



I Burn Today

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I Burn Today

"You have been sanctioned for the use of emotional language, radical proposal and, most damaging of all, Mr. Kurtz, treason."

Kurtz, hands chafed from the cuffs, for the first time in his life could not find words. A hundred thousand nights before he had no trouble. They came from him as water from the fall, a river meeting its eventual fate.

And now?

"Nothing to say, Mr. Kurtz?" The man behind the desk wore the uniform of a system that Kurtz had described plenty of times before. He had seen only rain and the most miserable winter morning in that uniform. Only winter in the faces of the Ministerial Officers.

Was that his crime? To speak of them as winter men? To assign them the coldest season by way of description?

Still no words, a speaker's block created by disbelief. What possibly could they object to in his writings? What crimes were there in talking of love and life and silver linings? Could there

be a crime in honesty?

"The offending texts in question are: *The House of Birds*, *So the Tarot Woman Says* and *In Old Paris*. These are your works, are they not?"

He could no more ignore he was their creator than reject a child.

"They are mine," he said, and in admission he remembered the inspiration for each. Love, Hope and Nostalgia. Each a personal moment in time, captured by another moment in words. There, in the black-and-white rooms of the Ministry he was for a moment caught in the blue-eyes of a woman once loved, a future once hoped for and a time he longed to experience. Precious moments put down so that everyone might feel a little of what he had felt.

The clicking of fingers brought Kurtz from his remembering.

"Eyes front, Mr. Kurtz," the official said, "we'll have no daydreaming here. You're facing serious charges, you do understand what is happening here, don't you?"

Kurtz wagged his head "no".

"You don't?" the official said.

“What crimes have I committed? What did I do?”

The official cleared this throat. He tapped and brought to life Kurtz’s words on the screen so that both could see. But the words were not left to that silent voice within the head, now they were flattened, made sour by the toneless voice of the Ministry Man.

“And I quote: *‘Her blue eyes were Earth seen from the deepest black, her love stronger than gravity, she pulled me close to her orbit in the following days.’* Now, I”m no reader, have no time for anything much more than my daily reports, but you can’t deny the language used here is un-sanctioned. Do you deny the accusation?”

He could not deny the love, for it was real, and the words had made it all the more real.

“Further to that, Mr. Kurtz, this sentence does not conform to the reading level set by the Ministry. You do understand we have a maximum reading age, do you not, all artists were informed by mandate.”

Mandates, bulletins, how was he supposed to take notice of the rules when his fingers itched

to type, his brain swelled with words. Pressure had to be relieved, the tap turned on, and their mandates only served as a plug.

"Let us move on, shall we?" And without agreement, the Ministry Man waved his hand and more text appeared behind him. He read from it as though going through the items on a shopping list. *'The future, Ardiss often thought, was only a matter of waiting for the weather to clear. One day the rains would stop, and with it the rain men would wash away into the gutters, forgotten under the glare of the returning sun.'* The Man from the Ministry eyed Kurtz. "Now, what is that supposed to mean?"

"It's up to you," Kurtz said.

The Man from the Ministry placed a hand over where there might be a heart.

"Up to me?"

"To the reader," Kurtz corrected himself.

"But what was your intent, Mr. Kurtz? A man does not simply write such a thing and not mean anything by it."

How could he explain the flow of a river, the beating of a heart to a man who had not been

caught in the tide or listened to the drum inside his ears? There was no floor plan, no map to desire and inspiration. There was only a moment of clarity, brightness, the sun coming through the clouds and then... typing.

There was only the stopping of time and the stretching of time. There was only the voices and the desires, the telepathy of fingers. None of this would make sense to the Ministry Man.

"The intent was to tell a story," Kurtz said.

"A story, I'm told, that advocates the eradication of the Ministry, as do most of your works. Are you a good citizen, Mr. Kurtz? Would a good citizen propose such radical ideas?"

"I don't propose anything."

"The report is here before my very eyes, and I quote *'The distinct aim of Kurtz's work is to foster a dissatisfaction with the rule of law. Kurtz's output regularly offers a path divergent from Ministerial justice. Further it suggests the building of a community outside of Ministerial Jurisprudence. This work is classified T-Alpha. Any and all actions to suppress this material is warranted.'*"

It was all so clinical and cold. Winter words

from winter men who would never understand. Despite this, Kurtz could not help the summer words that came from his lips.

"I've had worse reviews," he said.

"I very much doubt it could get any worse, Mr. Kurtz. Shall we continue?"

"I still don't know what I'm accused of," Kurtz said.

"That will become clear soon enough. We'll move on to the third infraction. Your novel *In Old Paris*, how would you describe this work?"

