

Jeffrey Ford - Malthusian's Zombie

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I'm not sure what nationality Malthusian was, but he spoke with a strange accent; a stuttering lilt of mumblement it took weeks to fully comprehend as English. He had more wrinkles than a witch and a shock of hair whiter and fuller than a Samoyed's ruff. I can still see him standing at the curb in front of my house, slightly bent, clutching a cane whose ivory woman's head wore a blindfold. His suit was a size and a half too large, as were his eyes, peering from behind lenses cast at a thickness that must have made his world enormous. The two details that halted my raking and caused me to give him more than a neighborly wave were his string tie and a mischievous grin I had only ever seen before on my six-year-old daughter when she was drawing one of her monsters.

"Malthusian," he said from the curb.

I greeted him and spoke my name.

He mumbled something and I leaned closer to him and begged his pardon. At this, he turned and pointed back at the house down on the corner. I knew it had recently changed hands, and I surmised he had just moved in.

"Welcome to the neighborhood," I said.

He put his hand out and I shook it. His grip was very strong, and he was in no hurry to let go. Just as I realized he was aware of my discomfort, his grin turned into a wide smile and he released me. Then he slowly began to walk away.

"Nice to meet you," I said to his back.

He turned, waved, and let loose an utterance that had the cadence of poetry. There was something about leaves and fruit and it all came together in a rhyme. Only when he had disappeared into the woods at the end of the block did I realize he had been quoting Pope. " 'Words are like leaves, where they most abound, beneath, little fruit or sense is found.' " As a professor of literature, this amused me, and I decided to try to find out more about Malthusian.

I was on sabbatical that year, supposedly writing a book concerning the structure of Poe's stories, which I saw as lacking the energetic ascent of the Fichtian curve and being comprised solely of denouement. Like houses of Usher, the reader comes to them, as in a nightmare, with no prior knowledge, at the very moment they begin to crumble. What I was really doing was dogging it in high fashion. I'd kiss my wife goodbye as she left for work, take my daughter to school, and then return home to watch reruns of those shows my brother and I had devoted much of our childhood to. Malthusian's daily constitutional was an opportunity to kill some time, and so, when I would see him passing in front of the house, I'd come out and engage him in conversation.

Our relationship grew slowly at first, until I began to learn the cues for his odd rendering of the language. By Thanksgiving I could have a normal conversation with him, and we began to have lengthy discussions about literature. Oddly enough, his interests were far more contemporary than mine. He expressed a devotion to Pynchon, and the West African writer Amos Tutuola. I realized I had spent too long teaching the canon of Early American works and began to delve into some of the novels he mentioned. One day I asked him what he had done before his retirement. He smiled and said something that sounded like *mind-fucker*.

I was sure I had misunderstood him. I laughed and said, "What was that?"

"Mind-fucker," he said. "Psychologist."

"Interesting description of the profession," I said.

He shrugged and his grin dissipated. When he spoke again, he changed the subject to politics.

Through the winter, no matter the weather, Malthusian walked. I remember watching him struggle along through a snowstorm one afternoon, dressed in a black overcoat and black Tyrolean hat, bent more from some invisible weight than a failure of his frame. It struck me then that I had never seen him on his return journey. The trails through the woods went on for miles, and I was unaware of one that might bring him around to his house from the other end of the block.

I introduced him to Susan, my wife, and to my daughter, Lyda. There, at the curb, he kissed both their hands, or tried to. When Lyda pulled her hand back at his approach, he laughed so I thought he would explode. Susan found him charming, but asked me later, "What the hell was he saying?"

The next day, he brought a bouquet of violets for her; and for Lyda, because she had shown him her drawing pad, he left with me a drawing he had done rolled up and tied with a green ribbon. After dinner, she opened it and smiled. "A monster," she said. It was a beautifully rendered charcoal portrait of an otherwise normal middle-aged man, wearing an unnerving look of total blankness. The eyes were heavy lidded and so realistically glassy, the attitude of the body so slack, that the figure exuded a palpable sense of emptiness. At the bottom of the page in a fine calligraphic style were written the words *Malthusian's Zombie*.

"I told him I liked monsters," said Lyda.

"Why is that a monster?" asked Susan, who I could tell was a little put off by the eerie nature of the drawing. "It looks more like a college professor on sabbatical."

"He thinks nothing," said Lyda, and with her pinky finger pointed to the zombie's head. She had me tack it to the back of her door, so that it faced the wall unless she wanted to look at it. For the next few weeks, she drew zombies of her own. Some wore little hats, some bow ties, but all of them, no matter how huge and vacant the eyes, wore mischievous grins.

