The Best and the Brightest

By Michael Anft

A day in December is always remembered. A day in December is always remembered.

Ms. Murtoid was told to repeat that line until she could recite it without prompting. They wanted her to recall the day the phrase invoked too. Sitting in her console, wires attached to her head and a scanning machine humming and hovering above her, it seemed all too much.

"In December?," she wondered, scanning some dim world in front of her that only her squinted eyes could see, though hardly well.

Magda had been encountering the Ms. Murtoids of the world for five years now, ever since she earned her neuroscience pathology papers when she was a tender 21. She was skeptical then about how it was possible to learn all the available knowledge concerning the human head—all those buzzing connections, fizzing chemical systems, rowdy reptilian regions, and those deep seats of fear, hope, and creativity—during three short years of brain school.

"There are schoolteachers who spend more time learning than I do," she'd say.

Crisis times, crisis measures, the faculty would tell her. You're one of the smartest ones. While you're still young, you get to bone up on running and reading the machines, learn a tad about how to deal with people, and you're good to go.

Whenever she thought of her brain-school years, each memory ended with the sound of a door slamming—a loud announcement of her irreversible entry out into the world of zombies.

Magda's task now was to run tests devised by her boss, Wu, along with her fellow Class I technologist, Rajiv, on people whose brains didn't work. She took a peek at Ms. Murtoid. The face still smooth, the mouth not yet melted by experience and gravity into a perpetual frown, the brass-tinted brown hair that hadn't been fussed over by a half-dozen beauticians because it didn't yet need to be. Magda sighed.

Ms. Murtoid, her head listing left and slightly forward, lolled among tens of millions of dollars' worth of equipment, devised by geniuses who had found novel ways to use optics, algorithms, and wave frequency measurements to explore the deep craggy valleys, smooth surfaces, and pulsing electrical activity of the only organic thing that has led the world toward progress.

Or not, Magda thought.

The digital eyes of the best and brightest technology invariably showed lobes entangled with spider webs, white matter laced with old used tissues, medullas crammed with eraser crumbs.

Those machines couldn't tell us what Ms. Murtoid would be remembering, if she could. The byzantine word games she'd played—and won!--against hundreds of other players on her Lifestick. The odd, exotic feel of a cool spring day. The haptic touch of her many lovers, the distance closed by devices that understood human sexual response better than most humans. (Well men, at least.)

"December? What the hell happens in December?," was all she was thinking now. (And this was a good thing! She had retained the lone mental task she was asked to work on!)

Over in the high-powered cerebral resonance seat—the electric chair, the technologists called it—Mr. Gumphers slumped, looking confused and chastened as a spurned little boy.

Rajiv was as mindful of the limitations of machines as Magda was. He liked to throw some old school testing in during his examinations—an fMRI that showed generalized wave activity in a region, a word recognition test that might light up the cerebral cortex.

But Magda liked to see how humans responded to things that triggered strong emotional associations. Ice cream. Puppies. Propaganda pictures of the nation's leader, Big Bother. And she liked to see if people could name things they smelled, a sign that there was a still cog or two churning up there.

"The nose is the gateway to memory. The past lives through our olfactory nerves," Magda explained.

This was too much, even for the rebellious Rajiv.

"We're not dogs," he said with his usual sniff of disdain.

Past the point of giving a shit, she asked Mr. Gumphers, who was farther gone than even Ms. Murtoid, even though he hadn't yet reached 35, to test-sniff a few items that she would pinch between her fingers and hold under his nose.

Things didn't go well at first. Allspice brought a look devoid of comprehension. Black pepper delivered the cliché of a sneeze. But bergamot did the trick.

"Craft beer!," he offered with enthusiasm, recalling an old spice-y IPA or three he had downed.

Magda and Rajiv looked at each other. Did beer pass for bergamot? "Close enough," Rajiv deemed.

But that was it. Oregano stirred no longings for pizza, basil for pesto, or even chili powder for chili. Mr. Gumphers had fallen asleep.

Just before she graduated, Magda's advisor told her that, in the old days, the Ms. Murtoids would have been 78, not 38, before their nuts went nuts, and their lights went out. Nowadays, people begin to forget where their comm devices are when they are in their 20s, lose their way home in their 30s when their GPS implants go haywire, and find words unsummonable whenever they go without their offshoring-and-logging machines. With no need to commit anything to their memories—their real memory, not a machine—their hippocampi and cerebellums take a holiday, and they never come back.

Scientists had developed machines that could identify whether brains stopped working, theories on what "lifestyle" measures could help slow the process, and palliative methods for more painlessly guiding the witless toward the inevitable dark.

But they hadn't learned enough to prevent the neuro-carnage, much less stop what had become a non-infectious epidemic of dim-wittedness, Magda knew. The mind is as much muddle as it is machine, a puzzle wrapped in a koan swaddled in a miracle of creation that somehow adds up to everything we know or feel. And up to now, the brain has outsmarted science.

It wasn't for nothing that Magda's days stretched out into an endless parade of despair.

Just then, Ms, Murtoid startled and bolted upright in her chair, the electrode wires standing straight up from her head, making her look a bit like The Bride of Frankenstein.

"Christmas!," she yelled triumphantly.

A day in December is always remembered.