The Betrayal of Times of Peace and Prosperity

*a novella*

Alex Kudera

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Alex Kudera is also the author of the novel *Fight for Your Long Day*.

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Publisher’s Note
About Alex Kudera
I. Afternoon

Andy,

I want to die.

Sincerely,

Jake

For the fifteenth time in two weeks, I read Jake’s last line, ball up the letter, and throw it at the wall. I wipe the sleep from my eyes, and rise from a lying to sitting position. Then, pressing my left palm flat against the alarm clock that rests on the foot-high night table, I hoist myself up off the floor mattress, and push myself out of bed. When I see the clock, relief rushes through me because I still have over two hours until my last college seminar. It’s only 2:37 p.m., so I sidestep the tall bong perched in the room’s center and limp toward the bathroom.

Stiff and groggy and trying to climb over the high rim of the old rounded bathtub, I bang my left shin and stub my right toe. I rub away the pain, and then stand tall in the tub and turn on the water. The sharp bite of cold water pelts against my chest.

Twenty minutes later, back in my room, I search for clothes in my closet full of four years of excess. There’s the usual in old junk—rolled-up posters, unopened books, moldy hot pots from frosh-year dorm existence, and enough clothing to warm an undeveloped nation. I put on some that smell clean.

I move to John’s room and place one of his reggae CDs in the five-disc changer. I return to my room and pray once more to the god of ganja—and then return the two-foot long violet tinted smoking apparatus to John’s closet. On second thought, I cradle it in my arms and carry it downstairs and into the kitchen. I place it in the cabinet for tall food items, behind the vegetable oil and jumbo bags of potatoes and rice.

By the kitchen’s card table, stoned, I sit sipping coffee and staring at box scores. Too soon, I’m lost in thoughts of LOB and ERA—statistical minutiae I can ill afford to dwell upon. So to keep the blood circulating, to stay awake, I rise to cook. At the sink, underneath a layer of yesterday’s bacon-greased dishes, I find a cutting board and knife. These I rinse and then place on the table. I lug the twenty-pound potato sack from the cabinet to the floor, rest it by mine and my chair’s leg, pull a spud from underneath the top layer, and commence to chop. I cut to the rhythms of dreadlocked men. Spud-done dopeness, the cutting engages and entertains.

Soon onions and spuds fry in an over-oiled wok. I trip upstairs and replace the reggae with gangster rap. Internships and pre-oppressorships in whiteness all over campus, and yet, as a tribe, we dig the rebel beats. John only invests in dissident sound—punk, grunge, reggae, and rap. Back downstairs, I add green peppers and mushrooms.

I open the spice cabinet and pull out oregano, garlic, salt, black pepper, curry, and cayenne. Behind these I spy the Alpo. One impulse leads to another, and if I could explain my actions, I’m not sure I would. In other words, spices fall to the floor as I grab the can and the opener and peel off the lid. Plop. The reddish conical meat-like wet food stands tall at the wok’s center. With a rubber spatula, I squish the cone down and mix it
into the potatoes and veggies. As the dog food sizzles, a chemical stench fills the chambers of house and nose. I stand away and think of Jake and the dog.

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It was after Thanksgiving when we brought Fred home for Jake. It was a present from his housemates, John and me, meant to take his mind off Jenna. He was fixated on her, and she kept rejecting him. We figured a puppy would be good company. Some good that did. Jake started taking long walks with Fred, all the way across campus to Jenna’s house. Fred, like most dogs, loved the exercise. But if Jenna were home, and willing to see Jake, Fred would remain outside for hours. Tied to the porch, the mutt would sit, wait, and watch. I can picture the dog looking at the door, waiting for his master to return. Sad eyes, tongue out, saliva dripping onto the cedar planks. If Jenna weren’t home, Jake and Fred would look sadly at the door together.

In its fourth week at Ward, the tiny mutt flew out the door and chased a furry creature up the road. We ran after Fred, but he never looked back. We looked again in the morning and posted signs all about campus that day. Silence. Then, the next week, we got a call from a pig farmer up the road. Said he found our dog in one of his rodent traps. We drove to examine the carcass. It was Fred alright. Stiff tail dead.

From that point on, things went south for Jake. Jenna was all he could talk about. He seemed too preoccupied to complete even the bare minimum required to pass. As the end of the semester approached, he withdrew from two of his courses. He received an incomplete for another and failed the fourth. In the middle of fall finals, he dropped out of school and moved to Berkeley, California. He assumed he would earn wages from a used bookstore or hip cafe, but so far, busboy shifts at a dive bar are keeping him afloat. Now he writes regularly, asking for information about Jenna, and detailing his life of unrequited love. His letters express his loneliness, and I usually need a couple bong hits just to get the situation off my mind. As his closest friend, I feel partly to blame. I know I am. Maybe that is why I read his words again and again.

***

A solitary tear falls in the cooking unless I just fried a bead of sweat.

I sprinkle on more spices, and then retrieve the bong from the cabinet and pack it from the kitchen stash. Either spices have overcome the wicked stench, or the foul additives have burnt away.

I’m sparking up and sucking in again when John barges in through the kitchen’s back door. He stands six foot one and weighs no more than 120 pounds. He is Chinese American and the most intensely tense individual I have ever known. Various labels may be applied to his personality, but they do little to expose his uniqueness. Neurotic, possibly virgin, paranoid. Antisocial and socially ostracized. Cynical and even clinically insane. Due to an error at immigration, his social security card reads John Dhou, pronounced “dough,” but he claims relation to a small army of Zhous from the mainland. His father delivers laundry for a living; I should say Dad is the workaholic owner, no mere driver paid by the hour.