In early spring, Malthusian invited me to come to his house one evening to play a game of chess. The evening air was still quite cool, but the scent of the breeze carried the promise of things green. His house, which sat on the corner lot, was enormous, by far the largest in the neighborhood. It had three acres of woods appended to it and at the very back touched upon a lake that belonged to the adjacent town.

Malthusian was obviously not much for yard work or home repair; the very measure of a man in this part of the world. A tree had cracked and fallen through the winter and it still lay partially obstructing the driveway. The three-story structure and its four tall columns in front needed paint; certain porch planks had succumbed to dry rot and its many windows were streaked and smudged. The fact that he took no initiative to rectify these problems made him yet more likable to me.

He met me at the door and ushered me into his home. I had visions of the place being like a dim, candle-lit museum of artifacts as odd as their owner, and had hoped to decipher Malthusian's true character from them as if they were clues in a mystery novel. There was nothing of the sort. The place was well lit and tastefully, though modestly, decorated.

"I hope you like merlot," he said as he led me down an oak paneled hallway toward the kitchen.

"Yes," I said.

"It's good for the heart," he said and laughed.

The walls I passed were lined with photographs of Malthusian with different people. He moved quickly and I did not linger out of politeness, but I thought I saw one of him as a child, and more than one of him posing with various military personnel. If I wasn't mistaken, I could have sworn I had caught the face of an ex-president in one of them.

The kitchen was old linoleum in black-and-white checkerboard design, brightly lit by overhead fluorescent lights. Sitting on a table in the center of the large expanse was a chessboard, a magnum of dark wine, two fine crystal goblets, and a thin silver box. He took a seat on one side of the table and extended his hand to indicate I was to sit across from him. He methodically poured wine for both of us, opened the box, retrieved a cigarette, lit it, puffed once, and then led with his knight.

"I'm not very good," I said as I countered with my opposite knight.

He waved his hand in the air, flicked ash onto the floor, and said, "Let's not let it ruin our game."

We played in silence for some time and then I asked him something that had been on my mind since he had first disclosed his profession to me. "And what type of psychologist were you? Jungian? Freudian?"

"Neither," he said. "Those are for children. I was a rat shocker. I made dogs drool."

"Behaviorist?" I asked.

"Sorry to disappoint," he said with a laugh.

"I teach the Puritans with the same method," I said and this made him laugh louder. He loosened his ever-present string tie and cocked his glasses up before plunging through my pitiful pawn defense with his

bishop.

"I couldn't help but notice those photos in the hall," I said. "Were you in the army?"

"Please, no insults," he said. "I worked for the U.S. government."

"What branch?" I asked.

"One of the more shadowed entities," he said. "It was necessary in order to bring my mother and father and sister to this country."

"From where?" I asked.

"The old country."

"Which one is that?"

"It no longer exists. You know, like in a fairy tale, it has disappeared through geopolitical enchantment." With this he checked me by way of a pawn/castle combination.

"Your sister?" I asked.

"She was much like your girl, Lyda. Beautiful and brilliant and what an artist."

As with the game, he took control of the conversation from here on out, directing me to divulge the history of my schooling, my marriage, the birth of my daughter, the nature of our household.

It was a gentle interrogation, the wine making me nostalgic. I told him everything and he seemed to take the greatest pleasure in it, nodding his head at my declaration of love for my wife, laughing at all of Lyda's antics I could remember, and I remembered all of them. Before I knew it, we had played three games, and I was as lit as a stick of kindling. He led me down the hallway to the front door.

As if from thin air, he produced a box of chocolates for my wife. "For the lady," he said. Then he placed in my hand another larger box. Through bleary eyes, I looked down and saw the image of Rat Fink, the pot-bellied, deviant rodent who had been a drag racing mascot in the late sixties.

"It's a model," he told me. "Help the girl make it, she will enjoy this monster."

I smiled in recognition of the figure I had not seen since my teens.

"Big Daddy Roth," he said, and with this eased me out the door and gently closed it behind me.

Although I had as my mission to uncover the mystery of Malthusian, my visit had made him more of an enigma. I visited him twice more to play chess, and on each of the occasions, the scenario was much the same. The only incident that verged on revelation was when Lyda and I constructed the model and painted it. "Rat shocker," I remembered him telling me. I had a momentary episode in which I envisioned myself salivating at the sound of a bell.

On the day that Lyda brought me spring's first crocus, a pale violet specimen with an orange mouth, Malthusian was taken away in an ambulance. I was very worried about him and enlisted Susan, since she was a nurse practitioner, to use her connections in the hospitals to find out where he was. She spent the better part of her Friday evening making calls but came up with nothing.

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Days passed, and I began to think that Malthusian might have died. Then, a week to the day after the ambulance had come for him, I found a note in my mailbox. All it said was *Chess Tonight*.

