewter finial shaped like a tulip bud. He had carefully placed the lamp on its side when the toilet called, and then, back at the table again, he adjusted the swing arm lamp and, removing the felt covering at the base, peered into the hollow tube, seeing that someone had replaced wires in a crude and thoughtless way.

The old wires had been clipped only five inches from their source, new wires clumsily taped to them. A real fire hazard, he thought. He'd have to rewire the whole thing, something he looked forward to

with pleasure.

For over a year Roger had been on permanent disability. No more work at the shoe factory, where he had come to notice a gradual change in production. Military boots had become the order of the day, lows and highs with visible steel toes and small devices imbedded in their heels. And in his free time, which was almost all of the time now, he'd taken to shopping, mostly in secondhand and consignment shops, but also for clothing, groceries, and whatever else caught his fancy. He bought things, mostly electrical for fiddling, but he had also come to enjoy browsing, moving in and out of shops in the town center and at the large mall that had grown up on the edge of the highway. And books. He'd never been much of a reader before his accident, but in the last year he'd begun what he thought might end up as a not insignificant little library. History and art books, how-to electrical tomes, and even a few novels, mostly of romance, but some of foreign intrigue that argued for political change. He'd come across a book called *The Feminine Mystique*. It was there on the new bookcase he'd built in the living room. He seemed to remember the book somehow, though he had not as yet read it.

He had reached up into the bowels of the lamp, aiming to pull the frayed tape away, when the lights went out, the basement thrust into darkness.

A breaker, he thought. He knew the basement well, and without pausing to get his bearings, he headed for the small enclosure beside the stairs where the breaker box was located. He had a small light, together with a few pencils and pens, tucked into a plastic container that was, in turn, tucked into his shirt pocket, and he shined the narrow beam into the box, seeing that nothing had tripped. Puzzled, he stood there for a moment, considering. Then he turned and shined the little light on the main switch. It had not been thrown.

He stood very still, there in the darkness, listening, feeling silly, and suddenly the lights came back on. He could hear nothing, but he noticed a faint scent that seemed unfamiliar. Could it be sweat? A thing distantly burning? He shook it off. Something with that dammed electric company again. This had happened before, and he'd called numerous times, only to be put on hold, then disconnected. He shook his head, adjusted his wig, and went back

to his electrical work.

He had awakened in a fog of misunderstanding. His vision was hazy, and he could not hear with clarity. He thought he was in bed, coming back from a troubling dream. But then he felt the tube in his nose, saw the vague bag of solution hanging from the IV pole. Figures surrounded him, nurses he suddenly realized. I'm in the hospital. What happened?

"An accident." A whispered voice. He must have spoken his last thought. "In the factory." Then he remembered bits of it: the toe lasting machine, hot glue. He'd known the uppers on the boots were too thick. Was he burning? He didn't feel any burns. He had a headache. "We can't give you anything for the pain just yet." That soft, soothing voice again. "The doctor will be here soon." Then he drifted back into sleep.

He awakened to the sight of a small, chubby man with a mustache leaning over him.

"I'm the doctor," the man said. "Can you hear me?"

"Some," Roger said. "Enough maybe."

"Well," the doctor said. "At least there's that."

"At least?" Roger said, or thought he said.

"Yes," the doctor replied. "And I have news, and it's upsetting and rather urgent."

Roger didn't understand. "I can't see too well. I have a bad headache."

"To be expected," the doctor said. "But we can fix all that. We do have to hurry though."

"With what?" Roger asked.

"The transplant."

"What do you men?" Roger said. "I don't understand."

"Well," the doctor said. "Let me explain."

He had been wearing a helmet, as required, when the toe lasting machine failed, and hot glue had washed over the leather, then found the portal and flooded into his left ear.

"What it did was a little like cooking. I mean it cooked a good portion of your brain. And it is still in there, drying, and doing its dirty work, sealing, rendering further matter quite useless. We need to operate, and we need to do it quickly. Now I know you have insurance, but it won't cover the transplant, unless..."

“What transplant?”

“Your brain, man! We have to replace your brain!”

“You can’t do that.”

“Indeed we can. But there are options. Decisions. Forms to be filled out.”

“And if I don’t agree to this?”

“Then I’m afraid you’re finished. Soon to be dead.”

“What are the options?” Roger said

“There are two. In our tissue bank we have a dozen or so male brains. These are somewhat costly and difficult to install. And I doubt that insurance would cover the operation. The brains themselves are expensive, as is the operation.”

