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JOYCE CAROL OATES

A NOVEL

ZOMBIE

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Zombie

A Novel

Joyce Carol Oates

 HarperCollins e-books

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Suspended Sentence

My name is Q__ P__ & I am thirty-one years old, three months.
Height five feet ten, weight one hundred forty-seven pounds.
Eyes brown, hair brown. Medium build. Light scattering of freckles on arms, back. Astigmatism in both eyes, corrective lenses required for driving.
Distinguishing features: none.
Except maybe these faint worm-shaped scars on both my knees. They say from a bicycle accident, I was a little boy then. I don't contradict but I don't remember.
I never contradict. I am in agreement with you as you utter your words of wisdom. Moving your asshole-mouth & YES SIR I am saying NO MA'AM I am saying. My shy eyes. Behind my plastic-rimmed glasses that are the color of skin seen through plastic.
Caucasian skin that is. On both sides of my family going back forever as far as I am aware.
My I.Q. when last tested: 112. A previous time tested: 107. In high school when tested: 121.
Born Mt. Vernon, Michigan. February 11, 1963. Dale Springs public schools. Dale Springs High School, class of 1981. Q__ P__ graduated forty-fourth in a class of one hundred eighteen. Did not win a scholarship to any college. Did not belong to any sports teams, school newspaper or yearbook etc. Highest grades in math except in senior year calculus where I fucked up.
I see my probation officer Mr. T__ alternate Thursdays 10 A.M., downtown Mt. Vernon. My therapist Dr. E__ Mondays 4 P.M., University Medical Center. Group therapy with Dr. B__ is Tuesday 7 P.M.
I am not doing well, I think. Or maybe just O.K. I know they are writing reports. But I am not allowed to see. If one of these was a woman I would do better, I feel. They believe you, they are not always watching you. EYE CONTACT HAS BEEN MY DOWNFALL.
Mr. T__ asks questions like rolling off a tape. YES SIR I tell him NO SIR. I am employed. On a regular basis now. Dr. E__ is the one who prescribes the medication. Asks me questions to get me to talk. My tongue gets in the way of my talking. Dr. B__ throws out a question as he says to get the guy talking. They're bullshit masters. I admire them. I sit inside my clothes staring at my shoes. My whole body is a numb tongue.
I drive everywhere in my Ford van. It is a 1987 model, the color of wet sand. No longer new but reliable. It passes through your vision like passing through a solid wall invisible. My American flag decal big as a real flag in the rear window.
My bumper sticker is I BRAKE FOR ANIMALS. I thought it was a good idea to have a bumper sticker



Is Time outside me, I started wondering in high school. When things began to go fast. Or is Time inside me.

If OUTSIDE you have to keep pace with fucking clocks & calendars. No slacking off. If INSIDE you do what *you* want. Whatever. You create your own Time. Like breaking the hands off a clock like I did once so it's just the clock face there looking at you.



I am a registered part-time student at Dale County Technological College where I am enrolled in two three-credit courses for the spring semester. INTRO TO ENGINEERING & INTRO TO DIGITAL COMPUTER PROGRAMMING.

It was decided that Q__ P__ might become an ENGINEER. There are many kinds of ENGINEERING. Chemical ENGINEERING, civil ENGINEERING, electrical ENGINEERING, mechanical & aerospace ENGINEERING. The college catalog lists the requirements for majors. Q__ P__ might earn a degree in how many years Dad calculated.

In the detention center downtown where they locked me up awaiting Dad posting my bond I was observed doing rapid calculations in pencil. Up and down the margins of old magazines laying around. Weird: my hand moving like it had its own purpose. Like in eighth grade, algebra equations. Geometry problems except I didn't have a compass or ruler but drew the figures anyway. Long columns of numbers like ants just to add them up for the hell of it, I guess. I don't know why. This went on for a long time. For hours. I was sweating onto the magazine pages watching where the pencil point moved. Even after the pencil point got dull and the marks were invisible. Even when the guard was talking to me and I didn't hear.

They had me quarantined as they called it. Ninety-one percent of inmates at the detention center are black or Hispanic, white guys are put together in holding cells. I was with two white guys busted on drugs. I was tagged RACIAL OFFENSE. But it was not RACIAL. I don't know what RACIAL is.

I am not a RACIST. Don't know what the fuck a RACIST is.

Sweating & my hand holding the pencil was moving but I wasn't talking. Nor EYE CONTACT with anybody. It was observed how for that period of incarceration Q__ P__ was not talking & was not making EYE CONTACT with anybody.

In that way the fuckers slide down into your soul.

How Dad learned of these math calculations I don't know. Might have been they allowed him to observe me through one-way glass. On a surveillance camera. & the magazines were probably gathered & given to him for examination. He is Professor P__ & they call him so. He said the idea came to him then. To lend me tuition for the tech college where I would learn to be an ENGINEER. We would all forget about Mt. Vernon State U., that hadn't worked out. That was years ago.

