

Wake Up With the Kimellians

Part 2

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Part Two

Roger woke up with a wet face. Lifting his head from the puddle of drool, he wiped his cheek with his sleeve, his face tensing in a look of frustration. What he was dreaming made more sense than reality did. The disparity between the two was so overwhelming that he spent several minutes staring at the ceiling while he debated with himself whether he was really awake, or just stuck in a bizarre dream because of the car accident.

He got up to grab paper towels and cleaned up after himself. Then he went to the sink to rinse his mouth out before he walked to the bathroom to use the toilet.

He finished and washed his hands, then took the towel with him as he left the bathroom.

The front room was a box with multiple uses. From where he stood drying his hands at the bathroom door, the front door was two steps ahead to his left. The left wall had a couch built in, and beside it was a writing hutch in the corner. The back wall held the TV screen, and the right corner of the room was filled by a single person padded cot. After the bed was a set of five dresser drawers, built recessed into the wall as well. The arrangement of furniture stopped, and the window filled a large portion of the wall. Beyond it, the aliens offered nothing else in the way of creature comforts. No bookshelves or closets could be found.

Perhaps the aliens thought the view was enough to keep their slaves entertained? Roger remembered the other buildings taking off, and he smiled as he thought, *I'll bet the view of space looks great from those.*

He didn't go to the window yet. Instead he turned and went right, returning to the cramped galley style kitchen to try eating the rest of the pork chow mein as a cold breakfast. He took the can from the compact refrigerator and managed a short laugh as he randomly thought, *Behold the true power of anarchy, having dinner for breakfast. Tonight, I'll dine on pancakes, and then raise a riot in the streets.*

Roger stayed by the sink during his first few bites, but nothing was wrong with the food. Once he was sure his stomach wouldn't complain, he walked with the can back to the front room to check the window. He almost broke the plastic fork by biting through the tines when he saw how many people were just standing by their windows. He was too far away to see any expression clearly, but he almost expected every face to be blank and apathetically motionless.

Roger ate faster, the nervous voice in his head prodding him to do something, even if it was just to leave the apartment. While he ate, he scanned past window after window, hoping someone would move.

But what was left of the human race wasn't the fighters or the overachievers. What was left were the confused cattle, the people who followed trends in the old days, and who never questioned conformity. But the people who never questioned their roles needed someone to tell them where to go, and how to act. Or else...

Roger finished his breakfast and sighed. *Anarchy among this lot isn't about tearing things up. Without a government, they'll just sit here and wait to be slaughtered or enslaved*

again. How can this be all that's left of us?

Roger started to throw the can away in the garbage, but instead he went to the sink and rinsed the inside clean.

He left the apartment and took can with him to the elevator, seeing no one on his way down. He didn't bother calling out to his neighbors either, because he wasn't sure he wanted to be anyone's great leader. In fact, he wasn't sure of what he was going to do once he got outside. Taking the can out was an act of protest. He planned to place it in the middle of the street, but beyond that, what else would he do? Walk around alone?

But then he knew he had to. It didn't matter what the other humans did, because he wasn't going to spend the last week of his life waiting in a cell for the new wardens to decide his fate.

He walked out of the building and treaded lightly, being worried about disturbing residual soot from the ground. But no toxic clouds rose to attack him, and he relaxed before he was a few steps away from the building. By the time he got to the street, he was walking with a normal stride.

He stopped at the curb and lobbed the can high into the air, watching it arc up, and then plummet to clunk on the street. The can rattled, then skidded a few feet before it started to roll down the road. There was just enough of a decline to keep the can moving, and Roger stuffed his hands into the pockets of his blue uniform pants while he watched his protest litter moving away from him.

He chose to follow the can to see when it would stop. The temptation to look up at the windows was avoided, as was the urge to check around the gaping holes in the ground where buildings used to be. For the time being, the can was the only important thing. The can was God's will,

or it was tugged invisibly by a thread of fate. Either way, it was meant to lead him into some greater purpose.

The can picked up speed when the decline became more noticeable, and Roger hopped the curb to jog after it. But eventually the roll had to end, and it did nine blocks from his building, clattering to a halt in the middle of an intersection.