I waited for the appointed hour, and after Susan had given me a list of things to ask about the old man's condition and Lyda a get-well drawing of a dancing zombie, I set out for the house on the corner.

He did not answer the door, so I opened it and called inside, "Hello?"

"Come," he called from back in the kitchen.

I took the hallway and found him sitting at the chess table. The wine was there, and the cigarette case, but there was no board.

"What happened?" I said when I saw him.

Malthusian looked yet more wrinkled and stooped, sitting in his chair like a sack of old clothes. His white hair had thinned considerably and turned a pale shade of yellow. In his hands he clutched his cane, which I had never seen him use before while in his house, and that childish grin, between malevolence and innocence, had been replaced by the ill, forced smile of Rat Fink.

"No chess?" I asked as a way of masking my concern.

"A game of a different order tonight," he said and sighed.

I was about to ask again what had happened, but he said, "Drink a glass of wine and then you will listen."

We sat in silence as I poured and drank. I had never noticed before but the blindfold on the ivory woman's head did not completely cover her left eye. She half stared at me as I did what I was told. When the glass was empty and I had poured another, he looked up and said, "Now, you must listen carefully. I give you my confession and the last wish of a dying man."

I wanted to object but he brought the cane to his lips in order to silence me.

"In 1969, September, I was attending a conference of the American Psychological Association in Washington D.C. A professor from Princeton, one Julian Jaynes, gave a lecture there. Have you heard of him?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Now you will," he said. "The outrageous title of his address was 'The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind.' Just the name of it led many to think it was pure snake oil. When Mr. Jaynes began to explain his theory, they were sure of it. Individual consciousness as we know it today, he said, is a very recent development in the history of mankind. Before that, like schizophrenics, human beings listened to a voice that came from within their own heads and from this took their cues. These were post-ice age hunter-gatherers for whom it was important to think with a single mind. They heard the voice of some venerable elder of their tribe who had since, perhaps, passed on. This was the much-touted 'voice of God.' Individual ego was virtually nonexistent."

"You mean," I said, "when the ancients refer to the word of the Lord, they were not speaking figuratively?"

"Yes, you follow," he said and smiled, lifting the wine glass to his lips with a trembling hand. "I could tell you that this phenomenon had to do with the right hemispherical language center of the brain and a particular zone called Wernicke's area. When this area was stimulated in modern laboratory experiments, the subjects very often heard authoritarian voices that either admonished or commanded. But they were very distant voices. The reason, Jaynes believed, was that these auditory hallucinations were traveling from the right hemisphere to the left, not through the corpus callosum-the, shall we call it, bridge that joins the hemispheres-but rather through another passageway, the anterior *commissure*."

"I'm hanging on by a thread, now," I said.

Malthusian did not acknowledge my joke, but closed his eyes momentarily and pressed on as if it would all soon become clear.

"Whereas Jaynes gives many explanations for the growing faintness of the voice of God-genocide, natural upheavals, parental selection, environmental demands requiring the wonderful plasticity of the human brain to enact these changes-my fellow researchers and I believed that the muting of the voice was a result of the rapid shrinking of the anterior *commissure* to its present state of no more than one eighth of an inch across. This, we believed, was the physiological change that fractured the group mind into individual consciousness. 'Father, why have you forsaken me?' You see? There is much more, but that is the crux."

"The survival of human beings depended upon this change?" I asked.

"The complexity of civilization required diversification."

"Interesting," was all I could manage.

"As I said," Malthusian went on, "very few took Jaynes seriously, but I did. His ideas were revolutionary, but they were not unfounded." Here, he took a cigarette from the silver case and lit it.

"Is that smart," I asked, nodding at the cigarette, "considering your health?"

"I have been conditioned by Philip Morris," he said with a smile.

"This theory is only the beginning, I can tell," I said.

"Very good, professor," he whispered. "As Farid Ud-Din Attar might have written-if this tale I am about to tell you were inscribed with needles upon the corner of the eye, it would still serve as a lesson to the circumspect."

He lifted the bottle of wine and poured me another glass. "To begin with, if you tell anyone what I am

about to tell you, you will be putting your family and yourself in great jeopardy. Understood?"

I thought momentarily of Malthusian's photos with all those military personnel and his telling me that he had been employed by one of the more shadowed entities of the government. A grim silence filled the room as those huge eyes of his focused on mine. I thought of leaving, but instead I slowly nodded.

"I was part of a secret government project called Dumbwaiter. The title might have been humorous if not for the heinous nature of the work we were doing. As psychologists, we were assigned the task of creating dedicated assassins, men devoid of personal volition, who would do anything-*anything*-that they were ordered to do. Mind control, it is sometimes called. The CIA had, for a short period, thought that the drug LSD might be useful in this pursuit, but instead of creating drones they spread cosmic consciousness. Once this failed, the Behaviorists were called in.

