

BRAIN TRUST

By Rachel Atkins

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Synopsis:

Married since medical school, Miles and Candace are scientists working together on researching neural enhancements for the treatment of depression. Miles has become depressed and withdrawn from the work, until he makes a new discovery and wants to experiment with it on himself. He convinces Candace to abandon her principles and help him temporarily implant an electronic device in his own brain—and then refuses to allow her to remove it when the results reach far beyond his expectations, forcing them both to face the moral, ethical, and personal implications of what they've done.

Cast:

One man, one woman

Characters:

MILES: a doctor/scientist focusing on neural enhancement research, suffering from depression, a risk taker, frustrated, manipulative, married to his work partner, CANDACE

CANDACE: a doctor/scientist focusing on neural enhancement research, a rule-follower, cautious, ambitious, married to her work partner, MILES

Time & Setting

Contemporary. A scientific research laboratory.

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BEFORE

(MILES is alone in the lab. He's wearing a lab coat and looking in a mirror: combing down his hair or doing something on the right side of his head, then probing his right skull, which causes his left eye and mouth to twitch. He puts on a surgical hat, reads some paperwork, makes notes, then paces, muttering to himself. When he exits to the next room, CANDACE enters from the outside: takes off jacket and hangs it up, etc. MILES re-enters, startling her.)

CANDACE
(shrieking)

Miles!

MILES
(overlapping)

Honestly, Candace, no need to holler like a fishwife.

CANDACE

Sorry, I was just—surprised. What are you doing here?

MILES

I work here, remember?

CANDACE

Yes, of course you do, but—I didn't expect you. You could have let me know—

MILES

I was busy. I'm trying to get myself back in the game here.

CANDACE

Well, good. That's great news, sweetheart. I could use your help—
(goes to kiss him)

MILES
(pulling away)

Don't. You smell like a zoo.

CANDACE

I do not!

MILES

I'm telling you, you do. You just can't smell it on yourself because you're around them all the time.

CANDACE

Come on. You know monkeys don't smell.

MILES

They smell to me.

CANDACE

Besides, don't I always wash up when I'm done with the animals?

MILES

Well, that stink doesn't wash out.

CANDACE

(teasing, playing Lady Macbeth)

Out, damn spot! What, will these hands never be clean? All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand!

(MILES looks at her blankly.)

Never mind.

(MILES goes back to his paperwork.)

So what are you working on?

MILES

Perfecting my whiffle ball swing. What do you think I'm working on?

CANDACE

I meant, specifically, in this moment. Can I take a look?

(tries to read over his right shoulder)

MILES

(pulls away again)

I'm—not quite ready to share it yet.

CANDACE

OK.

(preparing to work)

Well, I had a good morning, you'll be pleased to know. Natalia seemed a little less lethargic today, so I think the electrode site we're using on her may be starting to take effect. Also, I heard from the NIH that our research grant is under review, so I think—

MILES

Candace. Do you not see that I'm trying to focus here?

CANDACE

Sorry! Sorry, I just thought you'd like to hear the latest on *our* project. It *is* the first day you've been back in the lab since—

MILES

Because I don't give a shit about the goddamn monkeys!

CANDACE

Well, you'd better figure out how to change your tune about that, because those monkeys are our livelihood for the foreseeable future.

MILES

That's a depressing thought. And no, the irony of being depressed while researching neural implants to treat depression is not lost on me, Lady Macbeth.

CANDACE

So you haven't completely lost your sense of humor.

MILES

Candace. I need you to listen to me. Because I've had this idea, and I think I'm on to something. Something that could blow our research right out of the water.

CANDACE

I'm glad you're feeling positive about something, but I'm not sure I want years of work blown out of the water. And I'm pretty sure the NIH doesn't either.

MILES

That's not what I mean. I'm taking about a breakthrough.

CANDACE

Really?

MILES

Really.

CANDACE

I'm all ears!

MILES

I think we're going about this work the wrong way. How many teams are out there, studying the same questions about the brain and depression, each of us hoping to get to the answer first? We're all targeting the same general sites. We're all slogging along with dubious models of depressed monkeys or rabbits or rats, trying to guess if any given rodent is more or less down in the dumps on any given day. I mean, come on!

