

Zombie by Chuck Palahniuk

It was Griffin Wilson who proposed the theory of de-evolution. He sat two rows behind me in Organic Chem, the very definition of an evil genius. He was the first to take the Great Leap Backward.

Everybody knows because Tricia Gedding was in the nurse's office with him. She was in the other cot, behind a paper curtain, faking her period to get out of a pop quiz in Perspectives on Eastern Civ. She said she heard the loud *beep!* but didn't think anything of it. When Tricia Gedding and the school nurse found him on his own cot, they thought Griffin Wilson was the resuscitation doll everybody uses to practice CPR. He was hardly breathing, barely moving a muscle. They thought it was a joke because his wallet was still clenched between his teeth and he still had the electrical wires pasted to either side of his forehead.

His hands were still holding a dictionary-size box, still paralyzed, pressing a big, red button. Everyone's seen this box so often that they hardly recognized it, but it had been hanging on the office wall: the defibrillator. That emergency heart shocker. He must have taken it down and read the instructions. He simply took the waxed paper off the gluey parts and pasted the electrodes on either side of his temporal lobes. It's basically a peel-and-stick lobotomy. It's so easy a 16-year-old can do it.

In Miss Chen's English class, we learned "To be or not to be," but there's a big gray area in between. Maybe in Shakespeare times people only had two options. Griffin Wilson, he knew the SATs were just the gateway to a big lifetime of bullshit. To getting married and going to college. To paying taxes and trying to raise a kid who's not a school shooter. And Griffin Wilson knew drugs are only a patch. After drugs, you're always going to need *more* drugs.

The problem with being talented and gifted is sometimes you get *too smart*. My uncle Henry says the importance of eating a good breakfast is because your brain is still growing. But nobody talks about how, sometimes, your brain can get just *too big*.

We're basically big animals, evolved to break open shells and eat raw oysters, but now we're expected to keep track of all 300 Kardashian sisters and 800 Baldwin brothers. Seriously, at the rate they reproduce the Kardashians and the Baldwins are going to wipe out all other species of humans. The rest of us, you and me, we're just evolutionary dead ends waiting to wink out.

You could ask Griffin Wilson anything. Ask him who signed the Treaty of Ghent. He'd be like that cartoon magician on TV who says, "Watch me pull a rabbit out of my head." Abracadabra, and he'd know the answer. In Organic Chem, he could talk string theory until he was anoxic, but what he really wanted to be was happy. Not just not sad, he wanted to be happy the way a dog is happy. Not constantly jerked this way and that by flaming instant messages and changes in the federal tax code. He didn't want to die either. He wanted to be—and not to be—but at the same time. That's what a pioneering genius he was.

The principal of student affairs made Tricia Gedding swear to not tell a living soul, but you know how that goes. The school district was afraid of copycats. Those defibrillators are everywhere these days.

Since that day in the nurse's office, Griffin Wilson has never seemed happier. He's always giggling too loud and wiping spit off his chin with his sleeve. The special ed teachers clap their hands and heap him with praise just for using the toilet. Talk about a double standard. The rest of us are fighting tooth and nail for whatever garbage career we can get, while Griffin Wilson is going to be thrilled with penny candy and reruns of *Fraggle Rock* for the rest of his life. How he was before, he was miserable unless he won every chess tournament. The way he is now, just yesterday, he took out his dick and jerked off on the school bus. And when Mrs. Ramirez pulled over and left the driver's seat to chase him down the aisle he shouted, "Watch me pull a rabbit out of my pants," and he squirted come on her uniform shirt. He was laughing the whole time.

Lobotomized or not, he still knows the value of a signature catchphrase. Instead of being just another grade grubber, now he's the life of the party.

The voltage even cleared up his acne.

It's hard to argue with results like that.

