

A few days after I make him, the boy comes to me and says, "Father, why do I hurt?" and I reply, "Because I created you that way."

Windup boy, cute wooden soldier soft as skin, I turn his crank and send him chattering down the streets of little sunlit Springfield, Ohio. No crank, only joking, I'm not *tacky*. The boy's hard to tell apart from the real stuff, I'm good at what I do.

But I like my jokes. It's good to have a healthy appreciation for gallows humor when you're in my business. Otherwise, how can you stay sane?

"Hello, Sam," Mrs. White calls from her porch. She waves at Sam as he walks down the street. He waves back. I made for him a pretty smile. Nice dimples.

I'm mowing the front lawn. Can't abide the sound of a lawnmower, so I just have one of those push-mowers, it squeaks with rust. Limp severed grass coats the living ones, I will forget to rake it away.

Mrs. White looks over to me, raises her glass of pink lemonade with an ice cube and a wedge of lime.

"Is it nice having your nephew in town?" she asks.

"He's a good kid," I say.

"What are his parents doing?"

"Vacation," I say. "Florida Keys, they told me."

"Oh, lovely place," Mrs. White says.

"Come Sam," I say, as the boy rounds the corner, "It's almost lunch."

"Have a wonderful afternoon," Mrs. White calls.

"I was sorry to hear about your dog," I call back.

The boy and I go inside.

Here's another joke, I gave the kid a curse. If he says he'll do something, he's gotta do it. No matter what he takes, if he makes a resolution he *must* succeed. I took the neuron that gives a person free will and I tied it in a knot, it runs in a loop, the boy can control his own destiny but traps himself inside it.

"Repeat after me," I tell him. It's been a month. The boy's fictional parents died. Shark attack. Something farcical, it'll be the talk of the town, oh, the poor child. I took him in. How kind. A bleeding heart.

"Okay," he says.

"I will learn how to..." I consider, "...juggle."

"I will learn how to juggle," he says.

It's cute watching him resist the compulsion. He stands there, and his fingers twitch.

"Describe how you feel," I say.

"It hurts," he says.

"How?"

“My chest is tight,” he says. “I feel a beating in my head, and when I breathe it’s short, I’m running out of time, I can’t see straight, I need to, I need to-”

I rummage in a drawer until I find three juggling balls, hand them to him.

The next morning, I come downstairs to find him standing with circles under his eyes. He’s juggling.

“Good,” I say. “Very good.”

It’s a few hours after his birth and my hands are still red with the residue of delivery. No womb, mind you, no mother, I’m a bit shy around the ladies. The surgery was complex and even *I* couldn’t keep all the blood inside its human bag.

The boy stands in my living room. I’ve got a painting on the wall, above the piano, and his eyes trawl gently across it. They scrape across the sofa, the armchair, the coffee table, and then they make it to me, watching him, and my heart catches just a little.

“Hello,” I say.

He pauses. I gave him language, it just takes his mind a second to find it. “Hello,” he says. Quick study, he is.

“How do you feel?”

He looks at his hands. His mouth opens, but he doesn’t speak.

“You don’t have to answer.” I kneel down before him, take his hand into mine. His fingers are cold. Freakish zombie cold.

“Who are you?”

“You can call me Father.”

“Who am I?”

“That’s not for me to say,” I lie. “You make that one up yourself.”

“Mr. Smith, are you paying attention to me?”

His teacher is talking to me. I look up, surprised to find myself in a classroom. Macaroni art on the wall.

“Hmm?”

“I was telling you about your son’s grades,” she says.

I blink at her. “Nephew.”

“What?”

“He’s my nephew.”

The desks of the classroom are arranged in five rows of five. I close my eyes and I see the children sitting in them. The teacher opens their heads one by one, drops of spattered smattered scattered blood turn the daisies on her dress into roses. She takes a jar labeled “brains” and dribbles a scoop into each skull. Not so different from what I do, after all.

I smile.

It unsettles her.

“Anyway,” she says, “your *nephew* is one of the brightest young students I have ever had the pleasure of teaching.”

“Thank you,” I say, beaming. I love being flattered.

“He routinely scores the highest marks on every assignment. But I have to ask, is everything alright at home? Sam is awfully quiet.”

She looks at me with succulent earnestness in brown eyes, leaning forward.

“Oh, he’s just shy.”

“Does he get enough sleep?”

“About.”

She looks at me with a question in her brow.

I shrug. “As much as any teenage boy gets.”

“I suppose that’s true,” she admits, and smiles back at me.

“Can I ask you something?” I ask.

“This conference is for your sake,” she says, opening her hands as though to invite me in, “Please.”

“How many people have you killed?”

Her smile freezes.

“You have lovely cheekbones,” I say, standing, taking my jacket from the chair. “I’ll be going now.”