“Dude, isn’t that my pot?”
“At fifty bucks an eighth, dope is no longer freely shared. The communal good becomes private property.”
“You said it.”
I blow smoke in his face. “But I’m doing you a favor. You’ve got way too much work to do before graduation.”
“Guess you’re right. Smells good. Say, what’s cooking?”
With the bong hits and then John’s entrance I nearly forget my concoction. I run to the range, remove the can, and shove it way down deep in the trash. I’m too embarrassed to face him so into the wok I mumble, “Dad’s special cooking. Fried up veggies and potatoes with corned beef hash. Old country recipe.”
“Mmm. Smells really good.”
I turn round, give John full-eyeball contact, and stumble into an alibi. “You know, I’m not really feeling that hungry. I’ve been doing dope munchies all day. If you’re up for it, you’re welcome to dig into my grub.”
“You sure? You think there’s enough?”
“Sure.”
John is never one to eat another man’s food without repeated assurance.
“You mean I can have it?”
“I’ll serve it to ya.”
“I mean some of it?”
“It’ll be done in a sec.”
“Sure smells good.”
“Just have a seat and a smoke. I’ll serve.”
After this life, I’m sure to bake beyond a reasonable doubt. In other words, I push John into one of our old wooden chairs and serve him a heaping portion in a ceramic bowl. While he sucks, I sprinkle extra curry atop the sizzling lion’s share. I hand it to him with a clean fork from the dish rack.
He reaps a heaping forkful. I catch his wrist an inch from his mouth. “Hold on, John. Don’t bite in just yet.”
“Why not? You want to eat first?”
I nearly genuflect before my friend and beg forgiveness for such radical sin. But his sad stare evinces pained starvation, and so I meekly add, “It needs more spices to draw out the true flavor of the meat.” I push five plastic containers forward, and John sprinkles on generous amounts of each.
With his two front teeth, he halves a slice of potato. “Mmm.” He savors the initial morsel and then greedily gulps down the rest.
Soon his fork pierces a fat chunk of meat. I watch the portion move to within two inches of his pale pink lips. He holds the meat there. I hold my breath. He smells it. “Mmm. Mmm.” His lips mash against the fork as he drives the meat down. I watch in awe. He loves the food. I blow pot smoke in his face. “Chill, Dude,” he mumbles as he forkfulls his face with trash-compacting power. Many of us have nibbled on milk bones and dry food, but this is my first time watching a fellow suck down the wet. He finishes the bowl, and with a quick glance, gets my permission to serve himself seconds. Instead of guilt and fear, my doper laughs leak out.
“Dude, you must be stoned off your rocker.”
This adds to my pleasure, and I fall to the filthy linoleum floor. Fast guffaws storm from my gut. And then I regain composure and smoke again.

“Say, how’s the hash?”

“You mean the corned beef hash? It’s delicious.” I never see John take more than one meal a day. It is always the same meal—plain rice topped with margarine and black pepper. Could he only be enjoying this because a starving man would enjoy anything?

He pauses to smoke.

I smoke.

“Dude, like maybe I’m smoking too much pot. Do you know what I mean?”

I blow smoke in his face before I respond.

“Once we leave Ward we may never be able to smoke like this again. This is our last chance to replenish our reserve of THC. Where would we be without its endorphin production?”

“But I’ve got Licht’s paper and three finals between me and a fucking diploma.” I hear John’s panic. “Do you know what I mean?”

From the relatively assured post of a single essay, I am unsure if I do. I put the bong back in the cabinet.

“Why’d you do that?”

“Maybe you, we, should take it easy until we finish up.” I try to sound considerate but not too moral or high.

“Yeah.”

“Did you write your Licht paper yet?”

“Not yet.”

“It’s due tomorrow,” I add.

“Yeah. You write yours?”

“Not yet.”

John moves in to lick the wok. I know he will scrape it clean. I fed him dog food, a delicious and healthful meal, so I politely ask him to wash the dishes. And then I slip out the door because I want to arrive early to my last college class.

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I enter the ivy-coated red-brick building and ascend three flights of grey marble. I am the first one to class, and so I take the sunny seat by the window and stare down at the adjacent frat-house lawn. I spy barbecue. Frat boys and frat chicks recline and drink in lawn chairs while a ball-capped leader roasts a red pig, snout to tail.

I indulge in the pre-class calm.

History Senior Seminar: The Cycles of History

Soon Professor Licht joins me with several bottles of booze. He tosses me a smile and Swiss army knife, corkscrew out.

“Andy, Andy boy. You have much opening up to do!”

I uncork the white wine and pour us two Dixie cups full.

“Hurry, let’s down three to fate before the others arrive.”
Licht has known my name since his freshman-year lecture; he still makes me smile, and at times he seems dedicated to loosening me up. We get a couple Dixie cups down before eleven or thirteen of my colleagues show up. Last but not least, John rushes in and sprawls on a chair three feet from the table. He is wedged in the corner where the door might smash him were one to open it wide. Post-sat, he ceases to mutter and turns to rustling and shifting books in his sack, making clicking noises with his tongue and pen.

“John, my man! Good to see you!” Herr Licht bellows out at him. John has not attended of late. I believe this is his first class in several weeks. “Making progress with your final paper?” Licht gives him a gargantuan wink, as if an allusion to a mutual understanding that John has not yet applied pinkie to word processor.

“Uh, sort of, I guess. Ach!!” John doubles over in apparent agony, clutching his skin-lined ribs and growling about stomach pain.

“Are you okay, man? Quick! Pour this good fellow a drink for his psychosomatic good!”

I sense that, like myself, some in the class experience schadenfreude. Mirth at the sight of another’s distress. I feel guilty too, so I try to quell my chuckles as I pour for John.

“Think I’m okay,” he mutters after a shot of white wine.

“Good. Class may commence.” Licht, a large man, stands upright and we the history types of Ward cower afore his bellowing. “We won’t start until everyone is stinking drunk! Drink up, kids, drink for your miserable papers and decadent lives. I know shots of wine are a bit irregular, and so I brought this.”

Licht pulls a silver flask from his jeans.

“Take a swig and pass. From the other side of the room, we’ll take turns sharing our favorite passages and most perverse interpretations. Try not to be too analytical. Half a brain can’t buy you a bus ticket, so don’t expect cheers for your sharp minds here. If anyone has a really low-down, dirty, rotten anecdote to detail, feel free to interrupt. Points will be assessed for burping during discourse, hastily spitting, and any other dehiscence which lacks brevity, soul, or wit.”

Licht is an academy old-timer. His serious monographs long ago writ, and already undermined by brainier brats come lately, he waxes not so serious in tenured dotage. At fifty or maybe sixty-nine, he claims to currently enjoy a text called life.