"My lab was situated in a large, old Victorian house out in the woods. No one would have suspected that some bizarre Cold War experiment was taking place in its basement. I had two partners and, working off Jaynes's theory, through surgery and the implanting of pig arteries and chimpanzee neurons we widened and filled the anterior *commissure* in a test subject's brain in order to increase the volume of the auditory hallucination. Through conditioning, my voice became the voice of God for our subject. I was always in his head. One verbal command from me and my order would remain with him, inside his mind, until the task was completed."

What else was I to think but that Malthusian was pulling my leg. "Do I look that gullible?" I said and laughed so hard I spilled a drop of my wine on the table.

The old man did not so much as smile. "We had created a zombie," he said. "You laugh, but you should be laughing at yourself. You do not realize how, without any of our work, the human mind is so perfectly suggestible. The words 'obedience' and 'to listen' share the same root in more than half a dozen languages. With our experiment, this man would do whatever he was told. The results even surprised us. I instructed him to learn fluent French in a week. He did. I instructed him to play a Chopin Nocturne on the piano after only hearing it once. He did. I instructed him to develop a photographic memory. I commanded him to stop aging. At times, for the purpose of a particular assignment, I might instruct him to become fatter, thinner, even shorter."

"Impossible," I said.

"Nonsense," said Malthusian. "It has been known for some time now that the mere act of deep thought can change the physiological structure of the brain. If only my colleagues and I could publish our findings, others would also know that prolonged, highly focused thought is capable of transforming the physiological structure of more than just the brain."

It was obvious to me at this time that Malthusian's illness had affected his mind. I put on a serious face and pretended to follow along, exhibiting a mixed sense of wonder and gravity.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" I asked.

"Why, yes, why," he said, and, more astonishing than his tale, tears began to form at the corners of his eyes. "The zombie had been useful. Please don't ask me specifically how, but let us just say that his work resulted in the diminution of agitators against democracy. But then, with the end of the Cold War, our project was disbanded. We were ordered to eliminate the zombie and set fire to the facility, and were given large sums of cash to resume normal life-with the threat that if we were to breathe a word about Dumbwaiter to anyone, we would be killed."

"Eliminate the zombie?" I said.

He nodded. "But I had pangs of conscience. My own God was talking to me. This man, whom we had hollowed out and filled with my commands, had been kidnapped. Just an average healthy citizen with a wife and a small child had been taken off the street one day by men in a long dark car. His loved ones never knew what had become of him. Likewise, I had made a deal to never see my own family again when I promised to work on Dumbwaiter. I disappeared after my parents and sister were brought to this country. For me to contact them in any way would mean their demise. I have missed them terribly through the years, especially my sister, with whom I had a strong bond after surviving the horrors of the old country. For this reason, I could not dispose of the zombie."

"That would be murder," I said, and instantly regretted it.

"It would have been murder either way," said Malthusian. "Either I killed the subject or they killed us *and* our subject. Instead, I took a chance and left to the ravages of the fire a cadaver we had on ice there for many years. We hoped that no one was aware of it, that if a body was found in the ashes that would be enough to suffice. Remember, this is the government we are talking about. We had worked for them long enough to know that their main priority was silence." Malthusian went silent himself, nodding his head upon his chest. I thought for a second that he had fallen asleep. When I cleared my throat, he reached for the wine but stopped. He did the same with the cigarette case. Then he looked up at me.

"I'm dying," he said.

"This very moment?" I asked.

"Soon, very soon."

"Did they tell you that at the hospital?"

"I'm a doctor. I know."

"Is there something you need me to do? Do you want me to contact your sister?" I asked.

"No, you must not mention any of this. But there is something I want you to do," he said.

"Call the ambulance?"

"I want you to take care of the zombie until the transformation is complete."

"What are you talking about?" I said, and smiled.

"He's here with me, in the house. He has been with me all along since we burned the lab." Malthusian dropped the cane on the floor, leaned forward on the table and reached for me with his left hand. I pushed the chair back and stood away from the table to avoid his grasp.

"I've been working with him, trying to reverse the effects of the experiment. The change has begun, but it will take a little longer than I have left to complete it. You must help me to return this poor man to his family so that he can enjoy what is left of his life. He is beginning to remember a thing or two and the aging process is slowly starting to return him to his rightful maturity. If I should die, I require you to merely house him until he remembers where he is from. It won't take very long now."

"Dr. Malthusian," I said. "I think you need to rest. You are not making any sense."