CANDACE

Yes...?

MILES

I think there's another way. I think there's a better site for the implants that no one else is testing. In the ventral tegmental area.

CANDACE

The ventral tegmental area? But—

MILES

And I think it's time to stop—monkeying around with the damn animals as test subjects. I want to try this on myself.

CANDACE

You want to do *what*?

MILES

Now, Candy, hear me out—

CANDACE
(overlapping)

Oh no, you don't. You don't get to call me Candy when you're proposing something like this.

MILES

Just listen. We both know I've become profoundly depressed.

CANDACE

It's situational. It's just about our lack of progress with the work.

MILES

Maybe so. But I've been here before, and work is not the only trigger.

CANDACE

You've always come out the other side of it!

MILES

So far.

CANDACE

What does *that* mean?

MILES

(ignoring her question)

It makes me the perfect test subject. And if I'm right, this new site will give us results immediately. We'll be killing two birds with one stone! Our work will move forward, and I won't be depressed by it anymore!

CANDACE

Dr. Miles Wallace, professional guinea pig?

MILES

Why not?

CANDACE

Do you really need me to list the reasons?

MILES

No, but I can refute every one of them.

CANDACE

Deep brain stimulation in humans is only approved for significant medical conditions like Parkinson's.

MILES

I'll sign a waiver.

CANDACE

It's risky.

MILES

Life is risky. Remember when I asked you on our first date? You thought *that* was risky.
(imitating her, teasing)

What would happen to our work together if the relationship was a failure?

CANDACE

That's not the kind of risk I'm talking about.

MILES

Fine. I'm fully cognizant of the physical hazards, and I'm still a willing subject.

CANDACE

Chance of infection. Further physical impairment. You could hit a blood vessel!

MILES

Luckily, I have a doctor I trust with my life to do the implant.

CANDACE

Wait a minute. Me?

MILES

Who else?

CANDACE

No way.

MILES

You prefer I try to do it myself? Or enlist some incompetent technician?

CANDACE

What if something goes wrong?

MILES

It won't.

CANDACE

Oh, so now you're an optimist? We could both lose our medical licenses.

MILES

I'll take full responsibility.

CANDACE

You think the NIH or the Medical Board would buy that? Especially if I'm the one to implant the electrodes — which I will not be, by the way.

MILES

If it doesn't work, if there's nothing to report, then it can be our secret. A little private experimentation between husband and wife.

CANDACE

That's completely unethical.

MILES

But if this site works—*when* it works—think about what we'll have done! While everyone else is still plodding along with the animals like Dr. Doolittle, you and I will have actually achieved a real breakthrough—discovered a new area of the brain that can reverse depression. Think of the applications. Think of the notoriety. Think of the funding.

CANDACE

The NIH is never going to fund us in some unauthorized, half-cocked experiment—especially not one based on illegally obtained results.

MILES

That's because the NIH is too conservative and narrow-minded for this level of innovation. But there are plenty of other funding sources that would be thrilled to support the cure for common human depression! Imagine how many people's lives we could change. Not to mention how much *your* life would improve by not being married to someone depressed.

CANDACE

That's the thing, Miles. You've been depressed. You're not thinking clearly. If you were, you'd know that this is simply wrong.

MILES

How is taking that stand an exercise of your scientific mind? You've got to think outside the box to get anywhere in this business. You should know that better than anyone, Candace.

CANDACE

That's not fair.

MILES

The truth is not fair?

CANDACE

Playing on my bruised ego is not fair.

MILES

Your nomination for the Taubman Prize. You *had* that award. Remember how excited you were?

CANDACE

I remember.

MILES

But you were too careful, too methodical. You all but handed it to Druker and Sawyers.

CANDACE

We're talking about manipulating the human brain! There's no such thing as too careful or methodical.

MILES

There is when it robs you of a well-deserved chance at recognition for so many years of dedicated effort.

CANDACE

You're playing dirty.

MILES

I'm being honest. Sometimes the truth hurts. But you are a scientist, my darling. You deal exclusively in truths.