I find the pieces for the boy under houses. In the dark the moon reflects off the tip of my shovel that hangs loosely from one hand. I clamber over the fence to Mrs. White’s yard. Her dog barks at me. I take a silenced pistol from my pocket and shoot it. I wonder if I’ll remember to clean up the body. The sound of the bullet, though muffled, is a satisfying hollow click.

There are bodies beneath Mrs. White’s house. This town was built on a foundation of corpses. There are bodies under your house as well. There aren’t, you say? Have you checked?

I dig three feet down and find a hand. I slam the shovel down hard and accidentally remove a finger or two. I’m more careful with the rest of the corpse. I brought a spade for the detail work. I’m not an amateur.

The body is male, aged 24, of African descent, possibly from Senegal but the specifics are murky. All teeth intact. Healthy build.

I take him out of the hole, I take the body back to my room and desecrate it for spare parts. Quality livers, this one has.

The boy comes together on my workbench. Hmm, my tool rack seems a bit out of order. I put a pin in his nascent small intestine and take a break to organize my supplies. Cleanliness is next to godliness, you know.

Among other things.

It's been a few months. The boy has adjusted to school life. I think he might even have friends. I cherish the idea that my creation is convincing enough to replicate human relationships.

The boy is doing homework in the living room. "How are you?" I ask.

He tenses as I approach. I sit down across from him.

"Good."

"How was school?"

"Good."

"Repeat after me," I say.

He looks at me, nervous. I have taught him to fear my little jokes.

"Okay," he says.

I pause for a second, considering. "I will write the most beautiful story."

"I will write the most beautiful story."

This nearly kills him.

An hour after he makes the resolution, I find him staring at a blank piece of paper. He writes a word with delicate motions. Lovely handwriting. He crosses the word out. Writes another. Crosses it out.

Two hours later, and he returns from a trip to the local library. He spreads his findings out on the table; he's gathered a half-dozen memoirs by different authors detailing the secrets of their craft. He reads them quickly and efficiently, he's finished all of them by the morning.

He doesn't go to school that day. He can't. How can he? He's promised to write the most beautiful story, and every moment that he is not directly pursuing that objective causes unimaginable pain. I write a note to his teacher, *Sam won't be in school for a few days. This time in a child's life can be difficult. I'm sure you understand.*

No, instead of going to school he spends it at the living room desk. Staring at the paper. I watch from the corner of the room, I make myself as small as possible. The boy writes and writes and writes, and when he is finished, he tears what he has written to shreds and starts again.

That evening over dinner he tells me, "I wrote a story that is beautiful."

"What is it about?"

"A sparrow with a broken wing who learns how to fly anyway."

"That is indeed a beautiful thing," I agree. I chew with my mouth open, bits of meat loaf dribbling from my lips.

"It isn't the most beautiful story," he says.

"No."

He goes without sleeping for another night. I don't sleep either; the sound of his pencil scratching is like music and I thirst for it.

In the morning, his eyes black and red, he looks up from his hunched back and blistered finger and piles of crumpled possibilities and says, "beauty doesn't exist."

“Explain,” I say.

“Beauty is when something’s existence is pleasing to someone else. But it’s not a quality. It only exists because of the someone else, not because of its existence.”

“Sure,” I say.

“So it’s impossible.”

“Are you satisfied?” I ask.

He looks away. “No. I still feel the compulsion. I still feel the pain. Why did you ask me to say this?”

I smile. “Because it’s beautiful to me.”

“You’re evil,” he says. He stands.

I have made my boy strong and nimble and athletic. When he walks, it is with smooth grace. He looks at me with an expression of anger. I know if he wished it, he could beat me to within an inch of my life. I am old, I am out of shape and a bit overweight. I could not defend myself. The thought is thrilling.

“Why did you make me hurt?” he asks again.

“What is the most beautiful story?” I ask instead.

He pauses. “I can’t figure it out.”

“If beauty only exists because of someone else, then that someone is the actual beauty,” I say.

“So I am the most beautiful story?”

“Of course you are.”

He still does not understand. That evening, instead of watching the boy kill himself in search of something that doesn’t exist, I knock him unconscious with chloroform. While he sleeps dreamlessly, I enter his skull and remove the memory of him ever uttering the sentence, “I will write the most beautiful story.”

In the morning, he is at peace again.

The boy’s back muscles are what I’m proudest of, I believe. I pretend as though I am a renaissance paper dissecting a corpse to understand how musculature works. Their art was only possible because of the carnage, you know. Beauty is the varnish we smear across misery. It is a delicate knitting job, but my needlework is immaculate.

When the boy stands, his shoulder blades protrude an elegant quarter of an inch from his back, almost like wings. His spine is straight up and down with the slightest graceful bend in it. His body is a bow string.

