

NO LONGER HUMAN

BY OSAMU DAZAI

TRANSLATED BY DONALD KEENE

A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

PROLOGUE

I have seen three pictures of the man.

The first, a childhood photograph you might call it, shows him about the age of ten, a small boy surrounded by a great many women (his sisters and cousins, no doubt). He stands in brightly checked trousers by the edge of a garden pond. His head is tilted at an angle thirty degrees to the left, and his teeth are bared in an ugly smirk. Ugly? You may well question the word, for insensitive people (that is to say, those indifferent to matters of beauty and ugliness) would mechanically comment with a bland, vacuous expression, “What an adorable little boy!” It is quite true that what commonly passes for “adorable” is sufficiently present in this child’s face to give a modicum of meaning to the compliment. But I think that anyone who had ever been subjected to the least exposure to what makes for beauty would most likely toss the photograph to one side with the gesture employed in brushing away a caterpillar, and mutter in profound revulsion, “What a dreadful child!”

Indeed, the more carefully you examine the child’s smiling face the more you feel an indescribable, unspeakable horror creeping over you. You see that it is actually not a smiling face at all. The boy has not a suggestion of a smile. Look at his tightly clenched fists if you want proof. No human being can smile with his fists doubled like that. It is a monkey. A grinning monkey-face. The smile is nothing more than a puckering of ugly wrinkles. The photograph reproduces an expression so freakish, and at the same time so unclean and even nauseating, that your impulse is to say, “What a wizened, hideous little boy!” I have never seen a child with such an unaccountable expression.

The face in the second snapshot is startlingly unlike the first. He is a student in this picture, although it is not clear whether it dates from high school or college days. At any rate, he is now extraordinarily handsome. But here again the face fails inexplicably to give the impression of belonging to a

living human being. He wears a student's uniform and a white handkerchief peeps from his breast pocket. He sits in a wicker chair with his legs crossed.

Again he is smiling, this time not the wizened monkey's grin but a rather adroit little smile.

And yet somehow it is not the smile of a human being: it utterly lacks substance, all of what we might call the "heaviness of blood" or perhaps the "solidity of human life"—it has not even a bird's weight. It is merely a blank sheet of paper, light as a feather, and it is smiling.

The picture produces, in short, a sensation of complete artificiality. Pretense, insincerity, fatuousness—none of these words quite covers it. And of course you couldn't dismiss it simply as dandyism. In fact, if you look carefully you will begin to feel that there is something strangely unpleasant about this handsome young man. I have never seen a young man whose good looks were so baffling.

The remaining photograph is the most monstrous of all. It is quite impossible in this one even to guess the age, though the hair seems to be streaked somewhat with grey. It was taken in a corner of an extraordinarily dirty room (you can plainly see in the picture how the wall is crumbling in three places). His small hands are held in front of him. This time he is

not smiling. There is no expression whatsoever. The picture has a genuinely chilling, foreboding quality, as if it caught him in the act of dying as he sat before the camera, his hands held over a heater. That is not the only shocking thing about it. The head is shown quite large, and you can examine the features in detail: the forehead is average, the wrinkles on the forehead average, the eyebrows also average, the eyes, the nose, the mouth, the chin . .

. the face is not merely devoid of expression, it fails even to leave a memory. It has no individuality. I have only to shut my eyes after looking at it to forget the face. I can remember the wall of the room, the little heater, but all impression of the face of the principal figure in the room is blotted out; I am unable to recall a single thing about it. This face could never be made the subject of a painting, not even of a cartoon. I open my eyes.

There is not even the pleasure of recollecting: of course, that's the kind of face it was! To state the matter in the most extreme terms: when I open my eyes and look at the photograph a second time I still cannot remember it. Besides, it rubs against me the wrong way, and makes me feel so uncomfortable that in the end I want to avert my eyes.

I think that even a death mask would hold more of an expression, leave more of a memory. That effigy suggests nothing so much as a human body to which a horse's head has been attached. Something ineffable makes the beholder shudder in distaste. I have never seen such an inscrutable face on a man.

