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Excerpt from *Auggie's Revenge*

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Abstract

Auggie's Revenge is Alex Kudera's comic crime novel about academic labor in urban America. In the city of brotherly unemployment, instructor of philosophy Michael Vittinger shares an adjuncts' office far removed from any full-time or tenure-track position. After more than a decade of teaching, Michael still lives paycheck-to-supermarket in a small studio apartment. In the following excerpt, Vittinger gets stood up at the bar by his girlfriend, encounters less fortunate street dwellers on his way to securing affordable comestibles at the local convenience store, and retires for the evening to watch frisky bears on late-night television.

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On the first day of class, the students wrote about their summer experiences, whether they stayed home with Mom or went to work at the Jersey Shore. Melony wrote about her internship in Cleveland at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Her high-school hero had been Joan Jett, of the Blackhearts, and how that ever led her to me is unfathomable.

But teaching so many classes, brief comments, check marks, and smiley faces in green ink were mostly what I wrote on these pages. For no reason I can easily explain, before I could even connect a face with a name, I was inspired to note on Melony's letter my musical tastes. I told her that David Bowie singing "My Death" on *David Live* was, in fact, my favorite live song of all time. On a whim, I added a few lines: "My death waits there between your thighs / Your cool fingers will close my eyes / Let's think of that and the passing time." Yes, I quoted explicit lyrics on her paper, and even used slashes for line stops.

I didn't think much of it, because I'd written personal anecdotes on student papers many times before, but when I ran into her at the Wawa,

where, as it turned out, she worked a graveyard shift, as she rung me up—the usual six-inch hoagie, salad, chips, and peanut chews—she asked me if I was going home to sulk, sip wine, and contemplate my “demise” as she called it.

Needless to say, although this routine was not uncommon for my Saturday nights, I was taken aback. She must have seen my shocked or sad facial expression because she quickly added, “Oh, sorry. That was an allusion to what you wrote on my paper, about listening to Bowie. You said, ‘My Death’ was your favorite song.” That put a different slant on matters entirely.

This encounter led to exchanged e-mails a week after I’d searched for her information at the university website. Then the quarter ended, and the e-mails grew extensive, and she hated her mother, and I hated grading papers, and her mother’s boyfriend was boring, and so were the papers, and didn’t I ever ask a girl out or did I just send long e-mails forever, and it took me until three days later, but by the following Saturday, we were seated across from each other in a chain restaurant, and I was watching her shake a bottle of barbecue sauce and pour maroon goop all over crisp iceberg lettuce.

* * *

After my second shared moment with the Jack of Daniels over ice, I gave in and called.

“I have to cancel.”

“But I’m already here, baby.”

“Sorry, baby.”

“I’m already drunk and lonely.”

“Sorry. I’m just too busy. I hate it when you pressure me.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” Was I entirely without self-esteem? I supposed so.

“I’ll call you later.”

When!? I mean, “Okay.”

I went back to the bar and downed three more. Drowning my sorrow and anything remotely connected to my ego, I left the bar after

midnight but before last call. Walking like an imbalanced man, the way I always imagined inebriated characters walked in commercial novels, I made unsteady progress until in an unlit slither of Collegetown sidewalk, a gruff voice said, "Give it up."

I saw two men, one gun, and my fate in the hands of these three.

There was nothing like two strangers and a deadly weapon to return an abstract dreamer to his sobering darkness. Quick as a drunken philosopher, I turned my pants pockets inside out and screamed: "You see all I got!? I'm broke as you motherfucker. Fuckin' frisk me all over. My girlfriend no-showed, and I'm horny!"

The two faces turned to each other.

"White boy crazy."

"He a crazy motherfucker."

"His shit ain't right."

"Should shoot his shit to end his misery."

"Put a white boy down."

"A mercy kill."

"Take a life, get life."

"Sentence 'n shit."

"No way I go back."

"Nah."

"Put white boy out of his misery and go to jail for that shit?"

"Hell, no."

"That ain't the way."

"Word."

They ran off and disappeared into the darkness of our fair city. I stood for a moment. Shaking. Nerves? Adrenalin? It was as if my fear acted on delay and arrived five minutes late to the scene of the crime. But just like that, it abated. I was fine. Or at least I could walk.