What Licht initiates as glib anecdote moves to officious young Americans pretending to be serious critics. As a group, we want to speak about the cycles of history, when the next Hitler might appear, and how and whether fascist moments can be avoided in future history or contemporary moments. But isn’t it the rule and not the exception? We wander from cycles as Licht steers us toward the principle of backbiting within the Reich. A man could not be trusted who would not willingly lie and sleep his way to the top, or at least ahead of his best friends and neighbors. He suggests that even the Reich had its secrets. He asks if anyone would like to speak of the universal appeal of fascism, or if we should just break for McDonalds and washrooms.

John Dhou stands and delivers.

“Dude, like forget fast-food culture and shithouses. I mean there’s a whole hidden heritage of good eating that the average American has access to but completely ignores. It’s food from their ancestors. Man, like my housemate fed me an ancient family dish,
and it was awesome. You know what I mean? It was unlike anything I’ve ever tasted in this fucked-up, fascist, fast-food state of a country.”

“Your analysis offers a flavor of genealogy—”

John pardons Licht.

“But like I really wanted to speak on fascism. The shit is everywhere, Dude. Everyone’s a fascist ’cause everyone’s a coward. Most folks are fascists ’cause they do their fucking fascist job. Apathy’s the most deadly form of fascism. Police are overt fascists. The whole fucking rise of the corporate structure is a preliminary move toward a fascist state. Backbiting’s worse in corporate America, even ice-cream chains, than in Nazi Germany. Even people who call themselves progressives pick their friends in a fascist way. We’re all fucking cowards. It makes me want to puke!”

As a class, we quiescently absorb John’s wisdom. He sits down.

I look out the window and watch two frat boys parading the pig on a stick, snout still intact, through a lawn-chair maze of white girls in athletic bras. They sun themselves and sip transparent drinks. Their breasts wear the school colors, silver and black.

I turn back to class and see John deposit my donation to his stomach on the aged hardwood floor. “Puke,” he murmurs once more. Guilt bites at my soul in spite of drunken stupor. I fed John dog food. But then I reason that feeding John dog food could be an individuating, anti-fascist statement, at least by John’s thinking. Licht wonders aloud if he should drag the good man to the infirmary. John limps out of the room. I tell the class everything is okay, that I fed him aged ingredients for lunch, stuff that would upset the balance of anyone’s humors. Licht nods at me, but no one else quite comprehends or seems to care.

All of a sudden, Licht’s mood changes. He bursts into tears.

“Aye, it’s true. Bad food is everywhere. My wife used to cook wonderfully. But she left me years ago. I never knew why. Not enough quality time or shared television watching? Too little or too much sex? We can never know the reasons why things sour. Love is like any other emotion. People fall into it and people fall out of it. History occurs in like cycles.

“Times are good now. Some of you will enter careers upon graduation. Enjoy them. Soon enough the wheel will turn. Take, for instance, the case of John. He has his days when he tosses his cookies, but he’ll enjoy days when he eats them too! Fortune cookies, chocolate chippers, oatmeal raisin, oven warmed and bakery fresh! Learn to swim in the tide of history, and you’ll learn to navigate life!”

Licht grabs a tissue to wipe his eyes and blow his nose again.

Below on the lawn, frat boys throw their shirts to the wind, bump chests, and flatten grass as they perform a pastiche of professional wrestling. Their women chew on pig bones and watch the spectacle of drunken males grabbasing about. In my fuzzy mind, the ritual merges into Licht’s conclusions on history—hence, the importance of pork, America’s other white meat?

The carcass and remains cause me to wish I had eaten a few morsels from the wok before so altruistically donating it to the cause of John Dhou. I am unsure if sweat or saliva stains my notebook.

Two burly linemen types toss the pig’s head across the lawn.

I leave my last class in a drunken fog, my gentle high ruined by demon liquor’s soggy rust.
II. Evening Turns to Night

I stumble and stride along the cement path leading from the Social Studies Hall to the student center. Stoned, I stare through the pupils of each peer passing me by. Drunk, they crowd me in and steal my leers from me. Charged by the confluence of substances, I compensate by smiling at passersby, certain my faces look like lewd grins more than polite snarls. The walking is good for me, and fifteen minutes later, in front of the campus center, I experience encroaching sobriety. I feel a slight balance, enough to look at and judge the world.

In the six p.m. rush hour, the sundry kinds of Ward mingle where the various paths merge before the stone student center steps. Here, we express our differences in height, dress, girth, sex, and even skin tone. But the spring sun shines upon us all, cloaking dissimilarities in carcinogenic rays. We are privileged kid clones to pizza deliverers, security guards, mail clerks, and cafeteria workers—the campus townies who protect and serve. And perhaps there is some truth to their truth. Over half of us may or may not deserve the financial aid we receive, and I suspect in most cases parents or grannies help repay the massive student loans that may be in our way. To us the money is easily lent, thus contributing to our feeling of liberty and consequent desire to help the less free. Professor Dich, my feminist-narrative prof, says that on average, the over half of us who owe, owe over twenty grand. After college, or so I’m told by John Dhou, some of us will feel lucky to deliver pizzas for a living.

In the mailroom, a large red-lettered sheet advertises for the early evening rally against racism. At the end of each Spring term, campus radicals protest things—American foreign policies, cafeteria dinner entrees, professorial apathy, the plight of strays and pigeons on campus, the inequality of contemporary social constructions of quality, the dearth of dark skin from our mostly suburban hometowns. These protests commence two weeks before commencement, so the Ward intelligentsia might tidily absolve itself of guilt at spring semester’s end, whereupon students elide long-term commitment in favor of pilgrimage to varied hills and shores.

I stare at the crowd of mail collectors.

Too fearful of finding unsuccessful papers and failed exams, I have not checked my mail in three weeks. But this evening my resistance breaks, and I squeeze through the masses of rich and indebted Wardites collecting allowances and mailing home their clothes. Wedged into my box is a conic thickness of multicolored fliers. In school colors is news of graduation robes while a green sheet asks for class-fund contributions. My degree is in question and massive student loans are on the way, but already they crave my cash. I wish I were as hungry as this institution.