Roger looked around, but the view wasn't really so different. The world was still black and blue, and most windows of the buildings left were filled with gawking people.

Roger looked down at the can and smirked. *Either the thread of fate snapped, or God hitched a ride out with the aliens. But it looks like the choice is up to me.*

He checked the streets, then chose to kick the can heading left, where he could see the street would begin to decline after a few blocks. All he had to do was help fate along until then.

Two hours later, Roger leaned over to catch his breath, letting the can roll away from him while he huffed for air. He had no clue of where he was, and no concern for how he would find his way home.

In theory, all I have to do is look for every inclining road and make my way back up, he thought and uttered a breathy laugh.

Sweat soaked his uniform, and bright yellow spots floated in front of his eyes. But he didn't care. His protest was accomplishing one thing. It was making the nervous voice go away. He was doing something. True, he was just playing kick the can. But it was more than anyone else would do.

Then someone else kicked the can. It was still rolling, still singing with a hollow metallic sound until suddenly he heard the clank of boot meeting can. He raised his head, but instead of the kicker, he saw the can flying up and over his head. He turned to follow it, then glanced back at the boy who stood further down the street.

Like every male, the boy's head was shaved to a buzz-cut, which made his ears seem too small for his head. He had a lean, square face, and skin tanned a deep bronze which made his brown eyes seem darker. But what separated him from so many other people Roger had seen was the faint smile stretching the boy's thick lips.

Roger stared at him, then let his gaze wander to the building, where a woman stood in the doorway looking on with a mortified expression. She had dark blonde hair, but with her hand covering her mouth and the distance between them, he couldn't see her with any real detail.

Roger returned his attention to the boy and grinned. "Hey kid, you wanna play? The winner gets to be the ruler of the world for six days."

The boy's lips split in a grin as he nodded. "What are the rules?"

Roger laughed. "Well that's the real problem around here, isn't it? Nobody knows the rules anymore."

The boy walked closer, his smile fading while his expression became thoughtful. "You don't know the rules either?"

"Oh, no, kick the can was way before my time. I remember seeing it in a movie once, and I think it was based on some old black and white show." Roger thought about what the rules should be, then gave a half shrug. "Tell you what. Let's kick the can around, and between the two

of us, we'll come up with some rules. The game won't start officially until we've both agreed the rules are fair."

"But it can't just be you and me," the boy said as he started to walk around Roger to go after the can. "It wouldn't be fair, would it?"

"No, I guess—"

"But my mom can play on your side to make it fair," the boy said.

Roger guffawed and tried to feign indignation. "I'll have you know that so far, I'm the best player this game has ever had. I'm Roger, by the way."

"Phillip." He pointed back at the building. "That's my mom, Nicole. Where do you work? I don't think I've ever seen you in our factory."

"Yeah, that's a long story, and unfortunately, no one got around to explaining it to me either. But the short version is, I was in a coma until yesterday."

"Okay, that explains why you're so pale." Phillip thumped the can with the side of his boot, punting it a shorter distance back the other way to set the can rolling again. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you look sick."

Roger nodded and rubbed his head. "I do feel a bit light headed, so maybe I should sit down and rest first."

Once he settled on the curb, the weight of his limbs doubled, and he gave a short chuckle. "I used to be in better shape than this. But then, I've been out for a long time. I'm surprised I can walk."

"The aliens probably hooked you up to a machine to keep you from shriveling up," Phillip said. He chased after the can to punt it up the street again, keeping the game in motion while Roger took a break. "They're real weird like that. They killed so many people, but then they took our

sick and treated them like...like royalty. Everyone over five works in factories, but if you even get a scratch, you get carted off to be healed. The aliens had—” Phillip paused to kick the can again. “They had this attitude like we were expensive equipment. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, they wanted to keep you performing at peak levels to make something.”

Phillip nodded. “Yeah, but making what? That’s the great mystery. I know the part I’m meant to assemble, and I know my job so well I dream about it. But I don’t know what the damned thing does.”

“Phillip!”

Roger flinched, never hearing Nicole’s approach. He glanced back at her and smiled awkwardly while he squinted and tried to see her face. But the sun was behind her, and at first, the only detail he could register was how sheer her dress became with the sunlight behind her. Her body was slender and curved, and his eyes wandered down to her legs instead of up to study her face.