The old man slowly stood up. "You will wait!" he yelled at me, holding his arm up and pointing with one finger. "I will get him."

I said nothing more, but watched as Malthusian precariously leaned over to retrieve his cane. Then he hobbled out of the room, mumbling something to himself. When I heard him mounting the stairs to the second floor, I tiptoed out of the kitchen, down the hall, and out the front door. I reached the street and started running like I was ten years old.

Later, in bed, after locking all the doors and windows, I woke Susan up and told her everything that Malthusian had said. When I got to the part about the zombie, she started laughing.

"He wants you to baby-sit his zombie?" she asked.

"It's not funny," I said. "He worked for some secret branch of the government."

"That's the one all the kooks work for," she said. "You're a man with way too much time on his hands."

"He was pretty convincing," I said, now grinning myself.

"What if I told you they were putting Frankenstein together in the basement of the hospital? If he's not crazy, he's probably playing with your mind. He seems to have a healthy measure of mischief about him. That string tie is a good indicator."

I wasn't completely convinced, but Susan allayed my fears enough to allow me to get to sleep. My dreams were punctuated by wide-eyed stares and piano music.

I forced myself to believe that Susan was right, and that I had better ignore Malthusian and get to work on my book. The summer was quickly approaching and soon the autumn would send me back to teaching. It would be a great embarrassment to return to work in September empty-handed. I picked up where I had left off months earlier on the manuscript—a chapter concerning "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar." The return to work was what I needed to anchor me against the tide of Malthusian's weirdness, but that particular story by the great American hoaxer, second only to P. T. Barnum, had *zombie* written all over it.

One afternoon, when I was about to leave the house to go to the local bookstore, I looked out the front window and saw the old man slowly shuffling up the street. I had neither seen nor heard from Malthusian since the night I had abandoned him in his fit of madness two weeks prior. It would have been a simple thing to leave the living room and hide in the kitchen, but instead I quickly ducked down beneath the sill. As I crouched there, I wondered at the fear I had developed for my neighbor.

Five minutes went by, and when I thought he should have passed on to where the woods began at the end of the block, I raised my head above the window sill. There he was, standing at the curb, hunched over, staring directly at me like some grim and ghastly bird of yore. I uttered a brief, startled gasp, and as if he could hear me, he brought the top of his cane up and tapped it lightly against the brim of his Tyrolean hat. Then he turned and moved off. This little scene threw me into a panic. I never went to the bookstore, and when it was time for Lyda to get out of school, I drove over and picked her up instead of letting her take the bus, which would have left her off at the corner. My panic was short-lived, for that evening, at dinner, as I was about to describe the event to Susan, we heard the ambulance.

It is sad to say, but Malthusian's death was a relief to me. Lyda and I watched from a distance as they brought him out on the wheeled stretcher. Susan, who was afraid of nothing, least of all death, went all the way to his house and spoke to the EMTs. She was not there long when we saw her begin walking back.

"Massive heart attack," she said as she approached, shaking her head.

"That's a shame," I said.

Lyda put her arm around my leg and hugged me.

The next morning, while I was wandering around the house looking for inspiration to begin working on Poe again, I discovered that Lyda had draped a silk purple flower, plucked from Susan's dining-room table arrangement, around the neck of Rat Fink. The sight of this made me smile, and as I reached out to touch the smooth illusion of the blossom, I was interrupted by a knocking at the door. I left my daughter's room and went downstairs. Upon opening the front door, I discovered that there was no one there. As I stood, looking out, I heard the knocking sound again. It took me a few long seconds to adjust to the fact that the sound was coming from the back of the house.

"Who knocks at the back door?" I said to myself as I made my way through the kitchen.

3

His eyes were the oval disks of Japanese cartoon characters, glassy and brimming with nothing. Like the whiteness of Melville's whale, you could read anything into them, and while Lyda and I sat staring at him staring at the wall, I projected my desires and frustrations into those mirrors with a will I doubt Ahab could have mustered.

"A blown Easter egg," said Lyda, breaking the silence.

And in the end, she was right. There was an exquisite emptiness about him. His face was drawn, his limbs thin but wiry with real muscle. He looked like a fellow who might at one time have worked as a car mechanic or a UPS delivery man. I guessed his age to be somewhere in the late thirties but knew, from what Malthusian had suggested, that his youth was merely compliance to a command. I wondered how old he would become when the spell was broken. *Perhaps, like Valdemar in Poe's story, I thought, he will eventually be reduced to a pool of putrescence.*

We had been sitting with the zombie for over an hour when Susan finally arrived home from work. Lyda got up from her seat and ran into the living room to tell her mother that we had a visitor.

"Guess who?" I heard her ask. She led Susan by the hand into the kitchen.