“How expensive?” Roger asked.

“Sixty-five thousand dollars each, plus around twenty for the procedure.”

“My God! That’s a fortune! I can’t afford that. What did you mean by each?”

“Each male brain.”

“But I’d only need one, wouldn’t I?”

“Well, of course. Just one.”

“You said two. What’s the other option?”

“Well, there are the female brains. A few, about four, are available as we speak. And in this case the operation would be covered by virtue of a grant. We’re studying them. The fit can be awkward. Different skull configurations after all.”

“How much?”

“Fifteen thousand. A flat rate. No hidden costs.”

“Why?” Roger asked.

“Why what?”

“Why are the female brains so much cheaper than the male ones?”

“Well,” the doctor answered, “They’ve been used.”

“Used? Like a used car?”

“Sure. A metaphor. Something like that. Though maybe ‘broken in’ would be more accurate. And there is no warranty. You’d be taking your chances.”

And so he took his chances, and the brain, that of a thirty-five year old woman, was installed. The fit was a tight one, and even

after some necessary adjustments, Roger's eyes were slightly to the side of their sockets, giving him a rakishly provocative glance. So too had their been difficulties with the new brain's neural pathways, his getting used to them. It was almost as if he were two perceivers now, or at least had come to understand the world around him differently than he had before. Was there awareness somewhere in his body in addition to that in his new brain, something at the base of his spine, himself in his motor responses, something seated elsewhere?

Was he a woman now? The doctor had scoffed at that idea as he'd handed over the Geniux, a brain pill championed by Dr. Oz. "This might help with concentration. It's like Viagra for the brain."

At first all this was quite unsettling, but in only a brief time he had grown accustomed to a kind of double-vision. He began to feel integrated, though his hair had not grown back, and once up and around he had selected a wig that held waves and curls and a brush of hair that drifted over his left ear. Roger was fifty-five years old, but he felt much younger once the surgery and his recuperation were behind him.

Now he continued work on the new lamp, and while doing so he thought back on his visit to the second-hand shop where he had purchased it.

He was shocked as always, though less so since the operation, when he stepped beyond the front door of his house. The street was gone, as were the familiar houses that had faced his across from it. There was rubble still, both straight ahead and to the right, acres of it, and the only familiarity resided in the beginning of the forest that abutted his lawn to the left. Men had come to visit him, dressed in suits that seemed vaguely military. They had made offers, not very good ones, though he knew his neighbors had cashed in for much less. He might have sold had the suits come up with something substantial. They hadn't though.

He was at the very edge of the construction site, and it was clear that they could build what they wanted without his land getting in the way. At least for a while. He'd tried to learn what the project was all about. He gone to city hall to look at the plans, but none were available for viewing. The clerk had been sheepish, and when he went back and tried again, there was a different clerk, a stern woman

dressed like the men who had visited him, who dismissed him and his enquiry immediately. "This is a government project," she'd said. "Nothing is available to be viewed by the populace." Her language was formal and strict, a little arcane, and he left with nothing at all.

He made his way across the empty acreage, coming to places where the ground had been leveled and cleared, where there was new curbing and cuts through brush in preparation for roads, and finally stepped onto pavement where the edge of the town began. It was late-afternoon, and cloudy, and lights had been turned on in the various shops he passed by. On the door of each house and each shop, a small, sturdy metal box had been affixed, a series of buttons on each of them. Codes to be punched in. But by whom? New street lights stood, every thirty or so yards along the curbing, and each sported an elaborate surveillance camera beside its hooded canopy. He heard a vague clicking as they turned to track his progress. He thought he heard the chop of a helicopter in the quickly darkening sky.

When he stepped into the dimly lit store, he saw that there were only a few shoppers milling around. The owner, who seemed somewhat tense, was standing stiffly behind the counter. Roger was focused on the section that held the lamps but suddenly felt a little faint and gripped the edge of the counter to right himself. Beside his focused, pragmatic concentration, there was a more generalized awareness now. He could feel it behind his forehead and knew it in his eyes as they began to dilate even though nothing in the room's dim lighting had changed. It's you, he thought. It's me. His focus broadened, opening out as his head lifted, and then. . . she was taking in the entire space, its feel and its gestalt. There was something ominous, an atmosphere she thought she would come to understand, but not yet. She scanned the room, slowly, the book shelves, the counters of electrical gear, the few people present, the nature of the dim lighting. Most of the books were light reading: mysteries, self-help, a number of large coffee-table tomes. But there was something, a thin spine, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. What was it doing here? Why were the shoppers not looking to buy anything? They were just watching, gazing out the broad street-side windows, studying those passing by. They seemed to be waiting for something.