It wasn't a week after he'd turned zombie that Tricia Gedding went to the gym where she does Zumba and got the defibrillator off the wall in the girls' locker room. After her self-administered peel-and-stick procedure in a bathroom stall, she doesn't care where she gets her period. Her best friend, Brie Phillips, got to the defibrillator they keep next to the bathrooms at the Home Depot, and now she walks down the street, rain or shine, with no pants on. We're not talking about the scum of the school. We're talking about class president and head cheerleader. The best and the brightest. Everybody who played first string on all the sports teams. It took every defibrillator between here and Canada, but since then, when they play football nobody plays by the rules. And even when they get skunked, they're always grinning and slapping high fives.

They continue to be young and hot, but they no longer worry about the day when they won't be.

It's suicide, but it's not. The newspaper won't report the actual numbers. Newspapers flatter themselves. Anymore, Tricia Gedding's Facebook page has a larger readership than our daily paper. Mass media, my foot. They cover the front page with unemployment and war, and they don't think *that* has a negative effect? My uncle Henry reads me an article about a proposed change in state law. Officials want a 10-day waiting period on the sale of all heart defibrillators. They're talking about mandatory background checks and mental health screenings. But it's not the law, not yet.

My uncle Henry looks up from the newspaper article and eyes me across breakfast. He levels me this stern look and asks, "If all your friends jumped off a cliff, would you?"

My uncle's what I have instead of a mom and dad. He won't acknowledge it, but there's a good life over the edge of that cliff. There's a lifetime supply of handicapped parking permits. Uncle Henry doesn't understand that all my friends have already jumped.

They may be "differently abled," but my friends are still hooking up. More than ever, these days. They have smoking-hot bodies and the brains of infants. They have the best of both worlds. LeQuisha Jefferson stuck her tongue inside Hannah Finermann during Beginning Carpentry Arts, made her squeal and squirm right there, leaned up against the drill press. And Laura Lynn Marshall? She sucked off Frank Randall in the back of International Cuisine Lab with everybody watching. All their falafels got scorched, and nobody made a federal case out of it.

After pushing the red defibrillator button, yeah, a person suffers some consequences, but he doesn't know he's suffering. Once he undergoes a push-button lobotomy a kid can get away with murder.

During study hall, I asked Boris Declan if it hurt. He was sitting there in the lunchroom with the red burn marks still fresh on either side of his forehead. He had his pants down around his knees. I asked if the shock was painful, and he didn't answer, not right away. He just took his fingers out of his ass and sniffed them, thoughtfully. He was last year's junior prom king.

In a lot of ways he's more chill now than he ever was. With his ass hanging out in the middle of the cafeteria, he offers me a sniff and I tell him, "No, thank you."

He says he doesn't remember anything. Boris Declan grins this sloppy, dopey smile. He taps a dirty finger to the burn mark on one side of his face. He points this same butt-stained finger to make me look across the way. On the wall where he's pointing is this guidance counselor poster that shows white birds flapping their wings against a blue sky. Under that are the words actual happiness only happens by accident printed in dreamy writing. The school hung that poster to hide the shadow of where another defibrillator used to hang.

It's clear that wherever Boris Declan ends up in life it's going to be the right place. He's already living in brain trauma nirvana. The school district was right about copycats.

No offense to Jesus, but the meek won't inherit the earth. To judge from reality TV the loudmouths will get their hands on everything. And I say, let them. The Kardashians and the Baldwins are like some invasive species. Like kudzu or zebra mussels. Let them battle over the control of the crappy real world.

For a long time I listened to my uncle and didn't jump. Anymore, I don't know. The newspaper warns us about terrorist anthrax bombs and virulent new strains of meningitis, and the only comfort newspapers can offer is a coupon for 20 cents off on underarm deodorant.

To have no worries, no regrets—it's pretty appealing. So many of the cool kids at my school have elected to self-fry that, anymore, only the losers are left. The losers and the naturally occurring pinheads. The situation is so dire that I'm a shoo-in to be valedictorian. That's how

come my uncle Henry is shipping me off. He thinks that by relocating me to Twin Falls he can postpone the inevitable.