Upon discovering our guest, the first word out of her mouth was, "No." It wasn't like the shriek of a heroine being accosted by a creature in the horror movies. This was the *no* of derailed late-night amorous advances, a response to Lyda's pleading to stay up till eleven on a school night.

"Let's be sensible about this," I said. "What are we going to do?"

"Call the police," said Susan.

"Are you crazy?" I said. "The very fact that he is here proves that what Malthusian told me was all

true. We'd be putting our lives in danger."

"Go play," Susan said to Lyda.

"Can the zombie play?" she asked.

"The zombie has to stay here," I said and pointed toward the kitchen entrance.

When Lyda was gone, Susan sat down at the table and she and I stared at him some more. His breathing was very shallow, and with the exception of this subtle movement of his chest he sat perfectly still. There was something very relaxing about his presence.

"This is crazy," she said to me. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Malthusian said he would soon remember where he was from, and that we should take him to his home whenever the memory of it became clear to him."

"Can't we just drive him somewhere and let him out of the car?" asked Susan. "We'll leave him off in the parking lot at the mall."

"You wouldn't do that with a cat, but you would abandon a human being?" I said.

She shook her head in exasperation. "Well, what does he do? It doesn't look like much is becoming clear to him," she said.

I turned to the zombie and said, "What is your name?"

He didn't move.

Susan reached over and snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Hey, Mister Zombie, what should we call you?"

"Wait a second," I said. "He doesn't answer questions, he responds to commands."

"Tell me your name," Susan said to him.

The zombie turned his head slightly toward her and began to slowly move his lips. "Tom," he said and the word sort of fell out of his mouth, flat and dull as an old coin.

Susan brought her hand up to cover a giggle. "Tommy the zombie," she said.

"Pathetic," I said and couldn't suppress my own laughter even though there were shadowed entities at large in the world who might engineer our demise.

We had never had so unassuming a house guest. Tom was like that broom standing in the kitchen closet until you need it. The novelty of performance upon command soon wore off. Sure, we got a little mileage out of the stage hypnotist antics-"Bark like a dog." "Act like a chicken." I know it sounds a bit unfeeling, but we did it, I suppose, simply because we could, similar in spirit to the whim of the government that originally engineered the poor man's circumstance. Lyda put an end to this foolishness. She lectured to us about how we should respect him. We were embarrassed by her words, but at the same time pleased that we had raised such a caring individual. As it turned out, she had a real affection for the zombie. He was, for Lyda, the puppy we would not let her have.

It was not difficult remembering to command him to go to the bathroom twice a day, or to eat, or shower. What was truly hard was keeping him a secret. We all swore to each other that we would tell no one. Susan and I were afraid that Lyda, so completely carried away by her new friend, might not be able to contain herself at school. Think of the status one would reap in the third grade if it was known you had your own zombie at home. Throughout the ordeal, she proved to be the most practical, the most caring, the most insightful of all of us.

The utter strangeness of the affair did not strike me until the next night when I woke from a bad dream with a dry mouth. Half in a daze, I got out of bed and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. I took my drink and, going into the living room, sat down on the couch. For some reason, I was thinking about Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," and how D. H. Lawrence had described it as a story of vampirism. I followed a thread of thought that looped in and out of that loopy story and ended with an image of the previously airy and lethargic Madeline bursting out of her tomb to jump on old Roderick. Then I happened to look to the left, and jumped, myself, realizing that the zombie had been sitting next to me the entire time.

Tom could make a great pot of coffee. He vacuumed like a veteran chambermaid. Susan showed him how to do hospital corners when making the beds. When he was not busy, he would simply sit on the couch in the living room and stare directly across at the face of the grandfather clock. It was clear that he

had a conception of time, because it was possible to set him like a VCR. If we were going out, we could tell him, "Make and eat a bologna sandwich at one P.M." "Go to the bathroom at three."

Somewhere in the second week of his asylum with us, I got the notion to become more expansive in my commands. I recalled Malthusian telling me that he was capable of playing Chopin after only listening to a piece once. It became clear that the requests I had been making of him were penny ante. I upped the stakes and instructed him to begin typing my handwritten notes for the Poe book. He flawlessly copied exactly what I had on the paper. Excited by this new breakthrough, I then told him to read a grammar book and correct the text. *Voilà!*

It became rapidly evident that we would have to get Tom some new clothes, since he continued to wear the same short-sleeved grey Sears workshirt and pants day in and day out. There was no question he would have worn them until they were reduced to shreds. Susan went to the store on her way home from work one night and bought him a few things. The next day, as an experiment, we told him to get dressed, choosing items from the pile of garments we laid before him. He came out of the spare bedroom, wearing a pair of loose-fitting khakis and a black T-shirt that had written in white block letters across it *I'm with Stupid*. We all got a charge out of this.