Behind the junk mailings is a letter from Jake. At the recycle can, I toss in the fliers and stash Jake’s small envelope in my back pocket. I want to smoke before I read his letter. I see a thin woman whose hands shake as she reads her mail. Upon my request, she gives me a mean glare and an unfiltered cigarette.

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Outside the campus center, the protest is forming. Students mill about. It looks like a quarter of the campus is here, at least a few hundred students. Many wear multi-
colored, third-world clothing—Mexican hooded pullovers, llama’s wool sweaters, African and Amerindian robes. The wealth of color contributes to the warmth of smiles—shades of green and blue and purple and yellow. Everyone appears happy to be protesting under a warm spring sun.

Two campus-center employees set up a microphone. A short black woman takes the microphone and begins proceedings. She wears an expensive leather jacket. She speaks.

“We are gathered here today to speak out against a heinous crime on campus. Racist grafitti was found in the campus center bathroom. White chalk was scrawled on black boards in the African Center. We, black students, did not come to Ward to encounter bigotry. We left that behind in American cities policed by racist cops. Today, we speak out against such atrocities. Today, the entire white community is responsible. Racism is intellectual genocide. We will not tolerate it.”

Soon many students shed tears. In a huge steel trashcan, a fire is built and a book burning commences. One of Ward’s unshaven ties back his thick dreads and begins to throw texts into the flames. He shouts out names as he tosses—Melville, Faulkner, Conrad, Twain. Toward the end of the canon, he tells us, the racism got worse. In the heat, students shed their third-world leather and begin singing tunes from sixties suffrage times.

*What is to be Done?*

*Envy.*

*Who is to Blame?*

I squint to read these titles as they are handed over to the fire.

It starts with racism but becomes an open forum for all lament under the perfect spring sun. A black shirt but bootless punk-rock type, perhaps a crusty, bald save for a single dread hanging down his back, seizes the mike to confess his sins. A self-proclaiming lesbian of color balls up her “his-story” final and hurls it in with the books. Those whose hand-me-down Volvos are parked nearby occasionally run off to refill their meters.

Baseball-capped frat boys sneak around the crowd and into the campus center to purchase burgers and fries from their townie brethren. Guys they spat on in high-school football, guys the frat boys seem better able to relate to. Protest or no, it is feeding time for Regular Joe.

Wealthy vanguard of the world, unite!

In the distance, through the glass walls of the science library, I can see the disciplined studying to become lawyers and doctors, investment bankers and hedge-fund operators. A future dot-com millionaire presses his face against the glass. There’s an overrepresentation of post-colonial ambition: East and South Asia; perhaps a few from former Soviet republics; even a token African or islander. According to John Dhou, our resident expert on the studious, none of their folks were young Americans protesting in the sixties; or in the seventies, curing our national debt with disco and forgetting; or in the eighties growing older and rich. John says that these students are as ambitious as the college’s five-year plan.

Back at the protest, poetry is read. “Pity me, pity me, pity me, please; my father was such an awful man, buying sin stocks and cooking with lard as he did.” To the cause,
students donate their work-study dollars and checks from their trust funds. Justice, or at least youthful righteousness, is served.

The mike is tossed to a brooding fellow with a cappuccino complexion. He wears jeans and a black tee shirt. His presence quiets the crowd.

“All of you white Ward people don’t understand how this makes me feel. You don’t understand what’s wrong with this country. You don’t know what is evil in this society, spreading like a cancer, blanketing these United States. It makes me sick.”

I can’t say for sure that I know where this is headed, but his words appeal to me.

“I am telling you that it is time for the peoples of color to fight back. The only historically successful revolutions have been achieved by violence. Don’t give me that bull about revolutions in science and technology. The American, French, and Russian Revolutions—revolutions made by the people against an unjust system—were achieved by violence. We will use violence because we are not just about ‘by any means necessary.’ We know, I know, that violence is the only means necessary! Violence is how we get our voice heard. Violence gets the job done. History has proven this again and again.”

Momentary silence chills the collective spine.
After letting it all sink in, the people shout back at their leader.
“Violence never accomplishes anything.”
“Violence destroys. It doesn’t build.”
“In war, peaceful people suffer. Civilians die in mass graves. Women and children. Combatants walk.”
“You think your skin color gives you the right to male rhetoric.”
And so the man on the mike shouts back.
“Yes, this is black male rhetoric. This is how we feel. This is how we have been treated by your cops, your pigs, your white pigs who protect and support the values of your system. All you rich white students are just baby piglets squealing about in your parents’ mess and mud. Your whole damn life has been given to you by the system.”

His words seduce me more than those of the average student protestor. His offerings—real flesh and blood—taste rich compared to the low-calorie calls for hunger strikes and veganism.

“Goddamn, I hate you all!” With this last note, he tosses the microphone into the fire and sprints away from the crowd.

Although my heritage is the more or less Ward’s usual in white and suburban—between city and country, Jew and gentile, middle quintile and filthy rich—I am uncertain if I am a fascist pig. Mass rallies and armbands might not be my thing; I feel too self-absorbed to take it all in. Two brave souls employ a tree branch to remove the microphone’s wires from the flames. I experience not belonging. I feel guilty, almost tearful, for feeling apart from the crowd shedding guilt and tears.

My cigarette long since extinguished, I duck back into the campus center. After ascending three flights, I find a quiet corner of the coffee shop. Once seated, I tear open the envelope and read Jake’s news.

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May 7, 199-
Dear Andy,

I did it, and that’s why I have to write this on paper. My computer is packed with the rest of my stuff. Hal took his girlfriend to the mountains, and I took action. First, I took off all of my clothes. I stood by my window and stared at the park. It was Friday evening and the park was crowded. As usual, I was alone, away from people. I turned off all the lights and stood at the window for a good half hour. I saw people walking in twos and threes. It looked like people were having fun. I saw a pretty girl walking a puppy. I stared at them. I guess you’re supposed to go up to the girl and start playing with her dog. I don’t know. I do know she’s not Jenna.

