Brains
a zombie memoir
ROBIN BECKER
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All goes onward and outward... and nothing collapses, And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

WALT WHITMAN, "SONG OF MYSELF"
WHAT YOU HOLD in your hands is a zombie memoir, the touching postlife story of a walking corpse and his journey toward self-acceptance and knowledge, told honestly and in the first person, straight from his skeletal hand to your plump one.

What you hold in your hands I wrote and left on top of the desk in my hideout, a log cabin in the northern wilds of Canada. It is nothing short of revolutionary. Revisionist historians, prepare to revise.

In life, I was an English professor at a small college in rural Missouri. My mind retained information like a steel trap: No one played six degrees of Bacon better than I. No one knew more about Walt Whitman, the New Testament, or B movies from the 1950s. In conversation, I relentlessly sought the upper hand, whether discussing the best method for making flaky piecrusts (use Crisco, not butter) or the cultural importance of Freud (as massive as his cigar).

In death, I am a flesh-eating zombie with a messianic complex and these superpowers: I can think and I can write.

My name is Jack Barnes and I am a survivor. This is my story.
CHAPTER ONE

BRAINS. AFTER I was resurrected, my first thought was,Brains.
I want brains. Give me brains!

The imperative seemed to come from outside of my body; it rang
in my head like the voice of a god I had no choice but to obey.
Brains: I heard it clearly, simply, plainly. Brains! And I immediately
set out to procure some.

Now that I have analyzed this hunger, this twisted form of can-
nibalism, I realize it does not reside in my stomach, the typical seat
of appetite; it stems from a deeper place, my divine core, what some
might call the soul.

It is a small price to pay for immortality.

Brains. More dear to me than my wife. More precious than my
intellect and education, my Volvo and credit rating—all that mattered
in “life” now pales in comparison to this infinite urge. Even now, as I
write these words, my lips quiver and a drop of saliva—tinged crim-
son—falls onto the paper, resulting in a brain-shaped stain.

Stain, brain, rain, brain, pain, brain, sustain, brain, wane, brain,
refrain, brain, cocaine, brain, main, brain, brain, brain, brains!
Oh, how I love them.

THE VIRUS HIT the world like a terrorist attack.
Lucy and I—both still warmly human—were holed up in the
living room watching news reports of the zombie invasion. It wasn’t
confined to the Midwest, as they originally thought, but had spread
all over the United States. Indeed, all over the world. And it hap-
pened in a matter of hours.

Brian Williams looked wan, scared, a little boy in a grown-up
suit, the endearing humor in the corners of his eyes lost forever.
Lucy clicked over to Fox. I always suspected my wife of secret con-
servatism, but I said nothing. Because there was Geraldo Rivera,
out in the street, interviewing a she-zombie. A zombette.

“Why are you doing this?” Geraldo asked the creature. “Can
you even talk? Everyone thinks you’re a monster.”

The zombie groaned and grabbed the reporter’s cheeks as if to
move in for a kiss.

“That zombie must’ve been an athlete in life,” I said. “She’s
quicker than some of the others I’ve seen.”

“The poor dear,” Lucy said.

Geraldo bludgeoned the zombette with his microphone, but to
no effect. The mic merely sank into the undead’s head, disappear-
ing like a baby thrown into quicksand. Geraldo wrestled it out and
the camera zoomed in; the mic was covered with tufts of hair and
bits of gore. Geraldo shook it like a rattle and the zombie struck,
biting his hand. Geraldo shrieked—high-pitched, girlish—and Fox
cut back to the newsroom, where a generic blonde warned viewers
of the dangers of conversing with corpses.

“Now that’s the kind of reporting I expect from Fox,” I said.
“Stating the obvious with bimbotic style.”

“Do you think they could be here?” Lucy asked, her eyes darting
around the room. “In our town?”

“Of course not,” I said. “We’re in the middle of the middle of
nowhere. The flyover zone. No one comes here if they don’t have
to, not even dead people.”
I heard a noise, as if Hook Man were scratching at our roof. I turned off the idiot box and threw open the drapes.

Lucy and I were surrounded; there were zombies at the windows, zombies at the doors, zombies coming down the chimney like Santa Claus. It was just like the movies.

That's the genius of George Romero. His initial trilogy—Night of the Living Dead, Dawn of the Dead, Day of the Dead—was prescient in the grand tradition of science fiction becoming fact. First you have to imagine a man on the moon, then you can put one there. Imagine an atom-splitting bomb, and then build one. Imagine a virus that turns corpses into the walking dead, and someone, somewhere, will develop that virus.


There was a crashing sound as zombies broke the living room picture window and stumbled in. I threw the remote at them. Nothing. Then the TV Guide. Nothing. A vintage 1950s kidney-shaped ashtray bounced off of one like a rubber ball. Finally, my copy of the Da Vinci Code, never read. The ghouls kept coming.

"Their heads," Lucy yelled. "The news said you have to injure their heads!"

"You think I don't know that? It's a trope of the genre."

"Don't talk to me like I'm one of your students, Jack. It's demeaning."

As I bickered with my wife, my neighbor reached me. He was in his bathrobe and boxers and his feet were bare, the veins and bones bulging. The whites of his eyes were yellow and watery, and his arms were open wide for a hug. He leaned forward as if to tell me a secret.

And bit me. Just like that. Right on top of my shoulder, deep in the muscle.

It felt like a hot poker on my flesh, a rabid squirrel attack, the blinding light of a comet. It felt, in short, like sharp human teeth ripping me apart. How's that for metaphor? Nothing like the real thing.