"Laugh, Tom," said Lyda.

The zombie opened wide his mouth, and from way back in his throat came a high-pitched "Ha... ha."

The horror of it melted my smile, and I began to wonder about his choice of shirts. That is when I noticed that a distinct five o'clock shadow had sprouted across his chin and sunken cheeks. "My God," I thought, without telling Susan or Lyda, "the aging process has begun."

When Tom wasn't pulling his weight around the house, Lyda usually had him engaged in some game. They played catch, cards, Barbies, and with those activities that were competitions, Lyda would tell him when it was his turn to win-and he would. For the most part, though, they drew pictures. Sitting at the kitchen table, each with a pencil and a few sheets of paper, they would create monsters. Lyda would have to tell Tom what to draw.

"Now do the werewolf with a dress and a hat. Mrs. Werewolf," she said.

That zombie could draw. When he was done there was a startlingly well rendered, perfectly shadowed and shaded portrait of Lon Chaney in drag, a veritable hirsute Minnie Pearl. Susan hung it with magnets on the refrigerator.

"Take a bow," Lyda told him and he bent gracefully at the waist in a perfect forty-five degree angle.

My wife and daughter didn't notice that Tom was changing, but I did. Slowly, over the course of mere days, his hair had begun to thin out, and crow's feet formed at the corners of his eyes. This transformation I was seeing the first signs of was astounding to me. I wondered what it was that Malthusian had done to offset the effects of the original surgery that had been performed on him. Perhaps it was a series of commands; some kind of rigid behavioristic training. I hated to think of the old man poking around in Tom's head in that checkerboard kitchen under the fluorescent lights. What also puzzled me was how Malthusian had transferred command of the zombie to myself and my family. I began paying much closer attention to him, waiting for a sign that he had begun to recollect himself.

4

I held the drawing out to Lyda and asked her, "Who did this?"

She took it from me and upon seeing it smiled. "Tom," she said. "Yesterday I told him to draw whatever he wanted."

"It's good, don't you think?" I asked.

"Pretty good," she said and turned back to the television show she had been watching.

The portrait I held in my hand was of a young woman with long, dark hair. This was no monster. She was rendered with the same attention to detail as had been given to Mrs. Werewolf, but this girl, whoever she was, was beautiful. I was especially drawn to the eyes, which were luminous, so full of warmth. She wore an expression of amusement-a very subtle grin and a self-consciously dramatic arching of the eyebrows. I went to the kitchen and called for Tom to come in from the living room.

I told him to take his usual drawing seat, and then I handed him the picture. "You will tell me who this is," I commanded.

He stared for a moment at the portrait, and then it happened, a fleeting expression of pain crossed his face. His hand trembled slightly for a moment.

"You must tell me," I said.

"Marta," he said, and although it was only a word, I could have sworn there was a hint of emotion behind.

"You must tell me if this is your wife," I said.

He slowly brought his left hand to his mouth, like a robot programmed to enact the human response of awe.

"Tell me," I said.

From behind his fingers, he whispered, "My love."

It was a foolish thing to do, but I applauded. As if the sound of my clapping suddenly severed his cognizance, he dropped his hand to his side and returned to the zombie state.

I sat down and studied him. His hair had begun to go grey at the edges, and his beard was now very noticeable. Those wrinkles I had detected the first sign of a few days earlier were now more prominent, as was the loosening of the skin along his chin line. Invading his blank affect was a vague aura of weariness. As impossible as it might sound, he appeared to me as if he had shrunk a centimeter or two.

"My love," I said out loud. These words were the most exciting shred of humanity to have surfaced, not so much for their dramatic weight, but more because he had failed to follow my instruction and definitively answer the question.

I left him alone for the time being, seeing as how he seemed quite saddened by the experience of remembering; but later, when Susan had returned home, we cleared the kitchen table after dinner and tried to advance the experiment. We conscripted Lyda into the plot, since it was when he was with her that he had created the portrait of Marta.

"Tell him to draw a picture of his house," I whispered to her. She nodded and then Susan and I left the kitchen and went into the living room to wait.

"He looks terrible," Susan said to me.

"The spell is slowly dissolving," I said. "He is becoming what he should be."

"The human mind is frightening," she said.

"The Haunted Palace," I told her.

Twenty minutes later, Lyda came in to us, smiling, carrying a picture.

"Look what he drew," she said, laughing.

He had created a self-portrait. Beneath the full-length picture were the scrawled words *Tommy the Zombie*.

I pointed to the words and said, "Well, that didn't work as I had planned, but this is rather interesting."