But maybe I’ve done my best work on his hands. His knuckles protrude slightly, white. When his hands move, you can see the tendons moving with them, as intricate as the grand piano in my living room. His fingers are long and slender. He can hold things and he can break things.

“Repeat after me.”

“Okay”

“I will fall in love.”

“I will fall in love.”

He looks at me and his eyes wetly plead, please don't make me say this. He knows what I have done to him, he can feel the compulsion settling in, he can feel his mind eating itself already. Bubbling beneath the resigned grief is that simmering anger. I reach out my hand and brush his cheek. I can feel this new heat beneath the surface of his evercold flesh. It tingles like an electric thought. The boy hates me. I shiver.

That evening after school the boy goes for a walk in the cool evening air. I watch from a window. Walking the other direction down the sidewalk is another boy, a classmate of his named James, I think.

It's love at first sight.

James waves hi to Sam, takes one earbud out. They have a conversation. I see Sam laugh. Oh, what a beautiful laugh. I did not give him that, he found that himself. It is hesitant, withheld, a torrent of water desperate to break through the crack in the dam.

James joins Sam on the walk that evening. And the next evening. And the next.

The next week I am in the kitchen preparing lunch for the two boys as they sit in the living room. I can hear their conversation. (While I cannot see their gestures, I will make a most educated guess.)

“You can juggle?” James asks.

Sam nods, a bit embarrassed.

“I've always wanted to juggle. Can you show me?”

Fabric juggling balls hit the floor for several minutes, accompanied by Sam's soft instructions. “Like this.” “A circular motion.” “Keep your eyes straight.”

Finally, James tosses himself down onto the couch with an exaggerated sigh. James is a long, skinny kid, with a fop of messy brown hair that hangs over a narrow, freckled face. He wears jeans that are too short for his legs.

“That's impossible!” James groans. “How did you learn how to do that?”

Sam's shy smile attempts to convey, but does not fully capture, that he spent twelve straight hours standing in the living room, frozen in place by the prison of his own mind, his drooping eyes peeled back by a force he could not control, until he could juggle flawlessly. “Just practice,” he says.

I walk into the room, bearing a platter of sandwiches. “Oh, thank you Mr. Sam,” James says. He stands up with an excited rush and clutches the plate of food. “I'm starved.”

A few days later I am in my office, reading. The walls are thin enough that I can hear the two boys in Sam's bedroom next door. They lie next to each other on the bed, talking.

“This is a beautiful story, Sam,” James says.

“How can you tell?” Sam asks.

“I just know. It’s the most beautiful story I’ve ever heard.”

Muffled sounds and cloth rustling. Deep, ragged breaths.

“You’re the most beautiful story,” Sam says.

“I wish I was like you,” James says.

“No you don’t.”

“I do.”

“Why?”

“Because you have this... this drive that I’ve never seen anyone else. To write this well? It’s incredible! You must have practiced for hours and hours. I wish I could do that.”

“I wish I was like you,” Sam says.

“No you don’t.”

There’s a smile hidden in Sam’s voice. “You have the freedom to not do anything. To just exist and be happy. I’ve never been able to do that. Sometimes... sometimes my drive feels more like a curse than anything.”

“Sometimes, so does freedom.”

There is a tumble and a gasp and a wistful contented exhale.

James breaks up with the boy after two months. It’s high school. That’s how it goes.

I watch the boy and take notes. The compulsion returns with slow force. It had been satiated for so long. The boy had become addicted to the peace of mind. There will be withdrawal symptoms.

He stops sleeping. Then he stops eating. He stops going to school. He stops going for a run each afternoon. I find him sitting in different places around the house, staring at nothing. His hands, his lap, the wall. I wish I could break open his brain in those moments and taste his thoughts. I imagine that if I open his skull I will see an ouroboros gagging on its tail.

The boy comes to me, desperate, at five in the morning. Wakes me up with his cold dead hand on my shoulder. “Father, please.”

“What?”

“Take it away from me.”

“Take what away?”

“The curse, make it stop, make the pain stop.”

“I won’t do that.”

“Please, Father.”

I say nothing and watch him crumple.

“I’m going to die.”

“I won’t take the pain away,” I say finally. “But I can do something.”

I lay the boy’s unconscious body out on my workbench. The cap of his skull sits beside his head. I dip my fingers into his brain and I fiddle around. I don’t take away the curse. But

I make it defeatable. I remove the clause that says it cannot be beaten. I give him a chance to win.

The boy wakes up when the procedure is finished. His eyes flutter open at me. He stays still, analyzing his own body. Wondering what is different. I do not know if he can sense my change or not.

I have taken his broken wing and made it straight; it remains to be seen if my little sparrow realizes it can fly, or if it assumes that because it was once broken it always will be.

The boy opens his mouth and slowly says -- and it is the first time he sets himself a resolution I did not give him -- he opens his mouth and says slowly, "I will learn."