So we're sitting at the airport, waiting by the gate for our flight to board, and I ask to go to the bathroom. In the men's room I pretend to wash my hands so I can look in the mirror. My uncle asked me, one time, why I looked in mirrors so much, and I told him it wasn't vanity so much as it was nostalgia. Every mirror shows me what little is left of my parents.

I'm practicing my mom's smile. People don't practice their smiles nearly enough, so when they most need to look happy they're not fooling anyone. I'm rehearsing my smile when—there it is: my ticket to a gloriously happy future working in fast food. That's opposed to a miserable life as a world-famous architect or heart surgeon.

Hovering over my shoulder and a smidgen behind me, it's reflected in the mirror. Like the bubble containing my thoughts in a comic-strip panel, there's a cardiac defibrillator. It's mounted on the wall in back of me, shut inside a metal case with a glass door you could open to set off alarm bells and a red strobe light. A sign above the box says AED and shows a lightning bolt striking a Valentine's heart. The metal case is like the hands-off showcase holding some crown jewels in a Hollywood heist movie.

Opening the case, automatically I set off the alarm and flashing red light. Quick, before any heroes come running, I dash into a handicapped stall with the defibrillator. Sitting on the toilet, I pry it open. The instructions are printed on the lid in English, Spanish, French and comic-book pictures. Making it foolproof, more or less. If I wait too long I won't have this option. Defibrillators will be under lock and key soon, and once defibrillators are illegal only paramedics will have them.

In my grasp, here's my permanent childhood. My very own bliss machine.

My hands are smarter than the rest of me. My fingers know to peel the electrodes and paste them to my temples. My ears know to listen for the loud beep that means the thing is fully charged.

My thumbs know what's best for me. They hover over the big red button. Like this is a video game. Like the button the president gets to press to trigger the launch of nuclear war. One push and the world as I know it comes to an end. A new reality begins.

To be or not to be. God's gift to animals is they don't get a choice.

Every time I open the newspaper I want to throw up. In another 10 seconds I won't know how to read. Better yet, I won't have to. I won't know about global climate change. I won't know about cancer or genocide or SARS or environmental degradation or religious conflict.

The public address system is paging my name. I won't even know my name.

Before I can blast off, I picture my uncle Henry at the gate, holding his boarding pass. He deserves better than this. He needs to know this is not his fault.

With the electrodes stuck to my forehead, I carry the defibrillator out of the bathroom and walk down the concourse toward the gate. The coiling electric wires trail down the sides of my face like thin, white pigtailed. My hands carry the battery pack in front of me like a suicide bomber who's only going to blow up all my IQ points.

When they catch sight of me, businesspeople abandon their roller bags. People on family vacations, they flap their arms, wide, and herd their little kids in the other direction. Some guy thinks he's a hero. He shouts, "Everything is going to be all right." He tells me, "You have everything to live for."

We both know he's a liar.

My face is sweating so hard the electrodes might slip off. Here's my last chance to say everything that's on my mind, so with everyone watching I'll confess: I don't know what's a happy ending. And I don't know how to fix anything. Doors open in the concourse and Homeland Security soldiers storm out, and I feel like one of those Buddhist monks in Tibet or wherever who splash on gasoline before they check to make sure their cigarette lighter actually works. How embarrassing that would be, to be soaking in gasoline and have to bum a match off some stranger, especially since so few people smoke anymore. Me, in the middle of the airport concourse, I'm dripping with sweat instead of gasoline, but this is how out of control my thoughts are spinning.

From out of nowhere my uncle grabs my arm, and he says, "If you hurt yourself, Trevor, you hurt me."

He's gripping my arm, and I'm gripping the red button. I tell him this isn't so tragic. I say, "I'll keep loving you, Uncle Henry...I just won't know who you are."

Inside my head, my last thoughts are prayers. I'm praying that this battery is fully charged. There's got to be enough voltage to erase the fact that I've just said the word *love* in front of several hundred strangers. Even worse, I've said it to my own uncle. I'll never be able to live that down.