She lowered herself, sinking onto her haunches and closing her left arm around her shins to pin her dress to her legs. Then she offered her right hand to him and smiled politely. “Hello, I’m Phillip’s mother.”

“Yes, he told me. I’m Roger. I just woke up yesterday. I had the funniest dream that humans were still trying to kill each other.”

Nicole nodded and closed her arm around her legs. “There’s still six days left.” She wiped her hand against her dress, producing a long dark streak. “We could get back to it eventually.”

Roger’s smile fell, and his expression became troubled. “Do you really think so? I mean, look around. Most of these

people don't look like they could hurt anyone. These aren't the best examples of the human race, or the worst."

"They still might be capable of doing something when they become panicked." Nicole dropped a hand to the sidewalk, freezing and looking down at the soot before she hugged her legs again. "Would you like to come inside and get something to eat, or maybe some water?"

Roger glanced down at his hands planted on the curb. "Yes, though I might need you to turn on a sink for me to wash up first."

Roger chose clam chowder as his lunch, and he was surprised by how quickly he finished. He was trying to scrape stray bits of meat off the bottom of the can when Nicole groaned, then said, "Oh, dear lord."

The statement was made in annoyance, and though he couldn't see her, he could guess she was standing by the window.

Roger walked out of the kitchen, and he knew nothing was wrong when he saw the mixed emotions trying to find their place on her narrow tanned faced. Her brown eyes were filled with exasperation, but her thin pink lips twisted up and down, wrestling between a smile and a stiff line. Roger could almost see her thinking, *That's not funny*, so he knew it would be.

He walked to the window and brayed laughter, then raised a hand to cover his mouth and muffle the sound. Nicole sighed and let him laugh for a while before she said, "Sure, but you don't have to clean him up when he comes inside."

Outside, the game had moved to the soot covered grass, and a group of children played a game which looked similar to soccer, but without a referee to keep track of penalties.

And there were penalties on the field, as was obvious by the number of kids sitting on the curb rubbing scrapes or bruises.

Roger looked toward the street and gasped. Another group of kids were playing with their own can outside of a building up the block.

The trend was catching on.

Roger clapped his hands hard enough to make them red, then repeated the action several times though it made his palms itch. “Hey, kids? Yo! Come on over here!” He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled before waving the kids closer to take a head count. There were twenty-one children from what he assumed was just one building. He smiled and nodded. “All right, first let me warn you about a major rule being changed. This is not the tournament for the ruler of the world. It’s only the tournament for the rulers of your building.”

He nodded and waited through a chorus of groans. “I know, I was hoping to give you the world, but I’ve had a long chat with Phillip’s mother, and she thinks we need to be more...democratic. So, we’ll still have the match, but now you’ll get one leader, and a team of delegates. So I’ll need you to pick sides. Everyone who want to be a Leftist Liberal, stand on the left half of the yard. Everyone who wants to be a Right Winger should know where to go.”

The children divided up, though too many ended up

as Right Wingers. “Okay, guys, you have to give up a few people to the Liberals.”

“Why? Then they might win,” Phillip remarked and laughed. “Besides, Right Wingers sounds like a cooler team.”

“Phillip, you know if you defect to the other side and take some friends with you, I’ll talk to your mom for you about dropping the lecture,” Roger said.

“What lecture?” Phillip asked, his soot covered face wrinkling in confusion.

“The lecture you’re getting about the condition of your clothes, and for rough housing the other players. She saw that from the window, by the way, and she is fuming.”

Phillip frowned, and then nodded. “Guys, it’s been great working with you, but my compassions lie elsewhere. Who’s going with me?”

Roger chuckled as he watched the brawny thirteen year old gather up a group of friends to defect with, and then he had to deal with what to do with the one extra child. He waved for the tallest girl from the Right Wingers to stand in front of him and knelt down while he offered her a grin. “What’s your name?”

“Angela.”