A longer time ago when I was eighteen there was Eastern Michigan State at Ypsilanti. We had all forgotten about that long ago.

Quentin has a natural love of numbers Dad said to Mom. In my hearing. His voice thick like he was trying not to clear his throat of something clotted. *A gift for numbers. Inherited from me. I should have realized.*

THAT IS WHY I am a part-time student at Dale County Technological College. & I am studying hard. Dale Tech is seven miles from my current residence but no inconvenience for me, I told my probation officer Mr. T__, I have my Ford van I drive everywhere in. A distance of seven hundred miles is nothing, but I did not tell Mr. T__ that.

As of last Monday my residence is 118 North Church Street, Mt. Vernon. University Heights the area is called. Close by the big State University campus where Professor P__ teaches. (But Mom & Dad live in the suburb of Dale Springs, on the other side of town.)

At 118 North Church I am CARETAKER for this residence once my grandparents' home. None of the tenants know this fact I am certain and I would not be the one to tell them.

The property is still owned by my Grandma P__ who lives now in Dale Springs. But it is maintained by my father R__ P__ as a multi-tenant residence partitioned into nine rental units as approved by the zoning commission.

As a gesture of our trust, Quentin. Dad said.

Oh but Quentin will do a good job! We know that. Mom said.

Grandma's house is an old faded-red brick Victorian as they call it. With a smudged look in the front like somebody moved his thumb across it. Three storeys, plus the attic. An old addition at the rear used for storage. A big kitchen where tenants have "kitchen privileges" as they are called. A deep cellar which is OFF LIMITS to tenants. A stone foundation that is very solid. Clearing away some underbrush I discovered at the front right corner the date 1892 chiseled in the stone.

University students rent the rooms. The residence has been zoned for such a purpose since 1978 Dad was saying. If I knew this fact or not I don't know.

As CARETAKER of this property I live on the ground floor rear in the room provided for the CARETAKER. This is a room with its own bathroom, a shower stall & toilet. There have been previous CARETAKERS working for Dad but I don't know anything about them.

The back stairs to the upper floors & the stairs to the cellar are close by the CARETAKER's room which is convenient. Nobody can use these stairs except by passing my door. The CARETAKER's tools & equipment, work bench etc. are in the cellar.

I have access to all the floors of the house. Because I am CARETAKER. My father R__ P__ has entrusted me with this responsibility & I am grateful for the chance to make things up to him & Mom. My master key will open the door to any room in the house.

Most of the students who rent with us are foreign students. From India, China, Pakistan, Africa. Often they have trouble with their doors at first, so I am called upon to help. *Mr. P__* they call me. & am always obliging though speaking no more than is necessary. & MAKING NO EYE CONTACT.

Thank you Mr. P__ they will say. Or thank you sir.

Their dusky skins & dark-bright eyes & dark hair that looks oiled. A smell of them like ripening plums. They are shy & more polite than American students & they pay their rent on time & don't notice things American students would notice & don't trash their rooms like American students which is why Dad says they are preferred tenants. Quiet in the evenings. At their desks studying. They all have contracts with a residence hall for meals so using the kitchen is kept to a minimum, I am mainly the one who uses the kitchen but I don't eat there I eat in my room watching TV. When I'm not out.

All the houses on North Church Street are big old brick or wood-frame Victorians. In big lots. In Grandma's & Grandpa's time when Dad was growing up here they were single-family residences of course. This was a classy neighborhood. University Heights. Grandma says it was after World War II the change began. In all of Mt. Vernon. Now North Church Street properties are rooming houses like ours or office buildings or taken over by the University like the house next door that is EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES. At the corner of North Church & Seventh three blocks away where the University

president's house used to be the lot was razed for a high-rise parking lot. *So ugly!* Grandma says. Farther up is a Burger King just opened that Grandma has not seen yet where sometimes I get hamburgers & fries I bring back to my room to eat & watch TV or do my homework for my courses.



This is a small white card tacked beside my door. I printed it myself with a black felt-tip pen.

Monday afternoons 4:00 P.M.-4:50 P.M. Mt. Vernon Medical Center. Dr. E__ asks *What are your dreams, Quen-tin. What are your fantasies.* Sit staring at the floor. Or at my hands I have scrubbed. There is a clock on Dr. E__'s desk that he can see & I can not. But I have my wristwatch *which was RAISINEYES'* which is an expensive digital watch. With an ebony face kept turned to the inside of my wrist where only I can watch the tiny numerals flashing bronze toward 4:50 P.M.

Trying to think of a dream to tell Dr. E__. To confide in Dr. E__. Something that might be a dream. Such as a person might have. Flying? In the sky? Swimming? In—Lake Michigan? In Manistee National Park in one of the unnamed deep & fast-flowing rivers? If only Dr. E__ would not stare at me. His power being that he is Dr. E__ a staff psychiatrist at the Medical Center. (Which is part of the State University.) Dr. E__ is my private therapist hired by Dad but he makes reports to the Michigan Probation Department & these are secret from me. I wish my head did not become heavy in Dr. E__'s office. It turns to a substance like pancake batter, very thick though soft, raw & pale.