Roger had focused on the book she had drawn his attention to, but she had passed beyond it and was now staring at the man

who had emerged from the bathroom behind the counter and was speaking intently to the store owner as his machine ground out a key. He was a tall, thick man, dressed in a outfit reminiscent of military garb. His jaw seemed slack, his thin lipped mouth half open in dumb show, as he listened to the owner who then handed him the key.

Roger felt the skin on his face tighten, his eyes watering. He had recognized the shoes. My husband, she thought, the bastard, right here, right now. He can't see me, but I can see him. Soon, she thought. Roger lifted the lamp and moved to the counter. He nodded to the owner. Now he could smell the other, something rancid behind the scent of alcohol and cigarettes. He looked away from the owner, who was ringing up his purchase, gazed into the face of the other. Not one of the three smiled.

After a late dinner consisting of broiled lamb chops dredged in a little olive oil then rubbed lightly with herb de provence and salt and pepper, this accompanied by sauteed asparagus spears and new potatoes baked in oil, garlic and ginger sticks, Roger settled into his easy chair in the living room, a cup of fresh ground coffee and the morning's constructed crème brûlée in a custard dish on the table beside him, and read his paper.

Twice more the lights had gone out, then, in a brief while, had come back on. There seemed no reason to call. He knew he wouldn't get through. He spent these times in darkness, poised at the table, or sitting still with his paper in his lap.

He had taken up cooking since his transplant. Before that it had been TV dinners and various canned meats. Then he had discovered a complete Julia Child boxed set in one of his travels to a second hand book store in the mall. He'd bought it, read it, and then embarked on what he thought of as a wonderful journey. I might become a cook, he'd thought, and so he had.

There was a good deal in the paper these days, much of it having to do with the new president and his accomplishments. He was a tall, handsome man, at least he liked to think of himself that way. But the campaign had taken its toll, his blond hair had thinned and turned grey, and a new softness had replaced muscle in his shoulders and hips. Even his behind now sagged in his finely tailored clothing, and his mouth was often pursed in an unattractive way, as it was in the

photograph Roger was gazing at, one in which the president stood in front of a construction site, a large sign held up by some rough looking men behind him. *America Has Been Made Great Again* the sign pronounced, somewhat awkwardly.

Very little had been made great, at least on the international front, as promised, in his first two years in office -the second year of his reign, Roger thought-, but domestically much had been done, most of it having to do with security and surveillance: fear of the immigrant population, drug addicts, and domestic terrorists. Even in Roger's little town, the results of presidential edicts were in evidence. Cameras everywhere, chips installed, often against individual wishes, in cars, shoes, phones, and even in houses and workplaces when just the vaguest of suspicion was aroused.

And Roger knew this was only the beginning, for now the president had put forward his supreme court nominee, one to fill a vacancy in that august, though currently divided, body.

Alfred Bub Hawkins, known in his southern district as Big Bub, was a former mid-level official in the Ku Klux Klan. He had earned his law degree at a small Christian college, scoring 10th in a class of 12, then had gone to work in his home town, his practice consisting mostly of writing up contracts and notarizing documents, with a few divorce cases thrown in for good measure.

He was no great shakes. But he could write. He'd published a bevy of articles, all dealing with constitutional interpretation and its application regarding both central government powers and states rights. His articles were deemed brilliant, at least by those in the president's coterie and the members of the senate that had been investigated and found culpable enough to be bent to his will. Yet it was rumored that it was Hawkins' wife who had written the articles for him.

Alma Hawkins was an uneducated housewife who liked to read. She had studied the Constitution and the Supreme Court opinions, both majority and dissenting, in great detail, until she had come close to memorizing them in the way some had memorized the bible. She had also memorized the Bible and could quote it word for word, both the Old and New Testaments.

Roger had read the paper straight through. A few local arrests that seemed oddly unnecessary, some jargon about government construction projects, nothing at all of an international appeal. Still,

he read on, his only interest piqued by the fashion section, new clothing, mostly for women, that seemed retrograde, very little for men there.

He'd finished his days work on the new lamp, had carefully cleaned the small glass tulips that contained the miniature bulbs, a few of which had burned out and would need replacing. He'd have to shop for those, but that would come in a day or two. Now he was tired, though not exhausted, and decided he'd go up to bed and read a little before sleep. His bedroom was on the third floor, which was no more than an attic that he had refitted as a small study and bedroom. He liked the isolation, the cosiness of the space, and felt oddly protected there, though why he needed protection was beyond him.