He chewed on my shoulder, working through the muscle like a dog chewing gristle. I kneed him in the groin and shoved him off me; a chunk of my shoulder remained in his mouth like a meatball.

More zombies streamed in. Lucy fought them off with our Peruvian rain stick, the annoying rain sound harmonizing with the living dead's moans until the stick broke and dried beans spilled onto the hardwood floor. Lucy grabbed my elbow and pulled me down to the basement, where we were safe, at least temporarily. There was only one entrance, through the kitchen. We locked the deadbolt behind us, dragged flattened cardboard boxes up the stairs, and duct-taped them over the doorway.

It was classic victim behavior, actually, seen in dozens of horror movies: Grab whatever you can, stupid humans, and throw it at the door. Hell, use a solid granite tombstone if you've got it. Doesn't matter. If you lock yourself in a room, eventually the monsters will get in.

Lucy and I huddled between a giant plastic Santa and the LL Bean tent we used just once—and then in the backyard. Now we'd never go to Yosemite.

"What should I do?" I asked her, gripping my shoulder.

"What are your options?"

"As I see it, suicide or zombification."

"Don't focus on the negative, Jack. Think! How can we fix this?"

I made my jaw go slack and drooled. "Brains. I could eat your brains!" I held out my arms like Boris Karloff in Frankenstein, a film that disgraces monsters everywhere.

In Mary Shelley's original novel, the creature is sympathetic, a victim of human hatred and intolerance; he speaks French, reads Milton, and loves flowers. He is not a natural-born killer; society turns him into one.

Karloff's mute brute, on the other hand, yearns for flesh and blood from the get-go. He turns crowds into mobs and creates fear and loathing, yet his version is the one that lives in our imagination, not Shelley's.

To pervert Rodney Dangerfield: Monsters can't get no respect.
Lucy slapped my forearm. "That's not funny," she said, and started to cry.

"You cry because there's truth in my jest," I said. "Which is the goal of all effective humor, exposing the hidden pain in pleasure. The sorrow underneath all we do. The tragedy of our lives. I will be one of them soon, my dear, and I may indeed want to eat your brains. I have a decision to make. To be dead or undead. That is the question."

"Let me look at your shoulder."

The area surrounding the bite was plum purple and gashed open, the blood already coagulated. I felt beatific, angelic, but my failure to bleed was no miracle; it was the virus concealing my blood, freezing it, stopping it in its tracks and turning me into something both sub- and über-human. If the news reports and movies were true, I would have flulike symptoms—a fever, vomiting, chills, joint pain—then a numbing sensation, followed by a brief death culminating in my reanimation as one of the living dead. The whole process could take anywhere from six to thirty-six hours—the length of the average birth.

Lucy glanced at the wound and moved several inches away from me. "You could try electrocuting yourself with the Christmas tree lights," she suggested.

"Why don't we have any tools?" I asked, getting up to poke around the basement. "I can't even find a hammer. Didn't we ever have occasion to hammer something? A nail perhaps?"

I was already speaking in the past tense.

"A hammer would come in handy now," Lucy said. "We could fortify the door."

"Or rope," I said. "Why don't we have any rope? We don't even have a rope to hang yourself with."

"Or a pot to piss in."

"Rope wouldn't do anything anyway. I have to destroy my brain. With hanging I'd just be a zombie with a broken neck. That could prove to be a disadvantage in my search for food, I suppose."

"But does natural selection, survival of the fittest, apply to the living dead?" Lucy asked. "I mean, does it matter at that point? Will you need to compete with other zombies for food? Or will you live, or unlive, regardless?"

My bite site stank like rotten pork shoulder. My flesh was putrefying and I felt feverish. Or maybe it was psychosomatic. I sat down on the concrete floor and looked at my wife.

"It's a valid question," she said, "if you decide to, you know, go the zombie route."

Lucy wore her hair in a short, mannish cut, which I wished she would grow out into a softer style. But I never asked her to. God forbid I should appear controlling or, even worse, a card-carrying member of the patriarchy who dared suggest she assume a more traditionally feminine appearance.

She was a big-boned woman, but thin, so that her knees, elbows, and feet stuck out like knobs, almost bursting through her pale, blue-veined skin. She could have gained fifteen pounds. I could see her skeleton, the thinnest veneer of flesh covering it, with no body fat to speak of. Although I loved her dearly, sometimes, in bed, her bones ground into me and hurt.

But yum. If I could gnaw on one of those bones now as I write this. Just a strip of flesh hanging down would do. The smallest sinew is all I need.

**MUFFLED BY THE** cellar door, the moans of the undead sounded like an avant-garde chorus, a John Cage composition. *The United States of the Undead: A Sonata in the Key of Reanimation*. At the end of the cacophonous piece, the orchestra, consisting of infected musicians in tattered tuxedos, eats the audience.

It was hot; my shoulder was disintegrating. Lucy held my forehead and stroked my back while I vomited everything I'd ever ingested: Hershey's Kisses, funnel cakes, peach pits, mother's milk.

"You're a regular Florence Nightingale," I told her, wiping my lips with the back of my hand. There was a metallic taste in my mouth, like I was sucking on rusty nails or had eaten liver at a roadside diner in the rural South.

"I'd rather be Hot Lips Houlihan," she said.
“Walt Whitman was a nurse in the Civil War.”
“I wonder what Walt would’ve thought of the living dead,” Lucy said.
“He’d drink the tasteless water of their souls.”
Lucy felt my forehead. She fought back tears, my little trouper.
“You’re burning up,” she said.
“I’m on fire for you, baby. You make me hot.”
She kissed my cheek. “Let’s make love,” she whispered. “One last time.”