Well, I didn’t put any clothes on and go down to the park. I went to the bathroom instead. I put the rubber drain stopper in and began to fill up the tub with warm water. As the water ran, I stared at myself in the mirror. I didn’t feel like I really knew who I was looking at. I went to my desk drawer, and I took out my journal and my glossy photo of Jenna. She was vain enough to give me the picture, too selfish to offer her heart. I also took out a set of razors and a pack of matches. I went back to the bathroom, and over the sink, I began ripping my journal to shreds. Then, I burnt the shreds in the sink, carefully so that the ashes went into the sink’s basin and not onto the floor. Then I burned the photo. It smelled bad. When I had finished burning everything, I turned around and turned off the tub water. Then, I lit another match and watched its light glow under the razor. Yeah, I was disinfecting the razor. I tossed the match into the toilet, and then I entered the bath. I kneeled down and then eased myself into a lying position, careful so that the razor remained dry. I looked at myself under the water, thin and sinewy. My penis bobbed up toward the surface, flaccid but as if it could float were it not attached to me.

Then I did it. I don’t know how I got the nerve. I watched the blood diffuse into the tub water, red clouds slowly dispersing. I don’t know how long I watched, but I saw the water turn pink. I heard the doorbell but assumed whomever it was would go away. So I began to wait it out, but then I remembered my older brother had planned a visit, because he knew I was down, and I had forgotten all about this. I didn’t go to the door, but then the phone began to ring. When the answering machine picked up, I heard his voice, but I could also hear him from the hallway. So I got out of the tub, and I immediately saw that the incision I had made really wasn’t that large or deep. So I put a towel over my wrist and ran to the door. Saul asked me how I was, and I told him exactly what I was doing.
Now I'm at this hospital. I've been here for over two weeks. I think they want to let me go, and so I keep threatening to kill myself again. It seems like my only defense. The doctors look at me skeptically, as if they don't believe me. Apparently, the incision I made was not deep enough to rate as a legitimate suicide attempt and that on at least a subconscious level I knew that Saul was coming. They say I anticipated a rescue, so they classify it as a threat, not an attempt. That really makes me feel like a phony. They're trying to fit me with the right meds. I've been introduced to three psychiatrists and five psychologists, and I've dismissed them all. I try to keep my mind off Jenna, but she's all I can think of. Is it true she already has a boyfriend? I don't want to die, but I don't know why I should go on living.

Sincerely,
Jake

I close the letter. I'm smoking pot and feeding John dog food while Jake on the other side of the country is dying. I feel a welling up inside, the same one I've gotten after his last several letters. This one produces actual tears. I rest my head in my lap to muffle my quiet sobbing.

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Back at the house, upstairs, I take off all my clothes and drown myself under steaming water. Its heat reminds me to feel lucky I live with John; his laundry allowance ensures that eventually our bills get paid. After drying, I return downstairs, enter the kitchen, put on coffee and search for Dhou’s bong. I find it in the cabinet behind a quart of peanut oil and a bottle of cooking wine. I go up to his room and find his stash between a couple stacks of CDs. I put on Bob Dylan’s Blood on the Tracks. I turn up the volume and bring the pot downstairs. I sit and alternately suck bingers and coffee; massive doses of each create enough buzz to kill the pain.

I space out a bit. From the back door, John barges into the kitchen with a small bag of groceries. When he notices I’m nude, he emits a deathly shriek. Milk, eggs, and bacon go flying in five directions as he thrusts his forearm in front of his eyes and dashes out of the house. From his safe haven, he screams, “Holy fucking shit, dude. You could lock the fucking door.”

“There aren’t any locks on these doors. I thought you liked it that way.” Feeling uninhibited, I venture out into the twilight. I touch his shoulder.

“You fucking asshole,” he screams as he darts away. He bolts into the kitchen and hooks the door.
I stand nude, outside of the house, a bit stunned John reacted so. I absorb momentary solitude, breathe in, breathe out, and tap gently on the glass.

“John, let me in. Please.”

I hear him running down the steps. As he approaches the door, he shields his eyes. He unhooks the screen, pushing the door open and hands me what must have been on top of my hamper—a green tee shirt and maroon sweatpants. I put them on before I re-enter, and it is only then that I glance back and around the neighboring yards and trees to ensure that no one has seen me without my clothes.

“Dude. You could kill a guy like that.”
“Wish, John.”
“Well, I forgive you. I guess.”
“Thanks.”
“Since you cooked lunch, I brought breakfast.”
“Thanks, John. You’re a cool guy.”

He smokes some and starts frying up the bacon. I put on more coffee. He tosses a couple bagels in the toaster oven. John’s good for bagels and bacon. It’s about all we eat aside from wok and rice.

While the bacon dries, the eggs fry.
John carries the violet-tinted phallus in from the kitchen.

We methodically kill off the remaining buds. Three full hits each. I come to a stoned state in which I simultaneously act and watch myself acting, a certain disintegration of my self, my “I” as the Ward intelligentsia would say. In some weird way, I am living the American dream of two for one. If I were to break up into three or four, there may be cause for concern. But now I am saved by John’s voice.

“How’s he doing?”
“Yeah.”
“How’s he doing?”
“I think he’s hanging in there.”
“Man, I wish I had the balls to do what he’s doing. Dropping out of school. Going for it. I’d go into the music business, start my own label. You know what I mean?”
“Yeah.” I don’t have the heart to ruin John’s stoned ambition by relating Jake’s attempted threat.

Back to the kitchen, John decides to fry up the rest of the bacon.

After smoking again, we head for the computer lab. The campus tower clock says 10:37 p.m. We sit down opposite each other. Within a half hour, John bounces up and announces, “Dude, I can’t write. Do you know what I mean?”

He darts off before I can nod.

Determined to end my own anxiety, I fight through the initial struggle and proceed to bang out my last college essay. In three hours, I produce ten pages. After proofreading the first third or so, I print and leave the computer lab. I know it isn’t good, but I hope it is good enough.