I resumed my journey, and as I strode further into dark night, I questioned whether the highwaymen were real or not. The increased perspiration under my arms seemed to be the thing-in-itself, but could these robbers have been my hallucination?

* * *

I was reminded of the time that I saw a large brown bear on the Appalachian Trail. A few summers past, I had gotten the insane idea that I would escape city living for a few days of Edenic bliss. It was a back-to-nature jaunt to refresh and rejuvenate an urban intellectual. This was several years before I'd met Auggie, and I still saw myself as an almost normal gent. Yes, I was working on contracts, without the routines of a full-time job, but I was more or less part of the usual in lower-middle-class living. A vacation was what regular people did, so I felt obliged to take one.

I rented a compact Mazda 3 at an obscene rate that with tax and insurance totaled over ninety dollars a day. It only took me an hour to get out of the city and onto I-95. Indeed, I was stuck in Chinatown traffic for thirty minutes with no idea of how I arrived there.

After escaping Center City East, I drove six hours and arrived at a verdant land of trees and hills. Northwestern Virginia was beautiful and provided all that Philadelphia lacked. On my own, I breathed fresh air and navigated Skyline Drive and stopped at overlooks and points with a view. After a fresh, farm-fed lunch, I filled up my water bottle. At the next "scenic view," I saw signs for the Appalachian Trail, which apparently ran parallel to much of the road and only a hundred yards below. I decided to go for it.

So descend I did, and about twenty minutes into my walking tour of the natural world, at fifty yards ahead, I saw the bear. It was big, brown, and scavenging for berries in the bushes. Terrified, I hurried off so quickly, that to this day, I am somewhat uncertain if I panicked over reality or hallucination. I do remember being so certain of my vision, that when I chanced upon a family with children heading in my direction, I told the mother exactly what I then knew that I had seen. It wasn't until the parking lot that doubt set in.

How would a Kant or Kierkegaard handle this question? No doubt with their eyesight diminished, corrupted by decades of reading, they would have both been too blind to ever see a wild beast looming fifty yards ahead. Yet the thought led to larger questions, of course, of how we could know anything at all to be true.

* * *

Fresh night drizzle awakened me from my somnambulist dreaming, and I realized I'd like nothing more than a midnight snack to take my mind off Melony's rejection and the two men with the gun. Truth be told, rejection made me horny and mad, but once my libidinous humors abated, I found myself with hunger pangs so severe that I could stab a mutt and feast upon the yelping cur.

At the deli, I first selected steaming hot New England clam chowder and a six-inch long Italian hoagie. Turning around, I spied a rack of tortillas, chips, and pretzels; I grabbed the largest bag of Cheetos available. These were the cheesy kind that made love to the tongue on cold, winter evenings, when, alone on the sofa, I enjoyed "borrowed" cable television, absorbing the absurd biases and vulgar patriotism of Fox News. That Melony was a Cheetos lover, who had gotten me hooked, was for the present, a reality I wanted to ignore. Yet spying the photo on the package, I couldn't help but conjure images of her salty, orange-flaked fingers and tongue.

From there, I chanced upon prepared salads. They were fresh and sealed, and little compartments kept ingredients separate within each plastic bowl. The single-serving dressing came separately as well; I chose Caesar over vinaigrette and grabbed a plastic fork.

At the cashier, I lifted two sampler packages of peanut chews. At three bite-sized for twenty-five cents, they were a bargain compared to the chocolate aisle's sixty-nine-cent, full-size bar offering six of the same, but I preferred to steal these delicacies as proof of my free will. I'd let them rest in my book bag's side pocket, and if anyone at the counter noticed, I could say, "Oh, goodness. I forgot."

The fifty-cent cost made it too preposterous to be taken seriously as crime, at least not for a white man dressed as I was. Inside trading, tax fraud, and cronyism were my domain, but philosophy had led me away from the Caucasian male's worn path. Yes, you can see that Auggie was negatively impacting my race-consciousness, and his stories about Jonny were adversely effecting my consuming decisions. I didn't have to steal

peanut chews to survive.