CANDACE

Objectivity.

MILES

Yes.

CANDACE

And you don't think this idea is outrageously *subjective*? It would completely compromise both your status and mine as neutral researchers.

MILES

If this is successful, no one is going to scrutinize our methodology.

CANDACE

And that's what you're counting on.

MILES

Elementary, my dear Dr. Watson!

CANDACE

No, Miles! You don't get to prey on me with pet names and private jokes. This is a professional matter.

MILES

Exactly! It *is* professional. That's why I'm trying to include you. You think I couldn't do this on my own? Hire some post-doc flunky who's desperate to get in on the ground floor of something to drill a hole in my skull? And then I take the credit for discovery and success. But I want to do this with you. My partner. My wife.

CANDACE

You're manipulating me.

MILES

I wouldn't be if I didn't feel so confident. Candace, we have this power. Less than 150 years ago, there was no such thing as science. People like us called themselves "natural philosophers" and their work was all about finding God in nature. We know so much more now. We can *do* so much more. Aren't we morally obligated to put that knowledge and ability to use?

CANDACE

Are you actually claiming the moral high ground?

MILES

Would you just take a look? Just read what I've got and see what you think for yourself. Please.

(CANDACE reviews his materials)

CANDACE

I see what you're getting at here, Miles. I really do. But it's too dangerous. On so many levels.

MILES

The dangers are trivial compared to killing myself.

CANDACE

What?

MILES

Look at me, Candace. Suicide is a real possibility with this degree of clinical depression. You have to know that.

CANDACE

Miles, if you're considering suicide, then we've just stepped over a very important line that is way beyond—f this is some kind of cry for help, then we need to get you—

MILES

No! *This* is the help I need! This is all I need.

CANDACE

Miles, you just threatened me with suicide! Did you not expect me to take that seriously?

MILES

I'm sorry. Candace, please. You have to trust me. This is the answer. Not a suicide hot line or psychotherapy. Just—this.

(Beat)

CANDACE

So if I did agree to do this—if!—it would have to be temporary.

MILES

Fine.

CANDACE

Just long enough to determine initial results.

MILES

Absolutely.

CANDACE

And then if it's successful, we go about it through the proper channels.

MILES

You got it.

CANDACE

Testing in *animal* models.

MILES

Monkeys and bunnies from here to next Tuesday.

CANDACE

All right. Let me think about it.

MILES

Think about it?

CANDACE

You know I don't like snap decisions. Let me mull it over a few days. Process.

MILES

No! It has to be today. Now!

CANDACE

Why?

MILES

Because I've got everything ready to go.

(indicates the other room)

CANDACE

So you thought you could just steamroll me into doing whatever you wanted?

MILES

Not steamroll. Convince. Through thoughtful debate. Which we've done.

CANDACE

Miles!

MILES

Haven't we?

CANDACE

The first time you show up for work in months—months, Miles!—while I've been shouldering all the responsibility myself, keeping up with the records and data, smoothing ruffled feathers, making excuses—

MILES

I am well aware of how much I've burdened you here. And then coming home to a silent, depressed spouse every night? How do you think it's made me feel, knowing how difficult I've been making life for you?

CANDACE

That's not what I meant—

MILES

What kind of man does that to the woman he loves? Not pulling my weight, doing my share. No, Candace. That's why we have to do this. Because it's the first thing that's gotten me out of bed in months. Our work is stagnating as it is, and you know it. We both need this.

CANDACE

It's illegal. It's immoral. It's unethical. It's—everything you and I are against. Miles, if you really have a theory you want to try, there are right ways to go about it. Let's follow protocol—

MILES

I can't wait, Candace.

(reveals that he's already started to drill a hole in his right skull)

CANDACE

Oh my god, Miles.

MILES

I tried. I was going to do the whole thing without you. But I can't. I need help placing the electrode.

CANDACE

Jesus.

MILES

I didn't want to screw this up!

CANDACE

Miles, you have really gone too far.

MILES

Come on. I've got everything prepped. And you know that every minute we spend arguing while my brain is exposed increases the chance of infection.