Fantasy, Kurtz wanted to say. Longing, nostalgia for a time and a place he could not visit but so dearly wanted to. From mind through fingers he had conjured himself to walk the Left Bank with long dead artists, clap hands in the smoky Beat cellars with long dead musicians, climb La Tour Eiffel and from the top of that grand and long lost monument shout his love for the imagined city. On the pages, in his mind, he had fallen in love with a woman who was that city. A woman who was the Seine and Eiffel and the music all at once.

He could still remember her now, that

imagined creature, a girl in a red dress in a summer that was forever bright in a city that still existed. He could smell her perfume, a thousand-roses strong. Hear her voice, a gentle symphony. Her smile, summer sunshine.

How to describe then, everything that the book meant and brought back to him in a moment?

"It's a love story," he said.

"No," the Ministry Man said, "it is not. It is by classification considered non-classified by our standards. For one, the tense is incorrect."

"How so?"

The Ministry Man smiled and it was a tear in the cloud letting through the sun for a moment.

"You know very well, all scribes know that only Present Tense is allowed."

"And why is that?"

The Ministry Man passed his hand over the words and silenced them, obliterating the past in one swoop.

"The past, Mr. Kurtz, we, none of us need to know of the past. And to think of the future is as much a trouble. The present is all that matters.

The here, the now. As it is, so shall it be. Have you forgotten the Ministerial Motto?"

Kurtz became the child of another time, his words simple and direct.

"Why?"

"Seriously, you ask me this question?"

"I do."

"Because, Mr. Kurtz, to think of the past is to pause, is to be unproductive. To think of the future invites dreams, the wrong kind of dreams. We must be in the now, always, if our society is to remain strong. As it is, so shall it be."

They were mandate words, rules that Kurtz could not follow. There was always a past for Kurtz, and always the future. The now only a midpoint between one and the other.

To ignore the past was to forget love, to deny memory. To lose his thoughts of the future was to lose hope.

Even now in the black-and-white office with Ministry Man, Kurtz had not lost that hope and love. There was always a way, always a new story to tell, despite all mandates and sanctions.

"What do you think of all this?" he said.

“What’s your story?”

“I have none. I am an instrument of the law. A protector of the official mandate. You’d best heed that, Mr. Kurtz, for I am the one who will decide your punishment.”

“And that punishment?”

His face did not change as he spoke, there was no weight in the Ministry Man’s words as he gave his final decree.

He stood straight, not needing to see the screens, the verdict memorised.

“On the count of ignoring official mandate in the production of text and fictive works, the making available of such texts for no profit, and the sharing of those texts on non-sanctioned channels, you are hereby found guilty. Mandatory erasure of all authored works from the national database and any works that may point to those aforementioned is to be undertaken immediately by the Keepers of the Public Records.”

Kurtz swallowed hard, he felt a lifetime in the motion. Every late night spent in joy or frustration, every imagined world or woman, it would all be gone in the push of a button.

"I won't exist anymore, not anywhere?" Kurtz said.

"Only within the official Ministerial Records. There will be no public record of your works. Shall we move on to the second charge?"

"There's more? isn't that enough? To take my life's work and just... make it disappear?"

The Ministry Man did not look Kurtz in the eye as he continued.

"On the second count of treason and incitement to rebellion, you are hereby found guilty. You will, at a time of our choosing, be redacted from the greater populace. Your body will be recycled as per Ministry Mandates, and all database records will be expunged. Further to this you are allowed to present one final statement of guilt or innocence, which will be duly noted in the internal manifesto but not viewable in the public domain. You will be allowed a meal of your choice before your redaction, and to contact one member of your family." The Ministry Man turned now to Kurtz. "Is there any person that I might contact, Mr. Kurtz?"

Redacted, the word chilled Kurtz's mind. It

was a word that covered so much, a word as cold as the man who spoke it.

But Kurtz knew the true meaning of the word.
Death.

Simple.

They would kill him for loving and hoping and sharing that love and hope with others. They would erase him from the world he had dared to imagine differently. Gone, without any past or any thought of a future.

In the absence of family, Kurtz had a question.

"How?" he said.

"How?"

"How will I be killed?"

The Ministry Man held up a finger.
"Correction. Redacted, Mr. Kurtz, redacted."

"How will I be redacted?"

The Ministry Man cleared his throat, stared straight ahead and without any hesitation, spoke.

"You will be taken to Ministerial Chambers and there, at a preordained time, incinerated by

our technicians. Any more questions?"

Kurtz was lost for words.

His writer's block continued as they ushered him into the tiny cell at the end of a corridor that buzzed with the insect song of strip lights.

Inside he could think of nothing but fires and burning and the past, not the future.

There was no future now. He was left only with a tablet, his frozen fingers, and his thoughts.

They could not take those away, not yet.

He recalled history, seeped in black and white, where words and pages danced in hateful fires. He recalled the smiling faces of children as they threw books upon those fires. The glee as they tried to do what the Ministry Men could do with a push of a button.

The fires no longer needed stoking, the flames were digital and odourless, unseen by all except Kurtz and the Ministry Men.