Her voice was atonal and shrill, a screech owl in my ear, Yoko Ono singing. I knew it was just my senses, heightened by the fever, as well as the virus coursing through my veins, but I needed her to be quiet.

So I kissed her. She sucked in her breath and turned her head, wrinkling her nose and gagging. I must have tasted like death, but still she bent forward for another kiss.

“You need an Altoid,” she said.

“They’re curiously strong,” I said, “and I’m decaying.”

I took her in my arms and we kissed again. A violent chill overtook me and I turned my head to the side, coughing up what looked like a piece of lung.

“What I wouldn’t give for a cigarette,” I said.

“This would be an excellent time for you to start smoking. I mean, why not? At this point, you’ve got nothing to lose.”

She put her head on my shoulder, then started back in horror when she felt its wetness. A few pieces of my meat stuck to her hair. They were the size and color of bacon bits and although they were pulsating, throbbing, beating with my heart, I couldn’t feel a thing.

Lucy stood up, located the stuff sack for our tent, and tied it around my wound in a sloppy tourniquet.

“What’s the plan?” she asked.

“Plan?”

“Come on, Jack. You always have a plan. And I always think it won’t work and doubt you and beg you not to do it. You ignore me and do it anyway and it does work, wonderfully, in fact, and everything’s okay and I’m proved wrong again.”

“Like the time I successfully lobbied to deny Dobson tenure?”

“I was thinking of that ugly-ass cat-scratching post you constructed out of old carpet and clothes. But yeah, poor Dobson. I felt sorrier for his wife, actually.”

“He’s an idiot”—I coughed up a speck of blood—“and she’s a bitch.”

“They’re probably zombies by now.”

“And the cats loved that post. They used it all the time, sparing the ridiculously expensive couch you made us buy.”

“My point precisely. You were absolutely right. You always are.” The undead rattled the door. They wouldn’t leave until they broke it down; they had nothing better to do.

“I don’t have a plan, Lucy-kins,” I said. “Unfortunately, there is no master plan. No meta-narrative.”

“No clockmaker?”

“No exit.”

“Hell is other zombies,” she said.

“Hell is for children.”

“Love is a battlefield.”

“A Battle Hymn of the Republic,” I said. “Cowritten by Plato and Jesse Jackson. Break beats provided by Chuck D.”

Lucy put her chin on her knees and wrapped her arms around her shins. “I can’t do this,” she said to the floor.

“Can’t do what?”

“We’ve got a real problem here, Jack,” she whispered. Her eyes had a surprised look about them, round and alert, the eyebrows high on her forehead and plucked to a thin arch. “In a few hours, you’re going to be a zombie. And I’m either going to be devoured by you or else bitten and turned into a zombie myself. At the very least I’ll be a widow.” She paused and cocked her head to one side.

“But if you join the ranks of the undead,” she continued, placing a finger on her lips, “and I manage to escape unharmed and survive as a human, would I be a widow then? Technically speaking, I mean. Is there a word yet for that relationship?”

“Hmmmm, it’s thorny. I couldn’t say. Language doesn’t evolve that
quickly. Or does it? These are the most extenuating of circumstances and I'm sure future cunning linguists will have a field day with the zombie-related lexicon, orthography, neologisms, what have you."

A rat scurried in the corner. Death kept knocking on the door.

Every child's fear of the dark is justified. There is a monster hiding under your bed.

In our collective imagination, the babysitter's phone rings: "Get out!" we yell at her. "He's in the house!"

"The best option," I continued, "is to kill myself before I die, or you could kill me, whichever, so you could escape."

"How?"

"Slit my wrists, maybe. There's got to be a sharp implement around here somewhere. Or you could run the rake over my face. Then use me as a shield. Hold me in front of you, if I'm not too heavy. Conjure your superhuman strength. Pretend you're a mother lifting a Volkswagen off her kids. The zombies will fall upon me in an eating frenzy and you run, Lucy, you run to the hills. Run for your life."

"You're forgetting about your brain," Lucy said. "We have to destroy your brain or else you'll just be a half-eaten zombie. Unless they eat all of you and you disappear. Poof. No more Jack."

"Plus, I'm not quite sure I want to die." I lay down. I couldn't feel my extremities and I'd never been hotter. I took off my glasses and pressed my cheek to the cool concrete. The door was holding, but barely. Zombies would be in our sanctuary soon—either me or the ones at the top of the stairs.

"What if being undead is better than death itself?" I asked, and closed my eyes.

That's the last thing I remember of my human life. Resting my head on the soothing concrete, Lucy's hand stroking my hair. The ground smelled like dirt, must, mold, and gasoline. I smelled like Beethoven decomposing.

"Don't eat me, Jack," Lucy said from a great distance. "Don't you dare eat me."

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CHAPTER TWO

OH, THE HUNGER. So hungry. Waking up, my body was in flames. A human torch. A burning man. The all-consuming fires of hell. As in Dante's Inferno. As in eternal damnation. You can stop, drop, and roll all you want, there's no putting out this blaze.

Cognitive function was minimal. At first. Brain turning to mashed potatoes. Body falling to pieces...leprous leprosy. Leper, I was. Leper, I still am.

Upstairs, a noise. Some part of my mind registered: dog. Fluffy. Must go, stumble, waddle, trample like the Mummy, follow the whimper. I stopped in our conjugal bathroom and stared at my reflection. Jonesing for flesh, manic for meat, I scribbled letters on the mirror with my finger. Inscription, graphomania. The first hint of my sentience.