CANDACE

I can't believe you've done this.

MILES

I just need you to place the electrode in the site I've designated. Just like you've done a hundred times before, in the monkeys. Easy as pie.

CANDACE

Don't be glib. There's nothing easy here.

MILES

It's you and me, right? Wallace and Watson. Just like it's always been, ever since med school. Remember?

(he's said this many times before)

If there'd been a Walton or a Washington to separate us, we might never have been thrown together like we were. Might never have known that we belonged together. The great cosmic fate of alphabetical order.

CANDACE

That was a long time ago.

MILES

But we're still us. Still together. I still need you, Candace. Help me. Please!

(Beat)

CANDACE

Temporary.

MILES

Yes.

CANDACE

Just to confirm the effect.

MILES

Right.

CANDACE

No other tricks up your sleeve.

MILES

None.

(Beat)

CANDACE

Show me what you want me to do.

END OF SCENE

AFTER

(A few days later. CANDACE is alone in the lab: working, organizing materials and equipment, agitated. She makes a phone call, listens.)

CANDACE
(on phone)

Voicemail box is full!? Yeah, no kidding, full of *my* messages! Goddamn you, Miles!

MILES
(entering)

Candace, my lass, my lovely, top of the morning to you!

CANDACE

Miles! Where the hell have you been all this time?

MILES

Oh, out and about. Here and there and everywhere. You know how it is.

CANDACE

No, I don't know "how it is," because we agreed—

MILES

It really is a wonderful world out there. Miraculous.

CANDACE

Miles, I do not believe you. I have been calling and calling since—

MILES

On my phone?

CANDACE

Of course on your phone—

MILES

Oh darling, I gave that little curio away a lifetime ago.

CANDACE

You gave away your cell phone?

MILES

What do I need with such a prosaic communication device?

CANDACE

What are you talking about?

MILES

There was a homeless woman on the street downtown who clearly needed it more than I do.

CANDACE

You've been wandering around on city streets? Downtown?

MILES

I told you, I've been everywhere.

CANDACE

With a stimulating electrode halo attached to your head.

MILES

I kept my hood up. No one could see a thing. Look.
(shows her)

CANDACE

Miles, it is unbelievably foolhardy to walk around like that and you know it.

MILES

Well, that's why I came back here.

CANDACE

Great. So let's get you unhooked, because—

MILES

No, you misunderstand me. I didn't come back to remove it. I'm here so we can cement the electrodes in place permanently.

CANDACE

Permanently? Are you out of your mind?

MILES

Quite the contrary, my dear. As a matter of fact, I've never been more fully *in* my mind. Well, first I had to get a larger battery—

CANDACE

You did what?

MILES

So the implant can deliver more current. Now I can control the intensity.

CANDACE

You've increased the current.

MILES

Yes, and the results are phenomenal!

CANDACE

(ignoring his enthusiasm)

Miles, maybe you lost track of time out there, but this crazy experiment of yours has now exceeded the terms we specifically outlined when—

MILES

But Candace, you can't possibly expect me to abide by those terms now. Not when this crazy experiment, as you so eloquently describe it, has gone far beyond anything you or I could have imagined. Those parameters are completely meaningless.

CANDACE

Are you listening to yourself?

MILES

Of course I am.

CANDACE

I don't think you are, or you would understand how imperative it is that we remove those electrodes immediately.

MILES

How do you figure that?

CANDACE

It didn't work!

MILES

You call this not working?

CANDACE

I mean, yes, the initial test showed *some* efficacy—

MILES

Candace, with the increased current, what's happening to me now is beyond anything we could have hoped for. It's euphoria!

CANDACE

Euphoria.

MILES

Now you're with me!

CANDACE

You know as well as I do that euphoria is a common response to the release from depression.

MILES

That doesn't make it inherently invalid.

CANDACE

It's not real, Miles. It's an illusion triggered by electrical stimulation.

MILES

The light bulbs in this room are sparked by electricity. Does that mean that it is not, in fact, light in here?

CANDACE

A few days ago, you were threatening suicide!