THE FIRST NOTEBOOK

Mine has been a life of much shame.

I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being. I was born in a village in the Northeast, and it wasn't until I was quite big that I saw my first train. I climbed up and down the station bridge, quite unaware that its function was to permit people to cross from one track to another. I was convinced that the bridge had been provided to lend an exotic touch and to make the station premises a place of pleasant diversity, like some foreign playground. I remained under this delusion for quite a long time, and it was for me a very refined amusement indeed to climb up and down the bridge. I thought that it was one of the most elegant services provided by the railways. When later I discovered that the bridge was nothing more than a utilitarian device, I lost all interest in it.

Again, when as a child I saw photographs of subway trains in picture books, it never occurred to me that they had been invented out of practical necessity; I could only suppose that riding underground instead of on the surface must be a novel and delightful pastime.

I have been sickly ever since I was a child and have frequently been confined to bed.

How often as I lay there I used to think what uninspired decorations sheets and pillow cases make. It wasn't until I was about twenty that I realized that

they actually served a practical purpose, and this revelation of human dullness stirred dark depression in me.

Again, I have never known what it means to be hungry. I don't mean by this statement that I was raised in a well-to-do family—I have no such banal intent. I mean that I have had not the remotest idea of the nature of the sensation of “hunger.” It sounds peculiar to say it, but I have never been aware that my stomach was empty. When as a boy I returned home from school the people at home would make a great fuss over me. “You must be hungry. We remember what it's like, how terribly hungry you feel by the time you get home from school. How about some jelly beans? There's cake and biscuits too.” Seeking to please, as I invariably did, I would mumble that I was hungry, and stuff a dozen jelly beans in my mouth, but what they meant by feeling hungry completely escaped me.

Of course I do eat a great deal all the same, but I have almost no recollection of ever having done so out of hunger. Unusual or extravagant things tempt me, and when I go to the house of somebody else I eat almost everything put before me, even if it takes some effort.

As a child the most painful part of the day was unquestionably mealtime, especially in my own home.

At my house in the country the whole family—we were about ten in number—ate together, lined up in two facing rows at table. Being the youngest child I naturally sat at the end. The dining room was dark, and the sight of the ten or more members of the household eating their lunch, or whatever the meal was, in gloomy silence was enough to send chills through me. Besides, this was an old-fashioned country household where the food was more or less prescribed, and it was useless even to hope for unusual or extravagant dishes. I dreaded mealtime more each day. I would sit there at the end of the table in the dimly lit

room and, trembling all over as with the cold, I would lift a few morsels of food to my mouth and push them in. “Why must human beings eat three meals every single day? What extraordinarily solemn faces they all make as they eat! It seems to be some kind of ritual.

Three times every day at the regulated hour the family gathers in this gloomy room. The places are all laid out in the proper order and, regardless of whether we're hungry or not, we munch our food in silence, with lowered eyes. Who knows? It may be an act of prayer to propitiate whatever spirits may be lurking around the house. . . ." At times I went so far as to think in such terms.

Eat or die, the saying goes, but to my ears it sounded like just one more unpleasant threat. Nevertheless this superstition (I could only think of it as such) always aroused doubt and fear in me. Nothing was so hard for me to understand, so baffling, and at the same time so filled with menacing overtones as the commonplace remark, "Human beings work to earn their bread, for if they don't eat, they die."

In other words, you might say that I still have no understanding of what makes human beings tick. My apprehension on discovering that my concept of happiness seemed to be completely at variance with that of everyone else was so great as to make me toss sleeplessly and groan night after night in my bed. It drove me indeed to the brink of lunacy. I wonder if I have actually been happy. People have told me, really more times than I can remember, ever since I was a small boy, how lucky I was, but I have always felt as if I were suffering in hell. It has seemed to me in fact that those who called me lucky were incomparably more fortunate than I.