This is what I wrote: Brains!

Fluffy was Lucy's dog. A damn toy poodle. I ate her. She was very funny. I mean funny. Why did I write funny? Furry. Or fury. I ate her in a funny furry fury. There was little meat on Fluffy. Tiny brain. The fluffy white fur of Fluffy fell on the bedroom carpet and I learned: In a pinch, any meat will suffice.

When empty, my stomach is a pit of burning coals; every muscle
is tearing apart and my tendons are eaten by wolves, my liver chewed up like the liver of Prometheus.

The needle and the damage done.

Dear God, where was my Lucy?

I walked outside and stood at the end of the driveway. Our modest suburban street had been transformed into a Japanese monster movie. Humans ran like B-movie extras, like people running from an alien attack or a blitzkrieg, looking over their shoulders at Armageddon.

Cars screeched out of driveways and smashed into telephone poles and each other, going nowhere. Grandmas and children were left trapped inside SUVs and minivans, staring at the disaster through the windows like they were on a drive-thru safari, looking for the lions.

And chasing them all, the cause of their terror: me.

The old lady from next door ran by in her house slippers. In one hand she wielded a spatula, in the other kitchen shears. “Jack!” she cried when she saw me. “Not you too!”

Lucy and I had hated the biddy. She was the kind of anal-retentive shrew who brought out the leaf blower for one lousy leaf. Once, when Fluffy accidentally crapped in her yard, she picked up his poo and threw it over the fence like a monkey at the zoo.

I grabbed her wrinkly elbow and bit into her arm. She hit me over the head with the spatula as if I were a pancake she wanted to flatten. I didn’t even flinch.

Another zombie moved in and bit the back of her neck, then another and another, until she was surrounded. I stepped away from the group; the old bitch’s arms were over her head like someone bobbing in deep water. Not waving, but drowning. Her utensils fell to the ground.

A young mother ran toward me, clutching her baby to her breast. Every evening as Lucy and I sat on the couch watching Brian Williams, this woman power-walked past our picture window. We didn’t know her name or which house she lived in, but she’d become a fixture in our lives, as reliable as the evening news and David Letterman.

I reached out and snatched the baby from her as she powered by; Mama fell to her knees.

“Please,” she pleaded. “Not the baby.”

Oh, the melodrama. I clutched the baby by its arms, shaking it. I bared my teeth, drooling like Grendel over a virgin sacrifice.

“Mooooaaaah!” I roared.

The baby’s face was scrunched up, its eyes squeezed shut. It was utterly helpless. Defenseless. Fay Wray in the arms of King Kong, as tender and juicy as veal.

The need to feed grew within me. It was monumental, rivaling the needs of Michael Jackson, Adolf Hitler, Barbra Streisand, Henry VIII, and King Tut . . . combined. I was a practical joke played by Mother Nature.

Can a being with infinite desire ever be sated?

I opened my mouth as wide as I could, a circus freak with his chicken, Ozzy Osbourne with his bat.

“No!” Mama sobbed and plunged a knitting needle into my forearm.

The needle stuck out like I was a voodoo doll. I dropped the infant and Mama scooped her child up and cradled it. Baby pulled at Mother’s shirt, exposing a milky expanse of swollen breast. I understood its hunger. Mama turned tail and took off, dodging zombies like a running back, baby tucked under her arm like a football.

I pulled the needle out and walked toward the house. Behind me, I heard screams and moans, teeth crunching bones. The sounds of civilization coming to an end.

ZOMBIES DON’T SLEEP. I wandered the house looking for Lucy, half afraid I would find her and eat her, more afraid I already had. I left messages for her in the furniture’s dust, scrawled a letter on the dry-erase board in the kitchen, stuck Post-it notes on the walls of our bedroom. They all said the same thing: Forgive me, Lucy, for being a monster.
I might have spent hours or days walking from room to room. I
couldn’t tell anymore. Time meant nothing. The past and the future
no longer existed. The present was the only thing that felt real.

How Buddhist of me... if Buddhists ate babies for brunch.

When I gazed at myself in the antique gilt mirror over the fire-
place, “I started back,” as Frankenstein’s monster said, “unable
to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and
when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that
I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and
mortification.”

My hair was matted and dreadlocked. In life the look would have
been trendy for a certain demographic; even the clots of blood and
chunks of meat and bone embedded in the tangle could have passed
for over-the-top Goth. I had the pallor of the undead—pale as the
kitchen sink. My wrinkles, lines around my eyes and mouth that
once connoted a life fully lived, were etched in black and red, a cari-
cature of distinguished age. My once gym-toned and muscled body
was wasting and my shoulder, the site of my bite, was falling off like
spit-roasted barbecue. Yet I felt no pain.

I pressed my nose against the mirror. No fog. No breath.

On the mantel was a framed photo of Lucy smearing cake on my
face. It’s a scene replayed at a million wedding receptions: The bride
shoving frosting at the groom, intentionally missing his mouth, her
own mouth opened wide with laughter. The ritual is simultaneously
playful and sadistic, combining food and sex, dominance and sub-
mission, consumption and power. Sugar, spice, and everything nice.

I swept my hand across the mantel, sending the photo, a ceramic
vase, and a brass cat flying. I felt dramatic and romantic: a soap opera
hero, Hamlet wringing his hands, lonely Adam pining for Eve.

There was no use rambling around in that house of memories.
Like Lucy said, I always have a plan. A purpose.

Professor Jack Barnes was taking a trip, a pilgrimage, in search of
others like him. I couldn’t be the only corpse with consciousness, the
only brain-eater with a brain. I wasn’t entirely alone. Was I?