I see John sitting on the library steps.
“Dude, I was roaming all over our old dorm and no one was home. Do you know what I mean?”
“It’s finals. They’re all here in the library.”
“Dude, I went on every floor, knocked on every door. Like no one was home. Do you know what I mean?”
Even after simple statements, John will follow with his trademark refrain. The grass is green. Do you know what I mean?
“I know what you mean.”
“Dude, I walked all over the library and everyone is working. Reading and writing, studying fucking flash cards. Do you know what I mean?”
“It’s finals. I wouldn’t take it personally.”
“I went all the way to the top of the library, you know, the last floor where they keep the old bound volumes of *Time* and *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. All that musty old shit from the forties and fifties. You know what I mean?”
I nod.
“Stuck between July and December 1941 and January to June 1942 of *Life*, I found this!”
John tosses a used condom at me. Its contents have dried. It smells more rubbery than spermy, like a cross between an old shoe and an old book. I look up at John and see his desperation.
“I know what you mean, John.”
“Can you believe this fucking shit?”
“Yeah.”
“This is supposed to be finals and I find this fucking shit, pasted right over Pearl Harbor.”
“Yeah.”
“Do you know what I mean?”
“Let’s go do some mushrooms.”
I leave the prophylactic on the library steps.
Back in the kitchen, John hands me the plastic bag. I stare at the contents, then drop them on the table. I begin splitting the mushrooms into two piles, breaking up the larger ones to ensure an even distribution. John removes two cans of cola from the fridge.

“Pick your passion.”

John appears to critically judge the two. I presume he is looking for the larger one, so it surprises me when he chooses the smaller pile.

“With all my finals, I deserve the big pile,” he apologizes. It would seem impolite to slide him an extra shroom, implying his judgment is poor.

He opens his can and begins chewing. I do the same. The cola does little to mask the bitterness of the meal. John talks and chews.

“Life is like a bitter root. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“Where?”

“This kitchen. This school. This country. The whole fucking planet.”

“Yeah.”

“How’s Jake?”

“He survived his suicide attempt.”

“Man, I wish I had the guts to even try that. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah.”

John and I chew on in silence. After a while, he leaves the table.

***

Back outside, exploring, the shrooms accent the brightness of the night. I circle around every tree as I wander back to the center of campus.

I find myself snooping through the narrow first floor of the freshman dorm. The ugly brown carpet stinks of vomit and beer. Dead smells from decades ago as much as the current day’s enthusiasms. Hearing noises from above, I ascend the wooden staircase and enter an open room. Inside, I find a collection of jocks, enough muscle for a Division III offensive line. Sitting on facing sides of the room’s two single beds, they suck down plastic Bud cups and crowd a sweating pony keg. In Massachusetts accents they offer me “beah.” I accept and sit. A few sex stories, baseball talk, and pledge speak. I feel full of wracked nerves, and the beer does little to quiet my soul. After a second cup, I stumble up a floor.

The third floor is my old hall. I walk to room 313. My room. I shared a two-room triple with players of varsity lacrosse and soccer, stocky men who smelled of baby powder and sweat.

The door stands ajar. I push it open and look into the front room. On the pale green rug recline three female freshmen.

“Hark, who goes there?”

“It is I, Andy, a previous tenant.”

“Very nice. As if we haven’t heard that line before.”

“No, really,” I begin but then cease. “Who might you be?”
They introduce themselves as the three witches. In black blouses and sweatpants, they surround a lidless red hot pot whose contents boil. They look short and cute, perhaps a bit chunky, of moderate acne and cleavage.

“Toil, toil; brimstone and bubble.”
“Shakespeare test,” they tell me.
“What does being a witch mean?”
The leader speaks.
“We do not signify. Nor are we objectified. We transcend binary logic. We cast spells, we shrink souls. We send chills, we stir bowls.”

I am intrigued, experiencing the inner stir from another’s enlightenment. I ask for their names and receive three Jennifers—Jen, Jennifer, and Genne spelled like the beer. They say they enroll in all of the same courses.

“Can you predict my future?”

They nod and beckon me closer. I kneel by the witches and their pot of mystery soup. On command, I open my palm and extend my hand. They prick my finger and let a drop of blood enter their soup. They add a lock of my dirty blonde hair. They demand a snippet of shoelace, a strand of saliva, ink from my pen, a slight curl of fuzz from my left-leaning testicle, a smidgen of green mucus, my signature written over the box score of my favorite baseball team.

One Jen stirs, while another solemnly quotes from Macbeth, and the third names the speaker. Banquo. Lady Macbeth. I ask the first Jenny for more on witches.

“A witch is a woman. A witch is a woman who flies beyond the time. The time is cruel capitalism and misogynist corporate structures. A witch elides the technocracy and the culture of mission statements and football. While sympathetic to the plight of disenfranchised minority warlocks, a witch is wary of all commingling with men.”

By commingling with me, are they denying my manhood?

“And me?”

“You look like a boy.”

The soup simmers, and I grow weary. Just as my eyes close, they announce time for tea. It is strong stuff, black leaves and spiced. “Macduff,” one whispers. We sip as they inform me of my future.

“You journey to a far away land. Much inner struggle and personal discovery. Death encountered and transcended. Possible solitary moment during fresh-water fishing. You will feel the full power of the Lord.”

I am suspicious. Whose Lord? Is this last part metaphor?

The witches describe their own pasts and futures: desolate suburban childhoods in Northern Jersey and Long Island; career plans in cities, grad school in theory, or the practice of life. To change society, elide the fathers. Marriage can wait. Most men are sleaze.

I ask to see the interior room.

I move into my old room. They call it their womb. Whereas I slept alone here, they have moved in all three beds. A television is on, showing a political drama about an older man and younger woman, a staff assistant. It is confusing because I am unable to ascertain if I’m watching entertainment or news.

I press the letter A on a computer keyboard, and a word-processing program appears on the screen. I begin writing and continue unabated for what feels like at least
an hour. I write four full pages, a rough start to what you read here—The Betrayal of Times of Peace and Prosperity. They knock on the door and demand their womb. I say so long to these ladies of *Macbeth*, print my text, and leave.

***

The tower clock reads 2:53 a.m. I have been up for over twelve hours, and for the first time all day I feel wide awake. I breathe in the crisp night air. Behind the library, I descend the grassy slope that leads to the center of the college—the old gravel track and the football field. Midway down the slope, I take a seat on the grass. I look up and see stars. I’d never seen so many stars before moving to this rural campus. I stare out into the void. Could the new synthetic track surfaces be better for the knees and shins?

In the distance, on the opposite side of the oval track, I see an expert on the matter, a closet athlete, running at three in the morning. As he rounds the far corner and approaches along the left straightaway, I see he is doing fast walking. From fifty yards, I see an aged pale male widely swishing his hips. At thirty yards, I recognize Professor Licht. He looks like a spry ghost in his grey sweat shirt and pants with fluorescent green lining.