I have sometimes thought that I have been burdened with a pack of ten misfortunes, any one of which if borne by my neighbor would be enough to make a murderer of him.

I simply don't understand. I have not the remotest clue what the nature or extent of my neighbor's woes can be. Practical troubles, griefs that can be assuaged if only there is enough to eat—these may be the most intense of all burning hells, horrible enough to blast to smithereens my ten misfortunes, but that is precisely what I don't understand: if my neighbors manage to survive without killing themselves, without going mad, maintaining an interest in political parties, not yielding to despair, resolutely pursuing the fight for existence, can their griefs really be genuine? Am I wrong in thinking that these people have become such complete egoists and are so convinced of the normality of their way of life that they have never

once doubted themselves? If that is the case, their sufferings should be easy to bear: they are the common lot of human beings and perhaps the best one can hope for. I don't know . . . If you've slept soundly at night the morning is exhilarating, I suppose. What kind of dreams do they have? What do they think about when they walk along the street?

Money? Hardly—it couldn't only be that. I seem to have heard the theory advanced that human beings live in order to eat, but I've never heard anyone say that they lived in order to make money. No. And yet, in some instances. . . . No, I don't even know that. . . . The more I

think of it, the less I understand. All I feel are the assaults of apprehension and terror at the thought that I am the only one who is entirely unlike the rest. It is almost impossible for me to converse with other people. What should I talk about, how should I say it?—I don't know.

This was how I happened to invent my clowning.

It was the last quest for love I was to direct at human beings. Although I had a mortal dread of human beings I seemed quite unable to renounce their society. I managed to maintain on the surface a smile which never deserted my lips; this was the accommodation I offered to others, a most precarious achievement performed by me only at the cost of excruciating efforts within.

As a child I had absolutely no notion of what others, even members of my own family, might be suffering or what they were thinking. I was aware only of my own unspeakable fears and embarrassments. Before anyone realized it, I had become an accomplished clown, a child who never spoke a single truthful word.

I have noticed that in photographs of me taken about that time together with my family, the others all have serious faces; only mine is invariably contorted into a peculiar smile. This was one more variety of my childish, pathetic antics.

Again, I never once answered back anything said to me by my family. The least word of reproof struck me with the force of a thunderbolt and drove

me almost out of my head.

Answer back! Far from it, I felt convinced that their reprimands were without doubt voices of human truth speaking to me from eternities past; I was obsessed with the idea that since I lacked the strength to act in accordance with this truth, I might already have been disqualified from living among human beings. This belief made me incapable of arguments or self-justification. Whenever anyone criticized me I felt certain that I had been living under the most dreadful misapprehension. I always accepted the attack in silence, though inwardly so terrified as almost to be out of my mind.

It is true, I suppose, that nobody finds it exactly pleasant to be criticized or shouted at, but I see in the face of the human being raging at me a wild animal in its true colors, one more horrible than any lion, crocodile or dragon. People normally seem to be hiding this true nature, but an occasion will arise (as when an ox sedately ensconced in a grassy meadow suddenly lashes out with its tail to kill the horsefly on its flank) when anger makes them reveal in a flash human nature in all its horror. Seeing this happen has always induced in me a fear great enough to make my hair stand on end, and at the thought that this nature might be one of the prerequisites for survival as a human being, I have come close to despairing of myself.

I have always shook with fright before human beings. Unable as I was to feel the least particle of confidence in my ability to speak and act like a human being, I kept my solitary agonies locked in my breast. I kept my melancholy and my agitation hidden, careful lest any

trace should be left exposed. I feigned an innocent optimism; I gradually perfected myself in the role of the farcical eccentric.

I thought, "As long as I can make them laugh, it doesn't matter how, I'll be all right. If I succeed in that, the human beings probably won't mind it too much if I remain outside their lives. The one thing I must avoid is becoming offensive in their eyes: I shall be nothing, the wind, the sky." My activities as jester, a role born of desperation, were extended even to the servants, whom I feared even more than my family because I found them incomprehensible.