I rejoined my fellow zombies in the street, following the herd,
moaning as they did, lifting my arms as I walked, stiff as a board.
Admittedly, my gait was a bit more strident, more competent than
the others’. I had cognition on my side and I was a relatively young
zombie; most of my body parts were intact.

Car alarms blared; sirens wailed; and my shoulder tingled. I
sensed humans nearby but saw none. They were hiding in bas-
ements, no doubt, cowering in bathtubs or eating canned spinach
in bomb shelters. A helicopter flew overhead, spraying us with
machine-gun fire, but the attack was short and perfunctory, the
equivalent of a drive-by shooting. The chopper was headed south,
probably to Saint Louis to save the Arch. No one cared about our
tiny town and its corn, cows, and liberal arts college.

I searched the eyes of my companions as we shuffled along, look-
ing for a glimmer of intelligence, recognition, memory. I saw noth-
ing. Their eyes were soulless and flat, devoid of thought, empty of
feeling, and hell-bent on finding loved ones and neighbors to eat.
Instinct alone propelled them forward, one rank foot in front of the
other. Programmed for one thing and one thing only, they wouldn’t
stop until they got it.

Marie Delaney from across the street fell in beside me. In life she
had been a doctor, and a generous one at that; one evening when
Lucy refused to go to the hospital after punching the wall of the
sunroom in a fit of jealous rage, we’d knocked on Marie’s door.
After a brief examination, the good doctor prepared an ice pack for
Lucy’s hand—no questions asked and no payment accepted.

Lucy’s anger had been justified. She’d discovered a transgression
of mine, an affair of no consequence with a graduate student, a
dim meaty woman with breasts the size of a newborn’s head, both
of which, breast and metaphorical infant, I’d gladly eat now. That
would be more pleasant than screwing the woman was, come to
think of it.

Zombie Marie still had on her scrubs. They were splattered with
blood, a Jackson Pollock of red and black and forest green. Her
neck was broken; it lolled on her left shoulder, causing her to walk in a lopsided fashion. The classic zombie shuffle.

I tried to speak with her, to ask if she had a destination, a plan, a leader, but to my dismay, instead of a well-formed sentence loaded with the requisite layers of meaning—Do you like me? Remember that night we went skinny-dipping in the Smiths’ pool? Thank you for examining Lucy—inarticulate moans came from my gash of a mouth.

A caveman, I was preverbal. A boy raised by wolves. Helen Keller before her education. Nothing more than an animal.

Marie looked at me and her eyes flickered in recognition. For a microflash, a nanosecond, she grasped our predicament. Her eyes cleared to chestnut brown and I saw understanding in their depths. Grief beyond repair. Then the milky-white film, thick as cataracts, returned to her irises, and the pathos was gone.

If eyes are windows to the soul, then Marie’s soul had left the building.

We wandered en masse. There were no sidewalks in our town. Before zombification, cars ruled the streets. Now, we creatures commanded them. We passed a brick home guarded by a concrete goose lawn ornament wearing an Uncle Sam suit for the Fourth of July, then another brick home with concrete deer grazing on the lawn, and a third brick home flying the American flag. We hit the highway and passed the Wal-Mart. The parking lot was almost empty.

Zombies communicate as insects do, through pheromones or memes or telepathy. We moved as one past the store; no one broke off from the group to search the supercenter. The building was deserted, although I now know that Wal-Mart can be an excellent place to hunt. Humans raid the store for food and supplies; we raid the store for humans. Big fish follows small fish follows zooplankton follows phytoplankton. Your basic food chain. Ninth-grade biology.

Wal-Mart—their people make the difference . . . and the evening meal.

At the edge of town we turned onto a gravel road as if guided by an unseen hand. Cows munching on grass watched us as we filed by, a writhing stinking mass of the undead. They were undisturbed by our moaning. A few even lowered back.

The road ended and we stumbled up against a barbed-wire fence fortified with an eight-foot wall made of car tires and hubcaps, car doors and grilles. To the right was the Chariton River, to the left a field of soy; behind the fortress was A. J. Riley’s junkyard and within, the siren call that lured us: the unmistakable scent of human flesh.

Hyenas let loose on gazelles. Termites on wood. Maggots on meat. Fleas on rats. Amoebas on fleas on rats. We swarmed the wall.

It was a slo-mo frenzy. Rubber and steel fell as we climbed the structure in our shambling way, taking our time, like slipped old men shuffling down hospital hallways. A few zombies fell off the wall and onto the fence, speared like martini olives.

I was the first to reach the top. I hoisted myself over and tumbled down the other side, landing on my feet. A Rottweiler ran at me, a one-headed Cerberus guarding the gates of hell, and sank his teeth into my ankle. I shook him off as if he were a kitten, slamming his body into the wall just as Marie hit the ground. She jumped him. I heard his high-pitched whimper as she tore into his muscular neck.

There was a building in front of me and a Honda Civic to my right, its hood missing and its engine covered with rust. Behind the building were the junked cars, each one as decrepit and dead as we were, each roof a tombstone.

Inside the office, there was a gunshot. Blood splattered on the window in a Rorschach pattern of a dove in flight. I headed for it, a phalanx of zombies trailing behind me, clustered together like a zygote. By the time I made it through the door, most of A. J. Riley’s brains had seeped out of the hole he’d blasted through his head. I got down on my hands and knees and sucked them up like an aardvark sucking ants.