He had settled between the sheets in a seated posture, then reached for the chain on his bedside lamp. Nothing. A bulb, he thought, but when he felt for it, it was not there. How can this be? he thought. What the devil is going on? He rose from the bed and put on his robe, then moved through both the bedroom and his study, searching for any evidence that someone had been there. He could find nothing amiss. Tomorrow, he thought. I'll check the entire house. Then he went to the small storage closet where he kept his paper, pencils and pens and removed a new bulb from its sleeve. He returned to the bedroom then and screwed it in.

Back under the covers again, he reached for the book he was currently reading, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the chapter on violence against women. He managed to get through only a couple of pages before his lids were falling. Enough, he thought. Later. Then he pulled the lamp's chain, turned on his side, and in only a few moments was fast asleep.

Somewhere in the early morning hours, he had a dream that was not a dream but a gathering of memories that he had no recollection of when he awoke.

Early morning. Still dark. Could have been the salad, or the wine. Probably the salad. There are cracks in the ceiling. The cheap tulips he had brought, white, teardrop buds in the night light's soft gleam. The high pole with its miserable camera and flood. She could see it only vaguely through the open window, the curtains lifting in the soft, chemical breeze.

His smiling close attention to her needs. He had chattered across the table. Even candles. She can't move. She can move. But only her head. She's in the bed. Figures swaying in the room, furniture and shadows.

He had bent down over her, still smiling: "Are you happy now? I'll get what I want."

They had been married for six long years, and he had made the conscious choice, at the very beginning, to drift away from her, until she knew—his way of addressing her, a gradual hardening in his eyes, his distance in sex—that it was the money. Which was really very little, thirty thousand dollars from the sale of her deceased parents' house.

In the past year he had beaten her, pounding her in the ribs and kidneys, those thirty thousand dollars in his eyes. He was strong, and he would hold her by the wrist as he punched her. Through it all she remained stoic, at least she seemed so. She went to work at the coffee shop. She didn't socialize. She read books. And when she wasn't working, or reading, or cleaning, or fixing his meals, she spent her time hating him, wishing him dead.

He worked in construction, a small failing company of his own. Half a dozen men. Enough work to keep them alive, not much, though buildings were going up, and many were coming down to make room for the new. All this under a perpetual layer of smog and construction dust that blackened the town and its environs, causing the populace to move about in medical masks, their hair under their caps greasy and their faces and eyelids blackened. And he was looking for the big job, something to get him back on his feet again, and he'd told her he'd found something and was aiming to get it. And he'd told her that he loved her, repeatedly, after he'd beaten her. That smile. The obvious lie.

That evening, after the dinner and candles and wine, he'd left her. Put her into the bed. There was a meeting of his crew, he'd said. Discussion of the new jail that would replace the high school basement as the temporary venue for incarceration of those who were seen to defy, in any way at all, the new order. He had a small part in it, curbing and a sidewalk. She knew there would be drinking, possibly drugs, and women.

Fragments and regrets. Her eyes were alive. Her head seemed to be dying. She was tired. She needed sleep. She fell asleep. Ten

empty minutes.

And when she awoke she couldn't awake. She was awake, but only in her eyes. Fading cracks in the ceiling. Insubstantial shadows. I'm going away, she thought. Nightshade. She went away.

Roger awoke in earthquake. His bed was shaking, and when he sat up he saw that the whole room was rocking. He felt he was in a topsy-turvy fun house. His lamp teetered, then fell from the table and bounced on the floor. He rose quickly, hearing a pounding down below, and slipped into his bathrobe, a lacy satin number that he had purchased in a small boutique at the mall. His wig, too quickly pulled on, had slipped down onto his forehead, and his slippers were on the wrong feet. The pounding continued, and he rushed down the stairs. It was the front door, shifting on its hinges. He opened it to find a small man in uniform, four large earth moving monstrosities, digging and banging their yellow scoops on the ground near his foundation. The man raised his arm and waved it above his head. The activity stopped, the machines belching and sighing into silence behind him. And in that silence the man spoke.

"What? What!," Roger said, his ears ringing.

"It's time we spoke," the man said, smirking, gazing at Roger's headgear and his strange attire, and they did, or rather the man spoke, and Roger listened.

They wanted his house, and they aimed to get it. The previous offer was no longer in place. Now it was twice that. The little man sat in the couch, he feet tap-tapping on the floor.