The New England clam chowder was packaged separately, so I clutched it close to my chest while dangling the grocery bag with everything else. I pushed the glass door open with my back and walked briskly down the street. I didn't mind the rain so much, but hoped the droplets wouldn't pass through the plastic bag's opening and dampen my comfort snacks. My thoughts increasingly turned to food and how I would indulge once inside my apartment. I felt rich and free, able to snag from the convenience store most anything I craved.

Interrupting my food and freedom, out of the corner of my eye, I spied forms on church steps thirty yards ahead. As I approached closer, I heard sounds. Voices. Was it a homeless man yapping to himself? At a closer point, I heard he was speaking to someone else.

I saw a mass lying atop the steps, half protected and half exposed. It was a large form, maybe two heads staying dry under the church's awning, but legs and feet getting soaked. They were huddled together underneath several blankets. Moving closer, my vision improved, and I saw another person in a worn sleeping bag lying on the lion's share of dry porch.

I drew my plastic bags closer to my person and prepared to veer to the right to create as wide a berth as possible from the lost and rained upon. I clutched my late-night dining closer to my chest, ignoring any possibility that such a sudden move would cause the soup to leak. On another night, I would have sacrificed the bag's entire contents.

Almost upon them, I couldn't help but turn my head ninety degrees to stare at my fair city's indigence, clutching my bag even tighter as I did so. But at least, these two were not robbing and pillaging. They were minding their business, trying to stay dry. Perhaps they stayed awake to stand guard against more corrupt or crooked sidewalk sleepers.

In the moment, I got a close look and saw, yes, there were three of them – two men were seated on the top steps while a woman stood fully covered by the stone ceiling and wall protecting the church's front porch. The object I mistook for bodies getting wet was in fact a mattress, at least full-sized, with a metal frame on wheels no less.

Despite my myopic concerns over my stomach and Melony, I

wincing when I saw our city's citizens lacking shelter. Thank god it was past January and spring would arrive soon. With it, however, a famous Indian snowstorm or two, and I realized I should be grateful it was raining, particularly at night, and not snowing upon us all. Even as this last thought occurred to me, I heard, "It's too late for the train station" from one of the men. The homeless were evicted from the train station every night at 10 p.m., a cruel fate I'd experienced more than once, when the police came through and banged their night sticks against every green-grate table occupied by anyone who appeared indigent. Almost any seated solitary man could be mistaken for such.

I'd experience anger at the city, its police, and the homeless themselves, sure, but also an intense tingling of intermingled guilt and pleasure that in fact, I had a warm apartment that I could return to, and even a taxi ride home was not out of reach. I was no Diogenes, the ancient philosopher, living like a dog on the streets of Athens. My two-room studio was a king's palace compared to what awaited the less housed in the city's shelters. So many men and mites shared the same cramped quarters I shuddered whenever I imagined it. Even living like Melony, as one of two coeds in an efficiency apartment, was more than I could handle.

My mind returned from the prison house of the train station or the antechamber of Melony's apartment, or vice versa, and I came to in the middle of my walk. I was standing still and getting rained on and staring at three homeless and their half-wet bed. Not wanting to offend anyone, I nodded at the man who established the most eye contact. It was the middle man, a charcoal-navy colored man, whose shining white teeth and eyes acted against the dark night and ebony steps as a glowing epicenter, like that of a Rembrandt portrait. He returned my nod but stared at the bag.

"Can you spare any of that nutritious food?"

The moment of truth.

I turned to shove off and nod, "No, sorry," while averting my eyes, but I felt his stare remain glued to my packages.

Rejection or no, my few soft comforts led to a surge of guilty conscience, and I was soon intent upon feeding these lost souls. But did the poor peasants merit some peanut chews? You've got to be kidding.

The soup? Off limits. The salad? No way. And so that was that, and I dove into the bag and produced the six-inch hoagie and the large bag of Cheetos.

"Cheetos?" I asked with some doubt in my voice, if not a hint of despair that I'd lost an evening with Melony's orange-flecked tongue.

"Man, what the fuck am I gonna do with junk food? I said *nutritious*."

I stepped back, alarmed.

"*Psych*. Boy, I'm only playin' with you," and I could see the human warmth of his grin. "Whatever you got, man. We're grateful."