“Well Angela, you’re just about the prettiest ball of soot I’ve ever met. I guess you don’t want to be stuck out of the game either, do you?” Roger asked, then smiled when the girl shook her head quickly, causing her bushy red ponytail to sway behind her head. “All right, then you get to pick one player from each side, and your team will have a slightly different goal.”

Angela thought the idea over and nodded. “And who are we?”

“You’re the Middling Moderates.”

Angela pinched her face in a scowl, her green eyes seeming brighter for the streaks of black on her rose colored face. “The Moderates? But they don’t play. They make up the rules.”

“No that’s me. I’m the referee. The Moderates are a smaller team, but they get a bigger goal. The problem is, everybody is working against you.”

“I can pick anyone,” Angela said, seeming unfazed by the challenge.

“Yes, anyone, but it has to be one from each side.”

Angela smiled. “Then duh, I’m choosing Phillip and Roy.”

Roger snapped his head around where she pointed, but of course the bulky bronze skinned boy wasn’t his son. He let out a shaky breath and forced himself to get his thoughts back in the present.

The rules he set up were simple enough. Each team would try to kick the can all the way across the wide yard in front of the building. The sidewalk on the east side was designated Leftist Liberal domain, and the west half became the Right Winger’s base of operations.

Jackets and shirts were taken off and used to mark a section of sidewalk for the goal zones. The two larger groups had three squares of sidewalk to aim for. However, the north sidewalk facing the street had a set of clothes placed for the Middling Moderates, who were allowed five squares.

Even with the added goal size, the two larger teams scoffed at how the rules didn’t sound remotely fair when Roger started the game. But Angela had selected the two biggest boys in the building, and she was not shy about jumping in to take control of the can herself in an effort to steer it to the goal or one of her partners.

After a half an hour, Roger called a half time break because he needed to rest from trying to follow the can. He dropped into the grass with the panting kids, only then learning why the grass survived the other buildings taking off.

Because it wasn't real grass.

Roger tried to pry up a handful and yelped when the crook of his pinky was sliced open. He resisted the urge to put his finger in his mouth, instead making a fist while he looked around to see if anyone else noticed his accident.

Phillip smiled at him and patted the grass. "It's still better than landing on the street."

The second half seemed to go by much faster, with all of the kids becoming almost brutal in their efforts to score points. The final score was 4-3-1, and the surprise was the Middling Moderates not being the big losing team.

Instead, the Right Wingers could never organize with each other. Each one could take the can well enough, but once they had it, they wouldn't pass it to anyone. Stubbornly, they tried to hold onto the can to carry it to the goal themselves. They wished to hog the spotlight instead of being team players, and each time they held on, the can was stripped away by someone else.

The Leftist Liberals played dirty. Several Liberal children took dives and lapsed into tears, yet when they looked to Roger and saw he wasn't calling a penalty, their tears dried in seconds. They hurled baseless insinuations of unethical behavior against the other two teams, and sometimes kicked the can directly at their rivals as revenge for any perceived slights. But as soon as they were surrounded by attackers, they would pass the can so someone else could take the heat.

It was like watching C-Span, but without the dentures and name calling.

The Middling Moderates lost far more gracefully than the Right Wingers, who complained how all the breaks were against them. It was true they'd earn a few penalties, but just because they were willing to trip players or kick someone when they were down by "tripping" over them, it didn't mean they were deserving of a harsh punishment.

No one scored during penalty kicks. It was difficult to choose between free revenge over a free goal. But with their stinging scrapes still seeping blood, the kids chose to serve a blazing can of revenge somewhere around the midsections of their rivals.

When it was clear the game was over and the kids were breaking up into groups to talk over strategies for the next match, parents began coming out to collect their kids and take them home to be scrubbed and possibly disinfected. Other adults came out to watch Roger while he congratulated the winners, but no one approached him except for Nicole. He didn't mind, and he figured they just weren't ready to recover from shock yet.

Roger almost turned down Nicole's offer to come back to her apartment for dinner, but the task of finding his home was daunting, and he wasn't ready to go back to being alone yet.

It was the thing about being a "people person." He always felt better being around people, which is why he worked as a cabbie. When he finished work and got done talking with random strangers all day, he came home to spend time with his family. Sometimes, if he asked nicely and didn't come home too late, he was allowed to go out with his friends.