Most people, instead of saving me, they pull out their telephones and start shooting video. Everyone's jockeying for the best full-on angle. It reminds me of something. It reminds me of birthday parties and Christmas. A thousand memories crash over me for the last time, and that's something else I hadn't anticipated. I don't mind losing my education. I don't mind forgetting my name. But I will miss the little bit I can remember about my parents.

My mother's eyes and my father's nose and forehead, they're dead except for in my face. And the idea hurts, to know that I won't recognize them anymore. Once I punch out, I'll think my reflection is nothing except me.

My uncle Henry repeats, "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me too."

I say, "I'll still be your nephew, but I just won't know it."

For no reason, some lady steps up and grabs my uncle Henry's other arm. This new person, she says, "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me as well...." Somebody else grabs that lady, and somebody grabs the last somebody, saying, "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me." Strangers reach out and grab hold of strangers in chains and branches, until we're all connected together. Like we're molecules crystallizing in solution in Organic Chem. Everyone's holding on to someone, and everyone's holding on to everyone, and their voices repeat the same sentence: "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me.... If you hurt yourself, you hurt me...."

These words form a slow wave. Like a slow-motion echo, they move away from me, going up and down the concourse in both directions. Each person steps up to grab a person who's grabbing a person who's grabbing a person who's grabbing my uncle who's grabbing me. This really happens. It sounds trite, but only because words make everything true sound trite. Because words always screw up what you're trying to say.

Voices from other people in other places, total strangers, say by telephone, watching by video cams, their long-distance voices say, "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me...." And some kid steps out from behind the cash register at Der Wienerschnitzel, all the way down at the food court, he grabs hold of somebody and shouts, "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me." And the kids making Taco Bell and the kids frothing milk at the Starbucks, they stop, and they all hold hands with someone connected to me across this vast crowd, and they say it too. And just when I think it's got to end and everyone's got to let go and fly away, because everything's stopped and people are holding hands, even going through the metal detectors they're holding hands, even then the talking news anchor on CNN, on the televisions mounted up high by the ceiling, the announcer puts a finger to his ear, like to hear better, and even he says, "Breaking news." He looks confused, obviously reading something off cue cards, and he says, "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me." And overlapping his voice are the voices of political pundits on Fox News and color commentators on ESPN, and they're all saying it.

The televisions show people outside in parking lots and in tow-away zones, all holding hands. Bonds forming. Everyone's uploading video of everyone, people standing miles away but still connected back to me.

And crackling with static, voices come over the walkie-talkies of the Homeland Security guards, saying, "If you hurt yourself, you hurt me—do you copy?"

By that point there's not a big enough defibrillator in the universe to scramble all our brains. And, yeah, eventually we'll all have to let go, but for another moment everyone's holding tight, trying to make this connection last forever. And if this impossible thing can happen, then who knows what else is possible? And a girl at Burger King shouts, "I'm scared too." And a boy at Cinnabon shouts, "I am scared *all the time*." And everyone else is nodding, Me too.

To top things off, a huge voice announces, "Attention!" From overhead it says, "May I have your attention, please?" It's a lady. It's the lady voice who pages people and tells them to pick up the white paging telephone. With everyone listening, the entire airport is reduced to silence.

"Whoever you are, you need to know..." says the lady voice of the white paging telephone. Everyone listens because everyone thinks she's talking only to them. From a thousand speakers she begins to sing. With that voice, she's singing the way a bird sings. Not like a parrot or an Edgar Allan Poe bird that speaks English. The sound is trills and scales the way a canary sings, notes too impossible for a mouth to conjugate into nouns and verbs. We can enjoy it without understanding it. And we can love it without knowing what it means. Connected by telephone and television, it's synchronizing everyone, worldwide. That voice so perfect, it's just singing down on us.

Best of all...her voice fills everywhere, leaving no room for being scared. Her song makes all our ears into one ear.

This isn't exactly the end. On every TV is me, sweating so hard an electrode slowly slides down one side of my face.

This certainly isn't the happy ending I had in mind, but compared to where this story began—with Griffin Wilson in the nurse's office putting his wallet between his teeth like a gun—well, maybe this is not such a bad place to start.