"Oh." I moved back toward him and extended my free hand to give him the hoagie and Cheetos.

With alacrity, the man hopped off the church steps, smiled at me, and grabbed the snacks.

"You're a good man," he said. "God bless your soul."

He kept smiling at me, then. It was late-night assurance of the decency of my soul, and I wasn't disappointed to receive such alms for the poor of spirit.

I lingered only for a moment to watch the three dig in, and then onward, I continued home. The soup, salad, and peanut chews would be enough for me.

At a brisk pace, I marched away from poverty, and once around a corner, where they could not see me, I ran. It was too much, the guilt slapping me like a cold fish across the cheek. I felt sick and twisted. We had so many showering at public sinks and engaging in highway robbery and going without and sleeping on the street in the cold and rain. But I felt grateful because I had enough. *Fuck it*. What I meant to say is I was fucking ecstatic that I had *more* than all of these poor lost souls. As meager as my own wages were, I took pleasure in my relatively higher net worth.

Up the steps to my second floor rear apartment, I bounded in ecstasy, taking them two and three at a time, whereupon once inside my cozy abode, I collapsed on the couch and rethought the moment once more. These were poor, starving homeless people, and I gave them junk food and half a hoagie, not nearly enough for all three of them. Then and

there, in my warm residence with running water, I wished I were the kind of man who could give away the hot, scrumptious New England clam chowder no matter how much his own stomach growled for sustenance. “You cheap piece of garbage,” I muttered to myself.

Just as quickly, considering further, what if these were winos or drug addicts – abusing heroin or crack or worse – failing to enroll in the city’s services, so their addictions could be fed? They were choosing to avoid the puritanism of the shelters in favor of the wanton life of the streets. After all, they weren’t starving. I saw no distended stomachs or signs of thirst. They didn’t look desperate for three squares and a cot. For all I knew, even the mattress was a prop, similar to the dust-coated cheeks of beggar children sitting on Mama’s lap in Parisian metro stops. By feeding them, I fed only their addictions. I was encouraging laziness and depravity. They were part of the public blight.

Shifting again, I imagined that all these lazy and depraved souls were lost due to no volition of their own; rather, it was impoverished parents, neglectors and abusers, who had informed the formative years of their lives. They were as bad off as Auggie, and there was no just world that could ever correct their unfortunate origins and lead them to healthy, prosperous lives – not to imply those of us who had avoided such horrors were much better off. How fucked was this world we were living in? Could anyone ever avenge the lost and wounded and abused and forsaken? The properly bred people administered universities and corporations and stuck their hands out, demanding copious quantities of cash and gold from the beaten and weak as they established higher tuitions, new classes of assets, additional fees, and alternative minimum taxes. And the world spun round and round, the patter of this steady rain never ceased, and it seemed impossible to stop.

I devoured the salad before I had time to mix ingredients and add dressing. After that, I sucked the soup straight from its paper container. It was lukewarm but tasty. Last, I turned on the television and sat back with my peanut chews.

That was when news broke of the football “tragedy” and the seemingly just as tragic cover up. *Nightline* was discussing the case – a big school with an even bigger football program. A scandal, only five

hours from Philadelphia. The reporter stated that a former coordinator of special teams, a larger than life kind of old-school jock, had been violating the sanctity and borders of children, a dozen allegedly, and there were investigations into new cases popping up each week. He was retired now, and throughout his fifty years had contributed thousands of hours to charity. So far, there were nine kids prepared to testify against the monster, but questions remained. Were there others? If so, how many? Were there girls? Was he pimping little boys to donors to the prestigious athletic programs?

Of course, I thought of Auggie's situation, and how the adults in power and on the prowl got away with it one way or another in this land of football and freedom, home of overpriced education, end zones, and offshore tax havens. An oligarchy disguised as democracy, and you could read all about this at any corner internet café. At the commercial break, a hot model and former megastar told us to buy a German car to support resurgent Detroit, so I rose from the couch – satiated, bloated, and not half-numb. Finding the remote, I changed the channel, and reduced the sound. On a public station, I saw two polar bears on Mammal Planet sniffing crotches, and by the middle of my second package, fifth chew, they were fornicating like animals on late-night cable TV.