

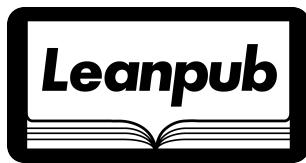
Zombie pulp

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Chapter One

“It is time.” As he sat on the humid earth, flickering grass around him, flooded by light, he knew the process had begun. He could sense it viscerally, blood pulsing frantically against his stomach, in the sight of the grass made silver by an overbearing light. He could see it in his thoughts, falling apart into instinct and dread.

Death does not become a being as himself. Something that has seen humanity change its face should not simply end. And yet he was. To the outside, it was simply a park scene, people laying like islands amidst the tall grass, avidly exposing themselves to the first rays of the sun. He is simply one consciousness floating among others, furtively stealing glances around, or keeping busy with devices. An average face among a sea of faces.

The man put down the book and hugged his knees. A soft sheen of sweat covered him despite chill he felt. He felt the atoms of his being reject his nature, reject his unnatural reign, and shudder violently against each other. He tried to steady himself with will power so to retreat. But his will was not his own anymore. In the end, it would have to end like this, in the open. His eyes hungered for sight. “Could this be the last thing I see? Could this me be the last that can still see itself? Where will I go? “

He caught sight of a girl sitting across from him. She was surrounded by textbooks, snacks, and enough bags to carry those and a lot more. She was staring directly at him behind her glasses, which she probably thought were not transparent. Just another human being, with a small story,

soon to be winked out of existence, just like me. Only she will see tomorrow and I will not. Or perhaps I will turn and attack her, will it be like this?

He caught himself feeling envy. He did not want to end like a small creature like them, caught in petty emotions, greedy for things that he should not have. No, instead I will make one more gesture and give her a gift she never asked for. If I cannot live as a human, why should she? Why does she deserve it? Why do I not?

“I used to think I was an ethical person, a good Christian. I have to hand it to the bastards, there’s pleasure in doing the wrong thing”. So he lifted his hand, and willed a piece of himself away. As she turned around distracted by a group of loud people singing badly, her mind was blank. And when she turned back, she stared to an empty place in the grass, unsure of why she was looking there. An eerie feeling told her she forgot something, and then, as all obedient humans, accepted it as a mistake of thought. But as she turned her sight back to the dreary textbooks she was reading, she realized something. A presence behind her. The peculiar man that she had just seen was gone.

Her name was Sarah, and she was a student. In her own mind, she was not a mere student. Not a mere number among numbers. Not an average life, despite being on the train of existence, going though all the usual stops. Birth, school, budding personality, awkward crushes, disappointments, fallible parents, being selfish, being hurt by other selfish people. But no, in her mind, she was more than the sum of her parts.

Because Sarah was a special kind of person even with-

out a gift. What she had that set her apart was the will to survive. An absolute, obstinate desire to be happy, to prevail. It was still hidden, unnurtured by the milquetoast events of her life. Nothing she had faced so far had made her realize she was a special breed. What she needed was tragedy, to bring out what was the best thing of her. As she got up to leave for home, feeling a bit dizzy, she locked eyes with a guy who was trying to covertly look at her. His eyes shot back down, and he casually looked around, as if seeing her was simply a coincidence while he overviewed the scene. “Was it the same guy?”

Sarah looked directly to him. He looked at her with thinly hidden hostility. Sweat covered his upper lip, and his eyes were hollowed out. His complexion was sallow and his clothes rumpled. Sarah felt like a fish in a fishbowl. As a woman, she had not met often with such direct confrontation. Her first instinct was avoidance. She darted away her gaze, as she felt her heartbeat quicken.

It was unreal, a beautiful sunny filled day like this, surrounded by running children, and lazy picnickers, and yet she felt alone, unprotected. She slowly looked back at the man to see what he was planning to do. His eyes burned darkly, his bare wiry arms twitching with tension. He looked ready to spring, just looking for that one sudden movement as excuse. Something deep down told her to not move. To not fear, to face calmly. As prey, she knew what she was. Countless ancestors had stood where she had, and they faced the same losing game. This guy wanted to hurt her, close enough to do it, before she or anybody else could do anything.

As they stood with deadlocked eyes, his body let out a slow, unterminable breath, like a balloon deflating. His eyes glazed over, his shoulders lost the tonus, and hunched, and instead of that burning hostility, he simply looked void of anything. Sarah felt her nails dig into her palms, and realized this was the moment to jump on her bike, and speed away. As she did this, her hands trembling, she told herself she was paranoid, imagining this confrontation. It was just a guy, looking at her. She was crazy to even think there was any reason he wanted to hurt her. Yet, she hurried, and pedaled hard until she felt her legs burn, and she didn't stop until she reached her building. As she tempered her breath, she looked around, feeling the presence of the man still around her.