Brian Williams was on the television mounted near the ceiling, his voice calm and professional. “We are coming to you live from our studios in Chicago,” he said, “Ground Zero of this horrific outbreak, where Dr. Howard Stein, the scientist responsible for the virus, lives and works. Sources reveal Stein is working with government offi-
cials on a cure or a mutation, pursuing any avenue that might slow
the spreading, control the infected, and spare precious lives. In the
meantime, you are advised to stay indoors and avoid contact with
anyone who has been bitten . . .”

I was listening to Brian’s report and stuffing my maw when the
zombie cluster caught up with me a few minutes later. I stood up and
waved my arms, yelling, “Moaaaggh!”

The masses stopped; they bumped into each other like kinder-
garteners forming a line for candy. “Moaaaggh!” I repeated, and
stepped aside to let the mindless demons feed.

CHAPTER THREE

I HAVEN’T SHAT since my transformation. The phenomenology
of feces. How come I haven’t expelled the flesh I’ve eaten? What
kind of chemical reaction takes place within me? How is it I extract
strength from the meat I eat? I become skinnier, rottener, deader,
by the hour.

After eating A. J., I headed to Chicago to look for Howard Stein.
Like the Oracle at Delphi, Stein would answer my questions,
prophesy my future, provide valuable information. He might even
be aware of my condition. Any decent scientist would have planned
for the contingency, perhaps even hoped for it. Any decent creator
would love and protect his best creation.

In my tweed jacket pocket, I carried the tools necessary to record
what I could: my pen and notebook. What more did I need? Poster-
ity would thank me.

As I passed the university, I joined the zombies wandering
around the quad, aimless as human students waiting for Intro to
World Religions to begin. I stumbled through the fountain and
walked over the rosebushes, not even feeling the thorns. I was
shuffling, favoring my bitten shoulder, the arm attached to it
hanging limp, the stuff-sack tourniquet long gone.

All at once I smelled it, wafting on a warm breeze. My shoulder
sang with it. Sweet as summer corn. Sweeter than Lucy’s sweet-
scented snatch. The sweet sweet smell of human flesh.

The student zombies smelled it too. Every undead head perked up and we moved as one toward the fragrance.

Oh, he was easy to find. Silly human. He’d barricaded himself in his office; a gray metal filing cabinet containing twenty-five years of teacher evaluations blocked our entrance. A group of us pawed at the door until it opened; the filing cabinet toppled and reams of useless paper covered the floor.

Professor Barnes made me cry, one student had written.

This class was a waste of time, opined another.

I knew the human: Dr. Ernst Welk, chair of the English department, hair white as snow, belly like Santa Claus. He could have easily evaded and outrun us—we move as if through sludge—but he panicked. The scene was a parody of every clichéd horror movie from White Zombie to Friday the 13th Part Million: Geriatric Jason. The slow but relentless killer walks without a care in the world, confident he’ll get his prey if he simply stays the course. And the stupid victim, looking back as she runs, trips over a tree limb or her own high heels.

I felt a line of monsters behind me as I advanced on Dr. Welk. My ancestors: Count Dracula, the Wolfman, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers, Freddy Krueger, the Red Death in his mask and vestments. Every party has a pooper; that’s why we invited the Boogeyman.

Ernst ran out of the office and made it halfway down the hall before he tripped and fell over a chair, the kind with the attached desk. He was wearing a suit and tie. He must be crazy, I thought. Why is he here? And in those clothes? Did he return for some document or has he been here from the start? And just how long has that been?

I was the first ghoul to reach him. The others were slower, a good twenty feet behind me.

“Barnes,” he said, “can you hear me? Are you in there?”

“Mmmph,” I said. “Uuhhhhh!”

Heaven forgive me, but I wanted him. Bad. I was a nymphomaniac for his hot flesh. He was portly and succulent, lying there on the circa-1970s purple carpet with his hands in front of his face like a gay pinup from the golden age of porn.

“Jack,” he began, “about your sabbatical . . .”

I ached; my soul ached. I was junk-sick and hungry for booze, pills, McDonald’s, sex, cars, chewing gum, crank, crack, Diet Coke, laudanum, Internet porn, video games—all of it. Take every weak human addiction and multiply it by the living, the dead, and the living dead, from George Washington to Saddam Hussein, from Homer to Bono, and that might come close to describing the magnitude of my hunger.

I desired, very much, to eat him.

“You deserved a semester off,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Ernst was flat on his back like an overturned beetle. One of his stubby legs was twisted around the chrome leg of the chair; the desk was poking him in the rib cage. He struggled to free himself, but every time he reached down to pull on his thigh, the desk dug deeper into his side. The man was weak from a lifetime of sitting; his arms were roly-poly, with no visible biceps, triceps, or deltis. His suit was wrinkled and stained. He had been a competent administrator, and that’s not saying much.

“Damn it, Jack,” he said, trying to drag both his body and the desk away from me and wincing from the pain. “Have you no humanity left?”

I got down on my hands and knees next to him: my boss, my colleague, my savior, my lamb. Appeaser of the beast in me. I took a bite. The memory is as clear as Wordsworth’s claim for poetry: emotion recollected in tranquility.

I started with his stomach and received a mouthful of polycotton blend. I spit it out and with the next bite hit pay dirt. His skin tasted like baby powder and musk. There was a thick layer of fat surrounding the muscle; it was gristly and responded to the teeth with an al dente spring. I heard the pack gathering behind me, moaning for stink. Ernst raised himself on one elbow, screamed, and kicked his leg like a toddler throwing a tantrum.
“You always were an asshole,” he said.
Tell me something I don’t know. Meal ticket.