Once in Dr. E__'s office when nobody had spoken for a while I felt my jaw drop like a dead man's & saliva trail across my chin. Slumped forward in the wooden chair with the hard slick bottom fitted to the cheeks of a wide ass. Head lolling & shoulders rounded & Dad was scolding whispering disgust *Quentin for God's sake: you should see your posture.* A rasping sound like a wasp that might have been a snore.

There was embarrassment to it. Falling asleep in Dr. E__'s office. If that was what had happened Dr. E__ glancing at the clock on his desk. Some papers on his desk.

Thinking his thoughts to type up on his computer after Q__ P__ leaves.

Is Dr. E__ a friend of Dad's I can't ask. I have reason to believe that this is so (both men are *senior professors* in the State University system) but both men would deny it if asked. I never ask.

After I leave his office Dr. E__ will pick up the phone & call Dr. P__ in his office at the University. *Your son Quentin is not making much progress I'm afraid. Did you know he never dreams & his posture is so poor.*

That afternoon a few weeks ago Dr. E__ was too polite to notice that I had fallen asleep in the chair facing his desk. It was the strong medication maybe. He might think. Or maybe Dr. E__ did not notice. For he is sleepy sometimes, too. Heavy-lidded eyes like a turtle's. It was raining & water ran down the window behind his head in thin pissing streams.

Wrote my refill prescription & handed it to me, dosage as indicated. Dad's medical insurance covers it. Saying we can end our session a few minutes early this week (it is 4:36 P.M. by my watch) i that's O.K. with me, he had a staff meeting. It was O.K. with me.

Last night I was working late in the cellar. Emergency work repairing SEEPAGE DAMAGE in the old cistern. I am a hard worker if what I am doing has a purpose. I did not require sleep (did not take my nighttime medication) & so at 3 A.M. climbed to the attic where there is a star-shaped window at the front of the house. The peak of the ceiling is not high enough for me to stand upright & anyway I needed to crouch there looking up at the night sky where there was a MOON so bright it hurt my eyes. How I knew the MOON was there, from down in the cellar, I don't know. Shreds of cloud were being blown across the moon clotted & cobwebbed like thoughts moving too fast for you to hear.



So sad & squalid Quentin.

But now we are going to turn over a new leaf aren't we son.

You get to the attic by a steep narrow stairs at the rear of the third floor hallway. The attic is locked & OFF LIMITS to tenants like the cellar. I made my way silently in wool socks not wishing to wake up the young Pakistani graduate student whose room is almost directly beneath the stairs.

Ramid would not be a safe specimen. Nor any of them beneath this roof. I never think of it.

In the attic there was a strong sharp smell of dust & that sweetish-sour smell of dead mice. I took a deep breath & another & another—my lungs like BALLOONS filling with air. Proof I don't need fucking medication. Am I sick? Who says? Shining my flashlight into the corners of the attic.

This could actually be for the best. Bringing a problem out into the open. The clarity of day.

Had I been here before? A long time ago a boy had climbed up here scared & in a hurry & he'd hidden something glittering & plastic on top of one of the beams back in the shadows but I don't know if I am supposed to be that boy or the other one bleeding & choking. But I was not wearing glasses then was I. (Did not begin wearing prescription lenses until aged twelve.) So it couldn't be Q__ P__. Or if I am confusing two times.

Fuck the PAST, it's NOT NOW. Nothing NOT NOW is real.

Quiet & not moving for many minutes. I have trained myself to do so. & my eyes to penetrate the dark.

Shining the flashlight which is the CARETAKER's flashlight into the corners of the attic. Where shadows leap like bats. Smiling to see how, when light moves, light you hold in your hand, bright as starlight you make shadows leap. The shadows are there all along. BUT YOU MAKE THEM LEAP.

Crouched there at the window watching the MOON move out of sight. The way a dream will move & you can't stop it. Heart beating fast & hard. & beginning to feel horny. Excited, & blood seeping into my cock. I am not so safe in the attic as in the cellar where I have my work bench. I have moved my things to lock in the big drawer of the work bench with the CARETAKER's tools.

This space in the attic is like certain dreams I used to have where shapes meant to be solid start to melt. & there is no protection. & there is no control. Unlike the cellar which is safe UNDER GROUND, the attic is far ABOVE GROUND. The concentration of COSMIC RAYS is higher at high elevations on Earth than at lower elevations.

The suggestion was made by Dad that I clean out the attic to reduce the *fire bazard* & I said O.K. I will begin that task soon. Right now the cellar is my Number One priority.

Now we are going to turn over a new leaf aren't we son & I said Yes Dad.

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