From my post above the track, I watch the figure move away and circle around again. I imagine Licht as history personified, huffing and puffing, his wrinkled butt swishing through the repetitions, farting upwind. At once, he is forward progress and endless cycle. I consider approaching him and explaining my dilemma. Licht has no doubt heard it all before. Perhaps he has even understood some of it.

“Licht.” My voice makes a quivering whisper, not nearly enough to call for the help of history. I feel a little dizzy. Am I hallucinating? Or is this the actual Licht? I decide against a second sounding, opting instead to stumble away.

***

I stride away from Licht and toward Browning College, home of the Dean’s office and student records. In my drug-marred state, I feel an intensity of self-loathing, so I decide to erase my presence at Ward. I will sneak into Browning and steal away the records of me.

I pass the night security guard. He has curly red hair and freckles. I smile at him and receive a slight nod.

From twenty yards, I see the smooth brown stone of the three-story building, what once housed the entire college. As I approach, I hear noises. Murmuring. It is coming from my right. I quietly step in that direction and peek around the corner. Under a nearby tree, away from the lamplight, I discern two dark figures. One is folding a piece of paper around a slab of stone. I can barely hear their voices.

“Man, make your statement. Throw it.”

“You throw it.”

The first voice is the angry one from the protest earlier in the day. So this must be black militant action—throwing a rock with a message through the Dean’s window. I instantly feel small and petty. These two have a cause to fight for, genuine injustice, real pain. My night wandering is leisure time. I wish I could vanish. I hurry away.
Under dark skies and then street lamps, I head to the town’s only convenience store. It is three blocks down and open all night. I pass low-rise clusters known for all-night parties to the left and subsidized housing known for poverty to the right. Shifting my gaze to either side, I cannot discern any difference between either group’s beige and brown residential units. I remember to walk on the left side of the street.

On the sidewalk before the deli’s entrance, a homeless man sits Indian style on a stained mauve blanket.

“Spare any change?”
I shake my head no and enter.

Inside, I feel jolted by the brightness of the lighting and the chill of strong A/C. I round the corner for the frozen-food aisle, where I see a familiar thinness. It is Professor Dich, my feminist-narrative teacher. I observe her holding two fat-free ice cream quarts. She appears to be comparing ingredients.

Dich is pronounced like “peach,” not “pick,” but even so, she is thin. If she were wearing a spandex body suit, you would see only bone structure. While tenured male colleagues grow hairy and fat, female academics waste away. They appear strung out on coffee, diet pills, brains, cigarettes. Being a career intellectual, with books to raise and kids to write about, must be difficult work. In women like Ms. Dich, the flesh is a non-entity more than an object of denial. Yet here I find her, shopping for food.

If I had courage, as a gentleman, I would share in her elbows and guide Madame Dich to the fat-full section of the store. There, I would treat her to a box of sweet cordials and a generous assortment of Swiss bars. Then we would break chocolate together and celebrate in life and sugar, good cholesterol and bliss. With my help, she could reclaim her fleshy self.

She turns and sees me staring.
“Andy?”
“Professor Dich?”
“Up late working?”
“Just walking. How are you?”
“Are you graduating?”
“I think so.” I want to be her savior but as my professor, she secures the question mark. She eyes me as a doctor would a patient, but held fast by her left elbow, I see a brick of frozen dessert.

I follow Dich over to the cashier, where an elderly man is waiting behind several skinhead youth. The septuagenarian’s baggy earth tones contrast sharply with the black denim and high boots of the bald townies. One defeats the barren land of his crown with a gleaming silver Mohawk, and another appears to have a pocket knife—at least a twelve-in-one model—stapled to his ear. Professor Dich reaches ahead for a mint toothpick. In passing, her elbow grazes ever so gently against the old man in front of us. He collapses, slamming nose first against the white linoleum floor. With the cashier and the leather types, we stand momentarily stunned, staring at the tragic turn of events, the smack in the face, of this man’s life.

Upon entering the store, a small troupe of students sees the body and turns away; I hear them stifle faint giggles or sobs. I recognize one as a classmate.

“Oh my god,” Dich whispers, her words as thin as her wrists.
He appears to be in little or no agony. In fact, he is motionless. I bend down to check his pulse. There is one. I reach inside the breast pocket of his tan jacket and find his medical card. I hand it to the cashier. She dials the number on a phone usually reserved for credit-card problems. One of the townies produces a cell phone and calls the police.

I turn back to Professor Dich and try to comfort her. “There’s no way you did that,” I say, trying to sound soothing. “He was bound to die. He probably smoked unfiltered cigarettes and ate red meat late at night.” The store owner nods as he pushes the fallen man’s cold cuts aside. He picks up a white-paper package that looks roast-beef sized; waving it with his right hand, he points at it with the thumb from his left.

With the owner at Dich’s side, I say goodbye and escape. Outside it is drizzling an even mist. The squatter is still there; he holds up a sign. “Have you helped your homeless today?” I doubt it, and I wonder if the irony is intended. I feel ridiculous doing so, unsure if I am helping or hindering my homeless, but I toss a dull quarter and a few pennies into the fluorescent green flying disc lying flat at his feet.

***

The air outside is cool and beautiful, a faint breeze like doggy breath. Back on the campus green, I twist and turn and stare at the stars. I run along the gravel track and do awkward handstands over the football field. I find myself staring at three young pines planted far away. They begin to move. I see John led as a prisoner by the two revolutionaries. No, it is the security guard leading the rock throwers away in handcuffs. No, it is John and Jake leading me away. Where could they be taking me? I run toward us with my head down, as fast as I can.

Upon arrival, I see these are no men at all. They are women, the three witches, now in army jackets and peasant skirts, out scavenging. I try to give a friendly hello, but horror is painted on their faces. They mistake me for a bad man—out alone, looking for danger—and drop some items that they then scramble to pick up. Bundling the fallen goods in their skirts reveals hairy shins and pale bony knees. I squint at the ground and see oblong objects. Doorknobs, drumsticks, candy bars and soda cans. A stick shift from a car and plastic joysticks from the videogame room.