IN THE MIDDLE of Iowa I was chased by a group of men in orange vests and waders. I was running through the corn, Ernst’s broken femur jammed in the back pocket of my Dockers.

There were zombie hunters everywhere. Shotgun-wielding rednecks who aimed for the head.

“There’s one now!” a man yelled.

“Holy shit,” said another. “That one’s running.”

“Impossible. The shits don’t know how to run.”

“Sure looks like he’s running.”

Someone laughed. “You call that running, Bobby? Now I know why you wasn’t much of a ball player in school. The thing’s legs are barely lifting off the ground. He’s a shuffler, all right. Running. Shit, them things can’t run.”

“I think Bobby’s right, sheriff. Whether or not he’s got the skill, he’s got the will. Looks like he’s trying to get away from us.”

I didn’t stop moving.

“Damnedest thing,” the sheriff said. “He does appear to have a plan.”

The sheriff gave me too much credit; I didn’t have a plan. I had one thought: Survive. And that meant protecting my brain.

Since I was—and am—a corpse, a fleeing, decaying corpse, I leave body parts behind when I run through vegetation. Little chunks of falling-off flesh cling to tall grass, raspberry vines, or brambles, making me easy to track.

I felt a stinging in my back and lurched forward.

“Got ’im!”

“You slowed him down, son, but you don’t have him, not ’til you hit him in the head and he’s flat on the ground.”

“Just take your time and aim, Bobby. He ain’t going nowhere in a hurry.”

I felt another sting at the site of my neighbor’s bite. I fell down and moaned.

“That time I got ’im for sure.”

“Don’t get cocky. It’s best to check your kill, make sure it’s dead. Just like you do with a deer.”

“Did you hear him though?”

“Sounded damn-near human.”

“I don’t like this one. Gives me the creeps.”

“More creeps than the others? You are a piece of work, Bobby. Grow some balls, why don’tcha? Now go finish the job. Put that stench down for good.”

I crawled away, elbow over elbow, and hid in a stand of corn. I took out the only weapons I had: my notebook and pen.

Help me, Bobby, I wrote. Spare me.

The letters were shaky and the pen strokes thin; it looked like it was written by a child.

Bobby rustled through the stalks.

“Hurry up,” his comrades yelled. “There’s another group on the horizon.”

With my head down, not daring to look young Bobby in the eye for fear I’d attack, I held up the paper.

“Holy shit,” Bobby said. “What are you?”

Gunshots rang out from another part of the field.

“Bobby!” they called. “What’s going on?”

I cradled my head in my arms, protecting it, supplicating before this farm boy. Bobby shot the ground next to me.

“Got ’im!” he yelled as he ran off.

Thank you, Bobby, child of the corn. I owe you my life.

THE HIGHWAY WAS littered with abandoned vehicles. A traffic jam without road ragers shouting into cell phones. The grass was yellow and brown, scorched by the sun. The crops were dry and neglected.

For breakfast I veered into the trees and found a rabbit’s nest. The mother and her five bunnies screamed as I bit into them. The sound was unexpected, as piercing and angry as the cry of a newborn stuffed in a trash can at prom. The rabbits’ brains were small,
their intestines filled with hard pellets like Skittles. I stored a foot in my pocket for luck.

Still hungry, I shuffled back to the highway.

The dead walked with me, wobbling like newly birthed calves, bumper-car zombies going nowhere. The ratio, Blake called it. Hammer wheels within hammer wheels.

The bullet holes in my back, the bite on my shoulder... it occurred to me that if I stopped the decay, I could escape the grave, live forever.

A Hummer drove down the highway, tearing through the zombie throng like Moses parting a Red Sea of bloody corpses.

The driver barely slowed down; he knocked over the walking dead as if they were bowling pins and he was going for a perfect game. I stepped out of the way and called out to the others to do the same.

"Mooohhhhaaa. Oooaaaaahhh!" I cried. Pathetic. My lips barely parted and my mouth felt like a crawfish castle—dry and full of mud. I was stuck in a body that would not obey me. A stroke victim, I was locked in. A rotting portable prison.

A walking putrefying metaphor.

I, Robot.

I, Zombie.

And, oh, those silly zombies. Letting themselves be run over like skunks and possum. And then worse, picking themselves back up afterward, maimed but mobile. Resuscitated roadkill. The tenacity of the undead. Their blind stupidity. A teenage zombette still wearing her soccer uniform, her legs were crushed by the Hummer’s tires. That didn’t stop her, however. She sprang back up like one of the Hydra’s heads and continued forward on those flattened legs, her red braids and braces gleaming. She was damn near perky.

As the vehicle passed me, I peered into the windows. Inside was a nuclear family—mom, dad, two girls, and a boy. Even a dog—some kind of terrier yapping away, its nose and paws pressed against the glass. The mother, a ponytailed blonde in a pink yoga outfit, stared back at me. We made eye contact and I flashed her the peace sign and grinned, dislodging a clump of crust in the corner of my mouth. The woman put her hand to her throat and in that instant, I felt known. Understood. My sentence was acknowledged by another thinking being. And then they were gone, hightailing it down the highway, crashing into parked cars and catatonic zombies.

I was even lonelier after that brief connection. Like Orestes or Princess Di, I was chased by demons both real and imagined. I needed a companion. I’d have taken Lilith if Eve was unavailable, but I preferred Eve. More compliant, made from my rib. Except for that apple thing, Eve would be perfect.

