

The Zahir

By Jorge Luis Borges

My friend Borges once described a Zahir, which in Buenos Aires in 1939 was a coin, a ten-centavo piece, with the letters 'N' and 'T' and the numeral '2' scratched crudely in the obverse. Whomsoever saw this coin was consumed by it, in a manner of speaking, and could think of nothing else, until at last their personality ceased to exist, and they were reduced to a babbling corpse with nothing to talk about but the coin, the coin, always the coin. To have one's mind devoured by coins, that is a terrible fate, although one which is common enough in these mercenary times. But to have one's mind devoured by the thought of a coin, that is strange and far more terrible. With such stories as these Borges kept me awake at night, to keep him company when he could not sleep.

I had arrived in Uruguay on a tramp steamer from Cuba and had tried to work my way down the country to the Argentina, where I would stay with Borges. But my money was nearly exhausted when I reached the Fray Bentos and I used the last of it to send a message to Borges, begging him to come help me. But he was detained by the press of his librarianship, and could not take enough time off at such short notice to come and get me. And so it happened that I lived for two weeks in a small town in Argentina with an insane cripple named Ireneo Funes.

I kept his cottage tidy and cooked for him and assisted him in all things, in return for sleeping in his corner and eating some of what I cooked. The woman who normally took care of him, Maria Fuente, was eager for a vacation, even a brief one. Funes was an irritating roommate. He spoke little, and when he did it did not make any sense. He would spend hours staring at a single object: his hand, a crack in the plaster, the tobacco in the end of his cigarette. I learned, as the days passed with no word from my friends, that he had become crippled in a riding accident some time before and that he was dying of tuberculosis, a frequent affliction of the bedridden.

Eventually I realized the cause of Funes' peculiar abstraction. His accident had left him physically helpless, but endowed with a memory perfect in its accuracy and perfect in its detail. He could remember everything he had ever seen, or heard, or thought. He remembered in detail not only every experience he had ever had, but all the times that he had remembered each experience, and the memories were as distinct and different to him as the beads of a rosary. The leaves of a tree were not leaves to him; he could remember each leaf in detail and compare it in his mind with each other, or with a leaf on another tree, a leaf of the same tree on another day, with a spray of water from the river that wetted him as

a child. I heard him mention those leaves once. He said that a certain leaf was curled like the curve of Pedro Althazar's horse's rump on the twenty-third day of March, only more graceful. "At the moment it shook off that fly," he added, seeing my perplexity. "Which fly?" I asked. "It was the eleventh one I saw," he elucidated, "but perhaps you saw some that I did not, since I did not rise from my bed to look out the window."

After a week of living with Funes, I feared that a malady of the mind had begun to overtake me also, and at first I ascribed it to the stress of having to live with this superhuman cripple. It was a simple thing, and yet it disturbed me, for I could find no explanation for it, and it seemed so small, so arbitrary, as to be completely removed from all rhyme or reason. The nature of the malady was this: On one wall of the cottage was a shelf on which I stored the containers of spices and seasonings with which I flavored Funes' food, and one of these jars of seasoning was a pepper-mill. Even after all these years I remember it: it was about six inches tall, cylindrical, made of a dark brown-stained wood with six longitudinal burnt scars. The handle was too small and was made of dull steel. At the time I was completely unable to remember it.

Meal after meal I cooked and would want to add mustard, and immediately my mind would fix on the mustard-pot and I would know where the mustard-pot was. I would look for the cilantro, and reach out my hand without even thinking, and there it would be. But when I wanted the pepper-mill, I could not remember whether we even had one. I would feel sure that we did, that we must, although I could not remember for certain, and would be unable to call its image or its location to my mind. Finally I would search the cabinet and the shelves, and come across the pepper-mill by chance. I would look at it stupidly, feeling sure that this was indeed a pepper-mill (for it looked just like a pepper-mill) but being unable to recollect it. Finally I would use the pepper and put the mill back on the shelf, resolving to remember it the next time.

After this had happened three times, I was distraught. I knew that the last three times I had wanted the pepper I had been unable to remember the pepper-mill and had had to search for it. And even though I remembered doing this, I could not be sure that we really had one and try as I might I simply could not remember what it looked like or where it was. I had nightmares that somehow Funes was devouring my mnemonic capability to feed his own. I went to speak to Maria Fuente, but she only said that he was the spawn of the devil, and that was no help.

Finally one day I burnt Funes' dinner by tarrying too long in searching for the pepper-mill. This brought sharp words from Funes, who, as you may imagine,

had no patience with the memory lapses of others. I did not want to tell him of my fears and my persistently failing memory; I had a half-formed idea that Funes was deliberately causing my weird forgetfulness, and I was afraid of what I might find out. I would have told him that it was the first time I had forgotten the pepper-mill, only I could not remember what it was I had been looking for. But for some reason, he demanded to know what it was, and I bleakly wandered around the cottage, opened the cabinet and searched the shelves, until I found the pepper-mill, and then I remembered. "Ah," said I, "it was the pepper-mill."

At this, he almost sat up. "Pepper-mill?" he said. "What pepper-mill?"