Tomorrow he would be a memory in the minds of those who accessed the grand Ministerial Channel. A week from now a vague recollection. Within the year, most would have forgotten him completely.

No need to burn the book any longer. Push a button. Burn the body. It was all so simple and clean.

Nothing left but ashes in the wind and an amnesia that none knew existed.

Kurtz stood, as he has stood so many nights before. He paced, as he had paced out the imagined lands of his stories. He stopped, as he had stopped so many times before when inspiration struck.

This time it was a lightning bolt.

Kurtz sat, his fingers were a thunder upon the slick membrane of the tablet. His ideas a fire a thousand times greater than any to burn books or bones with.

A last stand.

A last memory.

The final story.

If they wanted confession, confession they

would have. The confession of a life lived in passions, in glory and joy. A life of words and love and hope. If all that was to be left of him in this life was an unread, inaccessible document within the Ministerial Records then he would make it count.

Tomorrow he would burn.

Tonight he would do the same.

They came for him at dawn and found him weeping and smiling at the same time.

They dressed him in kindling clothes of the deepest grey, then marched him to the chambers of fire.

Before a shaft of blue flame they made him stand with the Ministry Man at his side.

"It's time, Mr. Kurtz," he said, "did you make a confession?"

The smile upon his face was hotter than any flame they would touch him with.

"I did."

"You accept then the judgement placed upon you?" The Ministry Man's voice rose with suspicion.

"I understand," Kurtz said. "I understand everything now."

"Do you have any final words before we carry out the sentence?"

Kurtz searched his tired, exhausted mind, but in the hours before dawn he had used every word, talked of every love, told of every past and possible future. In those true-burning hours he had walked again in his beloved and imagined Paris. He had smelled, heard, touched and kissed a woman in a red dress. Travelled beyond this time and this morning to lands absent of rain. Lands where the clouds never obscured the sun, where men were never burned for their passions.

All those words, all those imaginings, now Kurtz only had one final thing to say before he was extinguished from this life and the lives of everyone else.

"Read," he said.

"Read?" The Ministry Man parroted.

"Read. Anything, everything. Read. Fall in love, fall out again. Think of the future, the past, do not accept the present."

The Ministry Man drew his hand cleanly across the air before his throat. Somewhere within the fire chambers a recording device stopped listening.

"Clever, Mr. Kurtz, very clever. But you know that none of this will ever reach the public's ear. What you say, what you were and what you did, after this morning, it never existed."

"I know," Kurtz said, but there was no sadness in his voice.

For he had lived and loved and he'd seen the past and the future. And for those glorious moments, when the world as it was had faded away to nothing but the steady rain of his fingers upon the shimmering waters of a tablet, he had truly known what it was to be alive.

The Ministry Men would never know that feeling.

Theirs would always be a life lived in the now, with no hope and no love and no future but what was written in mandate, sanctified by

law.

He felt sorry for them.

And most of all, hopeful.

"You're smiling, Mr. Kurtz?" The Ministry Man said, puzzled.

"I am."

"Why?"

Kurtz eyed the Ministry Man.

"One day you might be lucky enough to know."

"Lucky? What does that word mean?" The Ministry Man said.

"If you're lucky, one day you'll know," Kurtz said.

"Okay, enough of this stalling. It's time to carry out the sentence, Mr. Kurtz." The Ministry Man held a hand into the air.

From behind the blue flames the technician's emerged. Hooded, their black expressionless mirror-faces reflected Kurtz's ever-growing smile.

They grabbed him and he did not resist. To the steady drumbeat of the Ministry Man's voice, he was walked towards his end.

“By order of the Ministry, upon this day citizen Alfred J Kurtz will be redacted from the Public Records. All history and works shall be rescinded and any deep links removed. As it is, so shall it be.”

For a moment the flames burned bright orange, then, finally, the turned to blue.

Outside the rain poured steadily upon a world that was how it was supposed to be. A world that had not changed since the redaction of Alfred J Kurtz. A world that no longer knew of his existence.

The Ministry Man sat down at his access screen and, with dutiful movements, brought up the reports from that morning.

As it is, so shall it be.

But that morning something had changed. The weather perhaps? Was there a hint of sunshine in the downpour?

No.

The document that appeared before the Ministry Man had a strange title, devoid of numbers and classification. Missing the clean and clear speech he was used to.

He read.

I Burn Today.

He read on.

by Alfred J Kurtz.

He continued to read.

An hour later, wet and shaking with tears, the Ministry Man remembered a man with the same name. A smiling man pushed into blue fire. A man who had spoken a word to him that he did not understand.

Suddenly he was thinking of the past and the possibility of a future. His mind teaming with the world imagined upon the page. Confused by the rush of emotion that had grabbed him.

A single word rose to the surface of his mind. A word that before this day, this morning, he had not understood.

Lucky.

Now he knew the meaning of that word.

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