One of them hisses at me, as spittle strands loom. “We protest the phallocentric regime. You tell a soul and we cut it off.”

“It?”

“It,” they gravely nod. And the leader waves a Ward public safety night stick at my nose.

I turn and hurry away, gasping for air, checking my package. With so much to assimilate, these incidents are unsettling. I cannot say for sure if the night is real or largely hallucination. I wonder if the shrooms were acid-laced. In any event, they chase me all over campus and then back to the source of the pain. The campus tower’s clock reads 5:03 a.m. The night sky fades into the lightness of day.

I slow at her porch and ascend the wooden steps. I take a full breath and then ring the bell. She comes and opens the wooden door. Through the screen, I see her in a lavender night shirt. She rubs her eyes. Even half-asleep, she looks amazing.

“Andy, is that you?”
“Yeah.”
“Where have you been?”
“I heard from Jake.”
“Andy, I don’t love Jake.”
“I know,” I whisper.

She opens the screen door, grabs my shirt, and pulls me in.

I am finally at rest, holding Jenna on her night blue futon. But before I can doze off, I am stuck with my thoughts. There are only so many drugs I can take to haze away reality. There’s only so much dog food I can feed myself until I know the truth. There’s only so much night wandering I can do until I go to sleep with Jenna, the girl Jake is dying for, but also a woman offering only a limitless land without love. I don’t want to betray anyone. I feel the weight of approaching sleep, and thank god for the chance to rest my weary soul.
IV. Commencement

Three weeks later, I am standing in a slight drizzle and a black and silver robe. We are a line of graduates here to please thousands of relatives and friends seated on wooden chairs where Licht was no doubt fast walking just hours ago. I can hear John on a cell phone; it sounds as if he is speaking in a panic, and I feel relieved it is in a language I cannot understand. I am happy to see he wears a graduation robe. At the least, they are letting him walk with his class. I avoid entirely any opportunity to meet Jenna’s family, and as far as I can tell she is doing the same. “You have my e-mail,” is how she ended our last scene. Soon enough, from the podium above, we hear the words of the Dean of Ward.

“You young minds go out into a world of peace and prosperity. As the millennium approaches, there is no intercontinental war. The markets are surging. Optimism abounds. Make the most of it. Stretch your wings. You are the best and brightest minds of tomorrow. Do not waste your talent. Be the best you can be.”

In a stentorian roar, the Dean actually says those last lines. Before I know it, I am following the black and silver line leading up to the podium. I’m stoned and in the rain and trying not to worry about the rest of my life.

I see Jake flailing his arms helplessly, being sucked into the eye of the world’s whirlpool. While I am fucking the object of his desire, he is bussing dishes. I see him failing the real test; I see him fighting for his life. I see myself as a weak child, not even struggling, using dope to mask my frailty. I feel as if I have no right to this commencement, or even to be the protagonist of my own story. And then I recall what Professor Dich once said, that a likeable narrator, or even a world, can be the most dishonest move that a writer can make.

But now it is my turn, and the Dean holds out my diploma. Gazing into his wide grin, I experience his six or seven figures and near-perfect teeth. As I reach for the diploma, I feel dizzy. I have climbed a long mountain trail and reached the top peak, but I do not know why I came. And now someone is pushing me forward. I am holding up the line.

Clutching my diploma, I head to the opposite stairwell, feeling as I descend, as if I am gradually sliding down the slope. I don’t know where the next foot rest lies, and I don’t know where I’m going to land. In front of hundreds, maybe thousands, I feel alone. I feel scared.
Publisher’s Note

I first met Alex Kudera virtually. He had commented on an essay I had written that appeared in InsideHigherEd.com. The essay was about the lack of health benefits for adjunct faculty members in higher education. At the time, I was a full-time adjunct at a couple of schools in Virginia, and I had become an outspoken advocate for fair treatment of adjunct workers.

In the comment, Alex mentioned his upcoming novel, *Fight for Your Long Day*, in which the protagonist is an adjunct slogging through his longest day of the week. Alex later e-mailed me and, in our exchanges, I eventually procured an advance copy of the novel. I liked it and wrote a review, which appeared in *Academe* in January 2011.

Alex and I kept in touch. Along the way, I published several short e-books of my own. Ambitious as he is, Alex approached me about helping him get *The Betrayal of Times of Peace and Prosperity* together as an e-book. That’s how Gone Dog Press was born.

It’s not every day that a guy gets to start his own publishing company. I have Alex to thank for that. I also have Alex to thank because he and I share another affinity: advocating through writing. Though his advocacy has been in fiction form and mine has been in nonfiction form, we both understand and appreciate the power of words. Sure, stories are fun but, like *The Betrayal of Times of Peace and Prosperity*, they can also have implicit arguments that just might change the world for the better.

It’s a small goal.

Isaac Sweeney

Gone Dog Press
About Alex Kudera

Alex Kudera has survived fifteen years of teaching overloads but in some circles is better known for his mysterious injuries. He has bussed dishes and tutored English in two countries, and *Fight for Your Long Day*, his first novel, was drafted in a walk-in closet during a summer in Seoul, South Korea. A lifelong Philadelphian until fall 2007, Alex currently teaches literature and writing at Clemson University in South Carolina. Contact him at alexander.kudera@gmail.com.

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Also from Alex Kudera:

Praise for *Fight for Your Long Day*:

“I highly recommend this wonderful book to anyone who loves great literature. It's a most impressive first novel with an unforgettable protagonist, Cyrus Duffleman, whose tragicomic plight consumed me for days on end. I would not be surprised if *Fight for Your Long Day* becomes a classic of early 21st-century American literature.”

-Peter D.G. Brown  
Distinguished Service Professor of German  
State University of New York at New Paltz  
Co-Founder, New Faculty Majority

“This marvelous debut is worthy of a place on the same bookshelf as *Lucky Jim* and *A Confederacy of Dunces*. The depiction of academic life had me both laughing and cringing at its accuracy. As in the best comic fiction, there is a poignant undercurrent of seriousness in this novel. Kudera is the real deal.”

-Ron Rash  
author of *Serena*, a *New York Times* Bestseller
Professor at Western Carolina University

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