He liked being around people, and waking up in a world where no one talked was hard to adjust to. So although he couldn't talk about much else but the match, he rambled and tried to stretch out his visit.

Roger was just finishing describing Phillip's one and only goal in the game when he blurted out, "Roy should have been here to play."

"He was playing," Phillip said before recognition lit his face. "Oh, wait, you mean your son."

"Yeah. I guess he'd be sixteen now, if I have my math right." Roger rubbed his hands together, aware of the nervous energy returning. Then he had a better understanding of what he was wanting. "I'm not sure if he survived the invasion or not, but I suppose I can try searching the city to find him, and my wife Sandra. Even if the aliens changed all the buildings around, Houston isn't that big."

He meant it as sarcasm, but Nicole pouted at him and shook her head. "This isn't Houston. You're in what used to be Wichita. Now it's 8212."

Roger's eyes bulged. "Kansas? How did I end up in Kansas?"

"Just guessing, I'd say the aliens moved you here to one of their medical facilities. They moved all the sick people to their first modified cities."

"But there are cities that weren't modified?"

"They were cleansed, but the southern states work in different roles. They run the farms, the canning plants, and the refineries."

Nicole talked more about how the states were broken up into different types of factory roles, but Roger could only nod politely and hope he was hitting the right points to agree.

Geography was not Roger's strong suit despite his being a cab driver familiar with his own city. He tried to think of how far Wichita was from Houston, but he was grasping at straws without a map. Even if he knew the distance, there was no way he could walk from Kansas to Texas in six...five days.

He showered and got out of the tub prepared to put on his dirty clothes. Instead he found a fresh uniform laying on the counter. When he came out of the bathroom, Nicole explained that there were automated uniform vendors on the first sub floor of the building. The building had ten sub-floors, but humans were only allowed on the first two.

Roger took the couch, and Phillip had the cot in the front room. The apartment had a different floor plan than his, and beside the TV screen was a door leading into Nicole's "bedroom," which was basically a walk-in closet with a dresser and a twin sized bed recessed into the opposing walls.

Roger peered into the room for only a moment before he went to his couch and decided that the aliens were hung up on retro designs from the seventies. Everything in white, and all of it curvy. Every piece of furniture had to be molded into the room.

Why? he asked himself, and then the answer became obvious. *To keep everything from shaking apart when other buildings took off. Or...or to keep things from floating away in space.*

Roger sat up, chewing at his lower lip while he considered the idea of flying the buildings away before the Kimellians arrived. But then he dismissed it based on one indisputable fact: no one knew how to pilot the buildings. Even if they knew how, where would they go?

Selecting a destination didn't matter, because the humans weren't skilled in harnessing the technology which surrounded them. Truly, the meek had inherited the Earth.

Sandra Maple walked into the bedroom stiffly and flopped over onto the bed beside Roger, making a muffled groan into her pillow. Roger rolled onto his side and rubbed her back, laughing when his wife mumbled grunts of approval through the pillow each time he found a sore spot.

“Rough day?” he asked.

Sandra rolled her head to the side and pouted at her husband. “When is it not a rough day at our diner? If it weren't for the tips, I'd love to punch about half the people who come in.”

“Hey, at least there are your regular customers,” Roger said.

“I was talking about them,” Sandra said and snorted. “How was your day?”

“Good. I got four big tippers, with the top amount being a whopping thirty dollars.”

“What idiot climbed in your cab today?” Sandra asked.

Roger chortled while he moved his hand further up his wife's back. “He was just some lawyer in a hurry to get to the airport. He passed me a hundred and started to jump out.” Roger grinned. “But you know what was messed up?”

Sandra grinned as well. “No, what?”

“I was starting to count change while he was pulling his bags out of the front, and he told me, ‘Fuck you, buddy. You can keep the tip and like it.’”

Sandra gasped, then giggled. “He didn’t really.”

“He did!” Roger insisted. “I just sat there at the curb for the next minute trying to figure out whether I was mad or happy.”

“So what did you came up with?”

“Bittersweet amusement,” Roger said.