"A sense of humor?" said Susan.

"No," said Lyda. "He is sad."

"Maybe we shouldn't push him," I said.

"Wait," said Susan and sat forward suddenly. "Tell him now to draw his home."

Lyda nodded and was gone.

An hour passed and Susan and I waited in silence for the results. We could hear Lyda, in the kitchen, talking to him as they worked. She was telling him about this boy in her class in school who always bites the skin on his fingers.

"When Mrs. Brown asked Harry why he bites his skin, you know what he said?" asked Lyda.

There was a moment of silence and then we heard the deep, flat response, "What?"

Susan and I looked at each other.

"Harry told her," said Lyda, "he bites it because that way his father, who is very old, won't die."

A few minutes passed and then came a most disturbing sound, like a moan from out of a nightmare. Susan and I leaped up and ran into the kitchen. Lyda was sitting there, gaping at Tom, who was pressing on the pencil with a shaking hand, writing as if trying to carve initials into a tree trunk. There was sweat

on his brow and tears in his eyes. I went over behind him and looked over his shoulder. There was a picture of a ranch-style house with an old carport on its left side. In the front window, I could make out the figures of a black cat and a woman's face. He was scrawling numbers and letters across the bottom of the picture.

"Twenty-Four Griswold Place," I said aloud. And when he finished and slumped back into his seat, I saw the name of the town and spoke it. "Falls Park."

"That's only an hour north of here," said Susan.

I patted Tom on the back and told him, "You're going home," but by then his consciousness had again receded.

The next morning I got up well before sunrise and ordered Tom down the hall to the guest bedroom to change. He set to the task, a reluctant zombie, his rapid aging causing him to shuffle along, slightly bent over. Literally overnight, his hair had lost more of its color and there was a new, alarming sense of frailty about him. While he was dressing, I went in and kissed Susan good-bye and told her I was taking him as we had planned.

"Good luck," she said.

"Do you want to see him?" I asked.

"No, I'm going to go back to sleep, so that when I wake up I will be able to discount the entire thing as a bad dream."

"I hope I get him there before he croaks," I told her. "He's older than ever today."

I settled Tom in the backseat of the car and told him to buckle the belt. Then I got in and started driving. It was still dark as I turned onto the road out of town. Of course, I was taking a big chance by hoping that he might still know someone at the address he had written down. Decades had passed since he had been abducted, but I didn't care. Think ill of me if you like, but as with the lawyer in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," who ends up finally abandoning the scribe, which of you would have done as much as we did? Shadowed entities be damned, it had to come to an end.

"You're going home," I said over my shoulder to him as I drove.

"Home, yes," he said, and I took this for a good sign.

I looked into the rearview mirror, and could only see the top of his head. He seemed to have shrunk even more. To prepare myself for a worst-case scenario, I wondered what the bill would be to have a pool of putrescence steam-cleaned from my backseat.

About halfway into the journey, he started making some very odd sounds-coughing and hushed choking. This gave way to a kind of grumbling language that he carried on with for miles. I couldn't make out what he was saying, and to block it out, I eventually turned on the radio.

Even with the map, the address, and the drawing, it took me an hour and forty-five minutes to find the place. The sun was just beginning to show itself on the horizon when I pulled up in front of 24 Griswold Place. It was remarkable how perfect his drawing had been.

"Go now and knock on that door," I said pointing.

I was going to get out of the car and help him, but before I could get my belt off, I heard the back door open and close. Turning, I saw his figure moving away from the car. He was truly an old man now, moving beneath the weight of those years that, in the brief time of our trip, had caught up and overtaken him. I hoped that his metamorphosis had finally ended.

A great wave of sorrow passed through me, and I couldn't let him go without saying good-bye. I pressed the button for the window on his side. When it had rolled down, I called out, "Good luck."

He stopped walking, turned slowly to face me, and then I knew that the transformation was complete. His hair had gone completely white, and his face was webbed with wrinkles. It was Malthusian. He stood there staring at me, and his eyes were no smaller because he did not wear glasses.

I shook with the anger of betrayal. "You bastard," I yelled.

"Let's not let it ruin our game," he said with a thick accent, and then turned and went up the front steps.

I was so stunned, I couldn't move. He knocked on the door. After a few moments, a woman, as old as he, answered. I heard her give a short scream and then she threw her arms around him. "You've

returned," she said in that same accent. She ushered him into the house and then the door slammed closed.

"Marta Malthusian, the sister," I said to myself and slammed the steering wheel. I don't know how long I sat there, staring blankly, trying to sort out the tangled treachery and love of a mad man turning a zombie into a zombie of himself. Eventually, I put the car in gear, wiped the drool from my chin, and started home.

THE END