"The brown wooden one," said I. "So long," holding my hands about six inches apart, "and about this big around."

"I have never seen this pepper-mill," he said. "Is it Maria's? Did she bring it while I was asleep?"

I said that as far as I knew it had been in the cottage longer than I had.

"Let me see it," he commanded, and I brought the pepper-mill. Funes examined it closely, even minutely. "I have never seen it before. Indeed, I did not even know I possessed such a thing. Speak to me no more of it," and he sank back onto the bed, quiet.

He seemed profoundly disturbed for the rest of the evening, and he did not speak again before I went to sleep. But I was awakened in the middle of the night. Funes was standing over me, in itself a cause for alarm, as he never arose from his bed except in the direst of emergencies. "Dominus," he said, shaking me and almost losing his unsteady footing, "Dominus! That... thing you showed me this evening. What was it? I have forgotten it." I could not remember, but I was able to get him to go back to bed while I hunted it up. He was trembling, and there was a wild light in his eyes. Finally I found the pepper-mill. "Here," I said at last, tossing it to him. "Here it is."

He caught it, and as he examined it, he grew more and more perplexed and even wilder than before. "I thought that I would know it when I saw it again," he cried. "But I am sure I have never seen this before in my life!"

"So you said this afternoon," I reminded him.

“I know I said it this afternoon!” he screamed. “I *remember* saying it this afternoon. But of the pepper-mill I have no recollection whatsoever. Where was it?”

“It was on the little shelf,” I said.

He made me hold him up as he came to examine the shelf. “Where?” he asked. “Here?” I assented. He leaned against me and studied the shelf, and then, satisfied at last, hobbled painfully back to bed. But He did not sleep. Of that I am sure. He lay awake, smoking and biting his nails, until morning.

When I awoke he looked haggard and there was cigarette ash on the floor beside his cot. He never spilt his cigarette ash; he found the details of the random patterns of the ash on the floor distracting and irritating, and they disturbed and excited him so that he could not rest. He was mumbling to himself. “Salt shaker,” he said. “Garlic press. Large head of garlic. Fourteen dead flies. Small head of garlic. Jug of oil.” He saw that I was awake. “There were seven hundred and fourteen distinct entities on that shelf last night,” he said instantly. “Counting small chili peppers, spilled grains of rice, fragments of garlic and onion skin, and flecks of soil. I can remember all but one of them. What is the missing object?” I could not remember. I went to the shelf and enumerated the large objects aloud. When I came to that abominable pepper-mill we were both surprised. “A pepper-mill,” mused Funes, gazing at it. “I thought perhaps it might have been a pepper-mill, but I then thought it might have been many things.” And he turned over and went to sleep with the pepper-mill under his pillow. I went out walking on the pampas, leaving a lunch by Funes’ bed..

That evening when I returned Funes was in a state again. He could not remember the whatever-it-was, and this time we could not find it. Half an our of searching finally turned it up under his pillow, and again Funes and I examined it interestedly, wondering how we could forget such a commonplace object. I was careful to put the pepper-mill back on the shelf, in view of Funes’ bed, to prevent this sort of farce from happening again. I had a limited success with this effort, since Funes forgot the pepper-mill whenever he averted his eyes from it. I eventually suspended it from the ceiling over his bed, so that it would be obvious to him as much of the time as possible, although this availed him nothing when he had his eyes shut, or when he slept on his belly.

Later I went to Maria Fuentes to ask for a less troublesome pepper-mill. She forwned, and said “I was so sure that there was one there already,” but could not recollect it, and so lent me another. As I left, I heard her wonder to herself about how she could have cooked so long for Funes without having a pepper-mill. This

stopped me from worrying so much about my own sanity, since I realized that nobody, not even Funes, could remember the accursed pepper-mill, and as long as Funes was quiet I was able to forget about it (forget about the mysterious forgetting, I mean---forgetting the pepper-mill itself was easy) and pass the time calmly.

Funes occasionally awoke in the middle of the night, and, being unable to see the pepper-mill hanging suspended in front of his face in the dark, would rustle and talk to himself and finally strike a light, before he caught sight of the pepper-mill and was able to get back to sleep. Thus I did not sleep too well at night, but my days were idle and peaceful and so I got enough rest. I eventually received a letter from Borges saying that he would come for me in a few days, and I passed those days pleasantly. I took in fresh air and wrestled with the young men of the village. The days were carefree and happy, and I dreaded returning to the cottage to cook for Funes, who would stare at the pepper-mill, looking quite deranged, and mutter to himself in different languages, describing it over and over again, for hours on end, and then suddenly shut his eyes and try to remember it. He never succeeded.

Borges arrived a few days later to take me away, and I left that madhouse gratefully and went with him to Buenos Aires. I have ever since been struck by the irony of the situation in Fray Bentos. Funes alone would have been immune to the Zahir, for the quantity and detail of his memory alone would have been beyond the coin's power to compass. But an Anti-Zahir, a thing which nobody could remember at all, no matter how often they saw it, was, for a man with an otherwise perfect memory, the thing that most stuck in his mind.