Michael looked outside at the beautiful weather. Another beautiful day, that he could not enjoy. He was never alone. Close to his chest, hugging him were death, and disease, like slithering reptiles absorbing his warmth. He was a mistake, he was not meant to be, someone to live enough to miss it. To learn enough to know what he could never have. Deep in the chaotic dance of protein and enzymes, of the twine of DNA telling the story of what he could be, there were the mistakes, the unspoken words which would break the choreography. It had already begun, the silent toppling of blocks which in the end would break his symmetry, and end him. The dance would stop, the masks would be silent,

and his eyes would close. But not before seeing a few more beautiful days like this to hate with all his failing being.

His mother had not come in yet. Perhaps she wanted to give him more time to sleep. Perhaps she was sick of seeing his face, sick of taking care of him. Sick of his burden. But no, the clock said 12:00. She would have never forgotten to bring him his medicine. This was not normal.

Michael stood up, and listened for the usual morning symphony. Every morning he would be met by his mother's careful tiptoe around the house, the smell of the freshly brewed coffee, the numbing chatter of the TV, the water dripping from the broken faucet as his mum would always postpone fixing. But for a change everything was silent. He walked painfully towards the door, and felt not the earthly smell of coffee, but something metallic. Something organic, and sickly sweet, and warm. Blood. He pushed the door open, afraid to see what a part of him knew he would.

His mum loved lovely white airy rooms. She was a happy creature, never down because of his, never resenting him for who he was. She had made the living room in her own image, elegant and inviting. And now, the soft beige was paired off with a garish red. The old family pictures covered in modern streaks of burgundy. And on the soft plush carpet, she lay with arms open, with a strange creature above her.

The creature fed on her. Using his fingers like a clumsy infant, he was shoving mouthfuls, not bothering to swallow or look around him. Michael's mind stopped. He simply stared, unable to deal with what he was seeing. He looked

to the left, to see the cupboard, walked to it robotically. The creature was unable to see anything, raptured in feeding. Michael walked in dread, and picked up the IKEA toolbox, and walked back to his room, and closed the door. He methodically took off his slippers before getting in bed, then gave a painful chuckle at seeing what he had done. His mother had always asked him to do that.

What was he suppose to do? Kill it surely. But what, and why, and oh my god, oh my god... He clutched the toolbox, and wished that by closing the door, everything would go away. But the smell was surrounding him. The fake cocoon could not protect him. He felt the creature defiling her, he pictured the gnashing of his teeth. Michael opened the toolbox, and grabbed the mallet. He went out, and yelled:

“Hey!”

The creature looked up. It was not an animal, but a person. It was his neighbor. The neighbor he grew up with. He called him Uncle Joe. He used to give him candy for washing his car. He helped them fix stuff around the house as his mum couldn’t afford. Michael looked at the sink, and the faucet was silent. There was Uncle Joe’s toolbox next to it, and a cup of coffee and a plate of mum’s cookies next to it. How had it gone from that to this?

Uncle Joe, or the creature he was now, sprung up at him. Michael was taken by surprise and ducked sideways behind the couch. The effort made him pant, and his chest was laboring visibly, but Joe, despite being a pensioner, was unnaturally motionless. There was no breath coming out of him, his muscles did not strain, contracting and relaxing,

but moved jerkily, like a puppet on an invisible string. Joe's neck lay at an awkward angle, with his jaw lax, and his unblinking dry eyes stared through him. The puppet was jerked again, and his hard yellow fingernails flew towards Michael's neck. Michael crouched down, and got up to the side of the creature and swung the mallet as hard as possible into its skull. With the sound of a cracked egg, the creature's head burst, spewing rotten shreds all over Michael. As if the puppet strings were cut, Joe's body fell down, unanimated, and empty.

The cup of coffee was resting on the table next to the stack of papers he had just finished reading. With mild annoyance, he clipped them and added them to their specific folders. Yet another batch of meaningless half discoveries, hastily drawn conclusions, and overreaching wishful thinking. Yet he then took a look at the printouts of last week's results, the heterogenous mess they were, and told himself to not be so critical.

Alex had been head researcher at the Institute for a couple of years now, and while he loved the status that came with it, the ability to work his minions to death, and the days working from home, he also felt utterly disappointed. It had been easy to excel in school, in college, to woo committees, to make promising plans. His entire life like an arrow heading always higher and always forward. And now his momentum was ending, and his life was

slowly brought down by the gravity of life. He had told himself he wanted to reach his limits. But what do you do when you reach them, and you have the rest of your life to stare them down, and beat at them with weak fists.

The unbelievable tragedy of being simply above average. Of being accomplished, attractive, slightly antisocial but comfortable with it, and just not better than that. If he wasn't so emotionally stable, he'd have a good cry about it. Instead, he hopped on his treadmill and did his usual 10k 30 minute run.