MILES

And now I couldn't be farther from it. Isn't that preferable?

CANDACE

What you are experiencing is not an effective treatment for depression.

MILES

Don't knock it til you've tried it.

CANDACE

This isn't a joke!

MILES

No, it's not. And I'm serious. I've entered into a state of absolute well-being and clarity, and you say that's not an acceptable alternative to depression? I can see, literally see, how everything is connected. I can feel all living things, and beyond. I am at one with the universe. I *am* the universe.

CANDACE

You think you're God?

MILES

No, my darling. I *realize* that I am God. There is a difference.

CANDACE

You have no objectivity.

MILES

I am God! How can you say I have no objectivity?

CANDACE

You're on an LSD trip. Just let me take out the electrodes and you'll see.

MILES

That makes no sense. Do you really not understand? We've more than achieved our goal!

CANDACE

We most certainly have not.

MILES

We have found an effective site for the immediate treatment — no, the reversal of depression.

CANDACE

Maybe, but with hallucinatory side effects that the medical community would never accept, let alone the general public.

MILES

Are you really calling spiritual enlightenment an unacceptable side effect? I sincerely doubt the public would agree with that.

CANDACE

Think about how this could be misused. Abused.

MILES

Impossible. In fact, just the opposite. The world would be transformed if we all lived on this higher plane of existence. Imagine! All of humanity, awakened, together!

CANDACE

Are you serious?

MILES

Why not? I now understand that, on a fundamental level, we are all one, Candace. It's incredible. We need to share it.

CANDACE

You want to implant electrodes into the brains of the whole human race? Literally?

MILES

You think some people deserve to be happier than others?

CANDACE

Sex offenders? Serial killers?

MILES

Brilliant! Opening the universal mind in this way would surely eliminate that kind of anti-social behavior. In fact, that's probably the population we should start with.

(makes a note)

CANDACE

Oh my god...

MILES

Yes, darling?

CANDACE

(as in: "Oh no, you didn't!")

Oh no—

(stops herself)

What about just—ordinary people who are perfectly content with their lives as they are?

MILES

When they've attained enlightenment, they'll be even more appreciative of what they have—and satisfied with having much less, come to think of it. The environmental impact alone could make the planet healthier in a decade!

CANDACE

And who pays to put everyone in the world on a permanent bliss trip?

MILES

There you go, thinking inside the box again. Once we've reached critical mass, the economics become irrelevant. No more haves and have-nots. No more first world/third world. We won't *need* economics.

CANDACE

You really have an answer for everything, don't you?

MILES

That's because there *is* an answer for everything.

CANDACE

Who are you? Not the Miles I know and love. Where is he?

MILES

I'm right here.

CANDACE

No. I want the old Miles back.

MILES

Why? The old Miles was a depressive. He made you and himself miserable.

CANDACE

But he was mortal.

MILES

This is the real me, Candace. My true ultimate Self. You just need to try it.

CANDACE

Out of the question.

MILES

But then you'd understand! Trust me—

CANDACE

I don't trust you. Not in this state.

MILES

You would feel so much better.

CANDACE

I don't need to feel better. I'm not depressed. I'm angry. With you!

MILES

Think about how we'd enjoy making up...

CANDACE

Miles, stop! Listen to me. We're supposed to be finding a treatment for depression, not a way to manipulate the fundamental brain activity of—humanity!

MILES

You're looking at this with way too narrow a focus.

CANDACE

That's our job description!

MILES

You only think that because you can't see what I see. Not yet. But you will. Let me put it into terms you can currently understand.

CANDACE

Don't you dare patronize me.

MILES

This discovery goes so far beyond our original scope. Isn't a revelation like this exactly why you chose to pursue neural research? To truly understand the capacities of the human brain, and to use that knowledge to make a profound and lasting difference in people's lives? To achieve a groundbreaking new conception of the most complex, beautiful organism on Earth? This is our life's work!

CANDACE

What about your speech the other day, about the absurdity of looking for God in nature and calling it science?

MILES

I can admit when I'm wrong. It's all true. The natural philosophers of yesteryear understood something essential that has since been obscured. But we can fix that.

