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Interview with the Zombie

The zombie sat motionless in my other leather chair. Now and then he sniffed one overstuffed chair arm or the other, as if wondering if the leather still contained food. Perhaps this confused him, if zombies can experience mental states, or any kind of states, for that matter. In any case, he was more or less still, affording me a chance to ask him a few questions.

“Do you realize what’s happened to you?” I asked.

He stared at the chair arm, a dry tongue darting back and forth through his open mouth. His lips were missing.

“Do you remember your name?” I said. “Before you were—changed?”

A hoarse grunt emerged from his dessicated throat. His body shuddered and it seemed as if he might be preparing to speak. At that point, I wasn’t sure if zombies could vocalize at all, but it was certainly worth investigating. After all, how many people have ever *sincerely* tried to converse with one?

“My name is Albert,” I said.

The zombie twisted around aimlessly, opening and closing what was left of its mouth.

“I’d like to hear your point of view.”

No reaction at all. Just a continuation of random motion, something like restlessness or ADHD.

“Can you hear my voice?” I asked. Then I felt stupid: obviously he could *hear* me. Zombies are attracted by noise, so yes, he could hear my voice. Perhaps he considered it too painfully obvious to deserve an answer.

“Do you understand English?” I wanted to shift the conversation back to a more sensible context.

A long, slow rattle emerged from his throat.

“Can you understand what I’m saying to you?”

The rattle morphed into a sporadic sandy flapping, deep in his chest, and then faded away.

I moved closer. “*Can you understand me?*” I shouted.

He turned toward me so fast that his torso twisted awkwardly. The rotting flesh dangling from his exposed ribs swung to and fro, but of course he was unaware of such things. What struck me was the look in his eye (the other one dangled from the socket, shrunken and useless, like an old grape). He seemed perplexed. But then, his condition *was* undeniably perplexing, for both of us.

I wondered what he was feeling—some kind of undead angst?

“I’m so sorry; you don’t have to reply,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

His head bobbed around, and his eye darted from side to side.

“It’s alright,” I went on. “Everything’s going to be OK.”

Of course I was lying, but there was no need to rub his nose in it. Compassion is probably unfamiliar to zombies, but still, it might ease the tension between us. It was worth a try, anyway.

For a few minutes we sat silently, two beings in leather armchairs, sharing the mysterious gulf that loomed between us.

I asked him another question. “Do you remember who you are?”

He coughed. It sounded like “Abarth.”

“I didn’t catch that,” I said. “Could you say that again?”

“Bendix,” he said, or so I thought, making the requisite esophageal allowances.

He returned to scratching the leather upholstery.

“Please don’t scratch at the furniture,” I said.

He stopped scratching and turned toward me.

“M-Michelin?” he asked.

I pondered. Was he speaking about car parts? Was there something about cars that he needed to say? Something so deep and important that even in his extreme condition the words were fighting their way to the surface?

Then I realized all his fingernails were coming off. My heart went out to him: all along I’d been worrying about the furniture. I was such a self-

centered insensitive fool. And he with no fingertips and at least two or three fingers missing completely. Oh, the vanity of the human condition!

The smell was, I hate to put it so bluntly, very intense. He smelled like—rotting flesh, what else? The room reeked of it. Another pang of guilt stabbed at my gut. Here I was, perfectly healthy, my whole future ahead of me, judging this poor creature because of his smell! We can be so petty.

I had hoped to muster a little journalistic professionalism. I wanted to set a suitable standard for myself. But here I was, already judging, pigeonholing, stereotyping. I fought back the urge to gag. This was not how Woodward and Bernstein would handle such things, or Edward R. Murrow.

I noticed that the leather armchair was becoming stained with colorful exudates and drippings. I wondered if saddle soap would take it out. Possibly the chair would need a full treatment with neatsfoot oil.

His hand twitched sporadically as he turned around in a series of small jerks. He was reaching toward me. I looked down—I had been gesturing with my pencil.

“Is that it?” I said. “Do you want my pencil?”

Of course! He couldn’t *talk*; he couldn’t articulate real words. It should have been obvious, and I had completely missed it.

But he brushed the pencil aside and lightly touched my fingertips. It was heart-breaking.

He really was reaching out. Not in a threatening way, but in a plaintive, pleading kind of gesture. I couldn’t refuse him. How quickly we judge others. I let him take my hand. His eye twitched up and stared straight at me and I was filled with confusion and compassion.

He bent further in my direction; a few loops of intestine tumbled out onto the side of the chair. Empathy overwhelmed me.

Then I realized he was gently nibbling at my hand.

He began almost as though he was savoring an hors-d’oeuvre, but the slobbering and grunts increased and I realized he was not going to stop with my fingertips. I should have pulled away, but I just didn’t have the heart.