As he was running, a slight draft cooled his shoulders. A waft of stale sweat and second hand clothes drifted by, and a bright beam briefly blinded him. Before he could realize, he saw the treadmill band above his head, and his white ceiling under his feet, together with the safety string, and a strange woman's face grinning.

The threadmill circled him, and the woman's grin smeared in his vision, and he hit the back wall with a thud. The world went silent, and as he opened his eyes, he saw blackness. As if the senses were trying to ease him back into reality, he first started to see his room. Pain made an appearance, and he let out a silent scream, as if in a nightmare. Next came smell, and the bizarre stink hit him again, only more acutely. He then heard a strange animal noise, until he realized that was his own pained voice. He felt his fists grab something, before he saw the teeth of the madwoman almost scrape his face off. Life was appearing to him in jerky movements, he felt a moment delayed to how events appeared.

His hands tensed around her neck, until he heard

a snap. He expected her to turn limp, but instead her teeth clacked even harder, noiseless, while her arms flailed towards him. Her torn clothes were covered in caked blood, which had seemed to drip from her mouth. He held her at a distance, which was easy as she was a stumpy middle aged woman, and yet all he could do was stare dumbly at her clothes, and wonder how she could be so strong that she was almost fighting him off.

The bump on his head pulsed painfully, and brought him out of his reverie. He had to do something, and do it before he lost it again. Keeping the woman at bay, he got up, and slowly dragged her to his bathroom, where he threw her in, and barred the door with a chair. He then went to the kitchen, and washed his hands and face. Having brought back a sense of normalcy, he listened to the animal scratches on the door, and the teeth of the madwoman click rhythmically.

“What the hell is going on?”

Having aced his second naval architecture exam so far, the finals were starting to seem less like hell month, and more like an opportunity to feel awesome. The universe had decided to finally repay him for being a nice guy, and it wasn’t pulling any stops. Robert was having the best day of his life, and there was nothing that could possibly mar it.

Of course, thinking that, he subconsciously crossed his

fingers. You just don't say stuff like that. That's like asking the universe to dare to ruin your day. That's the universe, even it being an unthinking, impersonal ball of emptiness taking the challenge and running with it. It's not like he was superstitious. No, he took pride in being rational, and level headed. But he crossed his fingers, just in case, and mentally took the words back.

There was a sudden knock at the door. This was strange, as it was a Saturday. You just don't do that to someone who might be sleeping. You don't do that to a student! The knock returned louder and more urgent. Robert got up, and slowly ambled to the door. He regretted the last 2 tequila shots of the night. Then he remembered the cute girl he had made out with, and thanked the tequila god. He took out his phone, and there it was, black pixels on white, her number. Life was truly good.

The door shook with a violent series of knocks. Robert opened the door, mildly irritated, and gasped in surprise. Right in front of him, an angry mailman was holding a seemingly heavy package. The guy pushed it in his arms.

“You should thank me, I brought it to you, so you wouldn't have to go pick it up. But next time tell your buddies to stop sending you so many freaking sweets, this thing weighs a ton!”

“Dude, you know you're getting your share”

The mailman winked, and walked away.

“I'm coming round tomorrow, and there better be some cupcakes waiting for me!”

Robert gave his best thumbs up, closed the door, and proceeded to freak out as usual over his present. Having

recovered enough mental power to stay still and find a pair of scissors, he opened it up, only to see yet another package. The box was old wood, and official stamps all over it, along with stickers of every kind, from danger signs to some proclaimin that it contains live animals. Proeminently on the top with big red letters it said:

“Governmental approved undead survival kit”

Staring out from the box were packages of dried ice cream, a water purifier, a roll of bubblewrap, a bright red crowbar, and enough twinkies to feed a small family of raccoons. As was written on top of the twinkie pack. Robert jumped up and down, and grabbed the pack, and ran down the dorm to show it off to his equally geeky and zombie -obsessed friends.

His best friend was standing at the entrance to the showers, munching on some marshmallows.

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god, dude, I just got the coolest present ever! You’re going to DIE of jealousy, and no you cannot have any of it, even if you have to pry it out of my dead hands. Like seriously!”

The guy continued to munch mechanically, while his empty gaze turned slowly towards Robert. He dropped the human ear like a dog drops a chewtoy, after seeing a fresh new steak on the table. Robert stuttered. Was this part of the joke? Surely... surely it was a joke. That was some kind of fake ear. What great acting! But nonetheless, he looked down to his friends’ feet, and saw the mangled face of another student on the tiled floor of the bathroom, lying in pinkish water.

That was not make-up. That is real. The zombie

apocalypse had started. And it wasn't a joke. It wasn't a stupid TV fad. It wasn't fiction. It was staring at him with hungry silent eyes, out of the dead body of his best friend.