“Ah, such is the life of the service workers.” Sandra rolled onto her back and put her arms under her head. “We hate the rest of the world, and they hate us. But what would we do without each other?”

Roger laughed and laid on his back, mimicking his wife’s pose. “You sound like a politician.”

“Well maybe I should sound like one. They work in the service sector too, and we do the same things. We take care of other people and try to sweet talk to everyone, telling them they are always right. But we really hate them and wish our roles were reversed.”

“I don’t,” Roger said, then yawned. “Besides, the politicians get limos and free airfare. They get paid vacations for a month. The last time we had a vacation, we had two days last summer, and we drove to Austin see your mother.”

“Oh, you loved visiting her, so shut up.”

“Yeah, okay, but Six Flag would have been better. I know Roy would agree with me.”

Sandra sighed. “Yes, but Roy is why we couldn’t go to Six Flags.”

“True.”

The room went silent until Sandra said, “I just don’t want him to turn out like his father.”

Roger nodded, biting back his anger. They’d had the fight before, and he’d given up the topic of Sandra choosing

to still call her ex-husband Roy's father.

Sandra left Harry Cummings while she was pregnant with Roy. Enduring Harry's abuse on her own was fine in her abused mind, but letting him vent his rage on a child scared her out of her rut and got her running.

Harry went after her.

Roger woke up disoriented, panting while he sat up and tried to find his wife. But he wasn't back at home in his small two bedroom house. He was miles and years away, living in a world where nothing was familiar.

He raised his head and found Nicole sitting in the narrow floor of the kitchen. Her head was bowed while she sewed what looked like a pair of pants. He watched her quietly then got up, shuffling to the kitchen to alert her to his presence.

Nicole had sewn the bottom seams of the pant legs into the back pockets, and he offered her a perplexed smile while he knelt down. She turned over the pants, and he saw the inside seams of the upper legs were cut and sewn into a single tube. The mid thighs were stitched shut with two lines of thread, and the rest of the legs made two wide straps. Nicole finished her silent demonstration by drawing the cord sewn into the waist to cinch the top of the improvised bag shut.

Roger nodded his approval, but his expression filled with confusion when she handed him the bag.

"Tomorrow morning, you can take what you want. I'll go to the food center to pick up some new supplies if we need them," Nicole whispered.

“How did you know?” Roger asked. There was no point denying that he would leave.

Nicole shrugged her shoulders. “You just had the look. When people were planning an escape, they got a certain look in their eyes. You’ve had that look from the moment you mentioned your son.”

“I feel bad leaving,” Roger said.

“It’s all right. What you did today will eventually stir these people out of their shock. Maybe all it does is give our kids something to do until...” Nicole shook her head. “It still makes a difference, you know?”

Roger tried on the empty bag. “Yeah, this will work fine. Thank you.”

“Would you like to have sex with me?” Nicole asked. Roger gaped at her with a dumbfounded expression, and she dropped her head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“Nicole, I’m flattered, but I’m...well, in my head, I’m still a happily married man.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” She tried to offer him a weak smile, but her face was filling quickly filled with a look of shame. “It’s just...if this is the end of the world...” Her smile cracked while tears welled up in her eyes.

Seeing her lose control, Roger couldn’t stop thinking of Sandra, or of Roy. His chest tightened, and a lump crawled into his throat that he couldn’t swallow down. He moved to sit beside Nicole and closed his arms around her while she cried.

She calmed down in his embrace, and she spoke in a soft whisper about her husband, who was a soldier based in Germany when the invasion began. She talked of her phone calls to him during the first few days, when she still had hope in the form of a voice on the other end of the line.

But then the phone stopped ringing, and then Nicole and Phillip were running for their lives like so many others.

Nicole talked herself out, yawned, and apologized again with a embarrassed face before she returned to her cramped quarters.

He moved back to the couch and took off the bag before he tried to go back to sleep. But Nicole's outburst, indeed even her offer, reminded him again how any plan he made wasn't so grand it could save the world. Roger completed the thought that Nicole couldn't before. *If this is the end of the world, what would you rather be doing?*

He decided that if he could somehow find his family, he wanted to spend his last moments with them. And if he couldn't find them, he wanted the satisfaction of knowing he had died trying.