"Have you been having any problems, with your electricity?" He asked this in an odd, conspiratorial fashion.

Roger didn't answer.

"I have the papers here. And the check." He produced them from the thin briefcase he clutched a his side.

It was a lot of money, and though Roger wished only to drive the little prick out of his house, he swallowed his pride. He was surrounded by construction, noise and filth, and now the deal with the electricity.

"I have to think about it," he said.

"Yes, you do. But don't take too long."

"I won't. But now. How about leaving me alone."

The little man seemed about to speak, to bring forth further

insinuations, but then he saw the look in Roger's eyes, nodded and left the house.

It was after dinner than evening, something light, a fillet of flounder, thinly breaded and coated with herbs, then pan fried in butter, when Roger thought he heard something down in the basement. Actually it was she who heard it first, then rocked their brain slightly to the side until Roger too caught it. I know who it is, she thought, his scent.

Roger rose from the table and went to the basement door, then climbed down the stairs.

The man was there, the one Roger had seen talking to the owner at the store. He seemed to be studying the walls. A heavy wooden beam ran across the basement ceiling, from outer wall to outer wall. It was supported by a couple of lally columns and hung low into the basement. Even Roger, who was only five ten, had to duck slightly so as not to hit his head, and when the man turned, hearing Roger's approach, he had to bend down considerably. He did so, then came up smiling and extended his hand. Roger didn't take it.

"What exactly are you doing here. How did you get in?"

He was dressed in some sort of uniform, a breast patch, hard to read, identifying him as working for the government, Roger thought.

"Well, you see, I was sent in to check for any illegal devices. And the electrical." A sheepish smile followed this last statement, reaching for irony that wasn't there.

"It's nothing, just routine. I have a key." He held it out as a child might have, smiling as he showed his prize.

"But more to the point, I think I've got the contract to tear this place down. Not yet, of course. Not until the sale is completed. Will it be completed soon? I just wanted to have a look."

He was grinning then. Nothing snide, or conspiratorial. Just a grinning from and into a certain emptiness. Something wrong and primitively evil, Roger thought. It's him, she thought.

The man stared into his eyes as Roger moved closer, and when he was just inches from him, looking up, he saw her eyes where his had been.

"My God, I don't understand," he said, his voice squeaking. And that was the last thing he ever said.

Roger leaped up and rammed his forehead into the man's startled face, and as he fell he hit him again, this time skull to skull. There

was a sharp cracking, a rush of blood. He was dead then, sprawled out on the basement floor, and Roger smiled, or she smiled. And it was done.

They painted a section of the beam with his blood. Then they called the police, who came, a half dozen of them, almost immediately. Each wore a large breast patch that read *America's Great Again*.

He'd heard a sharp whack from the basement while he was eating dinner, then found the man, bloody and broken, on the basement floor. He must have hit his head against the low beam. The police seem to know that he was there. They asked Roger if he intended to sell the place, and he replied in the affirmative. Each shook his hand. The ambulance came, and they took the body away. There would be no further investigation.

Later that night, Roger placed two large pillows, end to end, in the bed beside him. Then, once the covers were pulled up over him, he lay on his side, snuggled up, spoon fashion, against them. One tucked in against his stomach and groin, the other, hugged close, rested against his cheek. He breathed in the smell of eucalyptus, the scent she had used most frequently throughout her too short life. It was quiet now, no construction, no helicopters, no sirens.

"Did you mind very much killing him?"

"I didn't. You did."

"Well, I guess you're right. The instrument. But the intention."

"Did *you* mind it?"

"Yes and no. Mostly no."

"Well, at least America's Great Again."

"And will you really sell this place? Will you move away?"

"Yes. I've decided. Out of this town. Into the country."

"Where it is quiet."

"Yes."

"Can I come with you?"

"Well, of course. There is no alternative"

"Good."

"We'll dress well in bib overalls, a blue cotton work shirt, pearl buttons."

“And a straw hat, with a bright red ribbon around the crown.”

“A little garden. Herbs and fine greens.”

“I like to cook.”

“And in the evenings, a good brandy. Books. A little TV.”

“Then off to bed.”

“I’m tired. It’s been a busy day.”

“But what about cakes and pies? Ice cream and custard?”

“All that as well. Anything we like.”

“I can bake. I’m good at that.”

“And I can help.”

“No two have ever been this close.

“As one.”

“But, boy, am I tired! A long busy day.”

“Well then.”

“Goodnight.”

“Night. Sweet Dreams.”