CANDACE

This is ridiculous. And you're just prolonging the inevitable. We've tested your hypothesis. We've seen the results. Now we need to remove the electrodes and evaluate with clear heads.

MILES

So you won't join me?

CANDACE

Absolutely not. Miles, seriously, what do you think you're going to do from here? Publish? Proselytize?

MILES

Your imagination about this is so—limited. So human. I don't need to publish. The experience itself is what will convince others. It's completely self-validating.

CANDACE

This experience doesn't pay the mortgage!

MILES

(musing)

It's like we're speaking different languages now.

CANDACE

At best, you'll be the laughingstock of our research community. At worst, we both will. We'll lose all standing, all funding. Is this really worth sacrificing our careers and livelihoods? What you just described as our life's work?

MILES

I'll never go back.

CANDACE

That's not an acceptable or even remotely realistic choice.

MILES

If you won't cement the electrodes on permanently, I'll do it myself.

CANDACE

Like hell you will.

MILES

I can do it.

CANDACE

Because you're the all-powerful, all-seeing.

MILES

I'm not the Wizard of Oz, Candace.

CANDACE

No, you're God, because that's so much more rational!

MILES

I wish you could see it the way I can.

CANDACE

I don't! In fact, what I really wish is that I'd never let you coerce me into this fiasco in the first place.

MILES

I've crossed over. I'm existing on a new plane. It's not possible for me to go back.

CANDACE

Look, if this discovery is so monumental, it will hold. Now that we know this site works, we can investigate it with a monkey. We can use that to get the support we need for a human trial, the right way.

MILES

I won't be able to do that, Candace. Not if you take these electrodes out.

CANDACE

Well, we can't move forward with those electrodes in.

MILES

So we are at an impasse.

(Beat)

CANDACE

Look, I do think you're on to something, Miles. You've found an important new site in the cognitive machinery of the brain. I'm sure it will have important applications far beyond alleviating depression. It's an incredibly exciting discovery.

MILES

Thank you.

CANDACE

So let's make sure we can communicate that to others in a way they can hear and understand. I promise you, as one of those people out here, this is not it. So please, let me do what I have to do. And then we can address this together, two rational human beings. Scientists. Partners. Like we've always done.

MILES

(grabbing an instrument as a weapon)

I'm sorry, Candace. I can't let you do that.

CANDACE

Are you threatening me?

MILES

I will stop you from removing this link to transcendence at all costs.

CANDACE

At all costs. Including, what, murder?

MILES

This is too important.

CANDACE

More important than my life.

MILES

It seems like it's your life or mine.

CANDACE

What?

MILES

You're talking about this at the level of a scientific experiment. But it's gone so far beyond that. This is about my *existence*.

CANDACE

What about *my* existence?

MILES

You've said it yourself. Sometimes there are sacrifices that need to be made.

CANDACE

You're right, Miles. Sometimes there are sacrifices.

(Beat)

All right.

MILES

All right?

CANDACE

I see this isn't the way. And I'm as much to blame as you are. God, Miles, just put that thing down, would you? You're frightening me!

MILES

Oh, Candy, I'm sorry, you know I'd never—

(He drops his weapon and goes to hold her. As he does, CANDACE pulls a syringe from her lab coat pocket and injects him.)

Candy?

CANDACE

I'm sorry, too, Miles.

MILES

What have you done?

CANDACE

I didn't want to do it like this. But I will, if I have to—

MILES

Candy, please, no—

CANDACE

Just relax. Relax, sweetheart. I've got you.

(helps MILES sit down)

MILES

Candace, I'm telling you! It will kill me!

CANDACE

No, I promise—

MILES

It will!

CANDACE

Miles, just calm down—

MILES

You don't understand. If you—the new current—I'll die, Candace—
(loses consciousness)

CANDACE

(picks up her equipment and prepares to remove the electrodes, taking off his jacket, then stops)

This is more than just a new battery. What have you done to yourself?

(puts the equipment down)

What have you done to us?

(picks up equipment, puts it down again and steps away from MILES.)

Oh god, Miles. What am I going to do now?

END OF PLAY