**THE DEAD WALK** at a snail’s pace, complete with trails of slime. At the rate I was going, I’d decompose before reaching Chicago and finding Stein. A pickup truck cruised down the road, picking off members of the horde at random. When it stopped, the driver bending down to retrieve something from the floor—a plug of chaw, no doubt—and his passenger reloading, I acted.

Climbing in was an effort. My joints were stiff with rigor mortis. I lay down between a spare tire and a tool case. Empty beer cans and shotgun shells rattled around me and a gun rack loomed above. I covered myself with a blue tarp.

In life, I wouldn’t have looked twice at these men. They were large and one wore an oversized T-shirt advertising Pepsi. Both had on NASCAR ball caps.

The only Homer they knew was Simpson; their favorite beer was Bud Light. Their idea of an art film was *The Shawshank Redemption* and their wives collected Precious Moments figurines. What could I possibly talk about with them? The weather?

It was all I could do not to eat them.

“That one over there is almost pretty,” one said.

“Shoot her!”

“Now hold on a minute. She looks recently turned—probably still warm inside there. Fresh.”

“You ain’t never tried that, have you?”

“Screwing a zombie? Hell no!”

“But you’ve thought about it?”
“It’s crossed my mind. I suppose you’d have to tie her up first and gag her, or cover her whole head with something to protect yourself. Like a Wal-Mart bag maybe. Or a catcher’s mask. Then I guess you could just do it regular.”

“You are one sick fuck, Earl.”

“On second thought, doggy-style might be the safest bet.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that.”

There was a shotgun blast.

“Got her!” Earl said.

“Good shot. Right in the head.”

“Kind of seems like a waste though.”

“She did look like your wife.” He laughed.

“That ain’t funny. My wife is one of ‘em.”


The men rolled up their windows and the truck picked up speed. Hidden under my tarp, I exercised self-control. Mindful restraint. Denying my instincts, displaying the discipline of an ascetic monk, I took out my affirmation journal.

This is what I wrote:

**A To-Not-Do List**

1. Do not smash the back window and attack the driver.
2. Do not climb on top of the cab and slap your bloody hand on the windshield.
3. Do not press your face against the glass and bare your teeth at Earl.
4. Do not eat the rednecks.

Oh, but their dull stupid brains. I reckon they’re tasty.

**WE DROVE ALL** night through the cornfields of the Midwest. Lying on my back, I peeked out of the tarp and up at the stars. Amazingly, they were still there.

I may have prayed. If I believed in God I would have, but I was raised an atheist.

“God was wounded during World War One,” my father taught me, “and died in the gas chambers of the Holocaust. Don’t believe any of that supernatural mumbo-jumbo.”

My paternal grandparents were wealthy Jewish doctors who fled the Nazis in 1937. My grandmother was the first woman to graduate from the University of Vienna. When they arrived in America, they had a strongbox full of diamonds and identification papers. They had money tucked away in a Swiss bank account. And they had their lives and their children by the hand.

They left their drapes and Turkish rugs, pots and pans, real estate and religion to the Nazis. For all I know, Hitler himself slept in their oak four-poster bed underneath the feather duvet and on top of the dozens of pillows Oma kept fluffed and spotless. Oma and Opa never went back to Vienna, but Oma often talked about what they left behind.

Her stories ended the same way every time: “And that, kleine Jack, is how the Boorsteins became the Barneses.”

I have Viennese property I could claim. There’s an apartment building and a house. A pea patch and some vacant lots. Lucy begged me to take her to my ancestral home for our honeymoon, but I refused.

“Too painful?” she asked.

“Too boring,” I lied.

We honeymooned in the Caribbean instead, where Lucy wore a bikini and ran into the ocean, her heels almost touching the crescent moons of her bottom. She looked over her shoulder at me and I chased after her, grabbing her by the waist and kissing her; she was meadier then and I adored her.

“Float like you’re dead,” she’d said, treading water.

I rolled face-first into the sea, my arms splayed out, my legs hanging straight down. Lucy jumped on, straddling me piggyback style.

I dove underwater then, sunken with the weight of my wife. I could hear her giggling above me and I swam as hard as I could,
breaking the surface like a dolphin, Lucy riding me like a nymph.

If only Lucy were with me as the truck bounced along. She would have made a child’s game out of our concealment. Hide and Seek or Kick the Can.

Lightning flashed and it started to rain. I pulled the tarp over my head, my fingers leaving behind a thick coat of crud, sticky as glue.

Fat raindrops hit the tarp; each one sounded like a nail pounding me deeper into my coffin.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TRUCK STOPPED at a TA Travel Center in the middle of that godforsaken, corn-infested state. It was morning, the sky was clear, and the area appeared to be free of zombies. Humans milled about, filling up their gas tanks, gathering food and drink, exchanging information and gossip. No money changed hands, indicating a massive breakdown in the economy as well as society as a whole. Nothing is more integral to America than the accumulation of wealth. And if no one paid for anything, no one made a profit.

In the wake of the Zombie Apocalypse, humanity had gone commie. Zombie Joe McCarthy must be scratching at the walls of his crypt.

As soon as Earl and the driver went inside the truck stop, I peered over the top of the bed. Seeing no one in the immediate vicinity, I climbed out.

My stomach was a vast and empty black hole.

I lumbered from car to car, hiding behind wheels and trunks, pretending to be an injured soldier in a Vietnam War movie. Charlie got my shoulder, I radioed in. Turned it into pork for his stir-fry.

I watched the humans through the windows of the truck stop. Clustered in groups, dispensing soda from the fountain, unwrapping Snickers bars, leafing through Field and Stream. The women fondled molded plastic angels, slipping them into their purses.