



# I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son

By Kent Russell

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From one of the most ferociously brilliant and distinctive young voices in literary nonfiction: a debut shot through with violence, comedy, and feverish intensity that takes us on an odyssey into an American netherworld, exposing a raw personal journey along the way.

Locked in battle with both his adult appetites and his most private childhood demons, Kent Russell hungers for immersive experience and revelation, and his essays take us to society's ragged edges, the junctures between savagery and civilization. He pitches a tent at an annual four-day music festival in Illinois, among the misunderstood, thick-as-thieves fans who self-identify as Juggalos. He treks to the end of the continent to visit a legendary hockey enforcer, the granddaddy of all tough guys, to see how he's preparing for his last foe: obsolescence. He spends a long weekend getting drunk with a self-immunizer who is willing to prove he has conditioned his body to withstand the bites of the most venomous snakes. He insinuates himself with a modern-day Robinson Crusoe on a tiny atoll off the coast of Australia. He explores the Amish obsession with baseball, and his own obsession with horror, blood, and guts. And in the piercing interstitial meditations between these essays, Russell introduces us to his own raging and inimitable forebears.

*I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son*, blistering and deeply personal, records Russell's quest to understand, through his journalistic subjects, his own appetites and urges, his persistent alienation, and, above all, his knotty, volatile, vital relationship with his father. In a narrative that can be read as both a magnificent act of literary mythmaking and a howl of filial despair, Russell gives us a haunting and unforgettable portrait of an America—and a paradigm of American malehood—we have never before seen.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

Praise for *I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son*

“A book of essays can be a constellation. Individual pieces shine like stars, but to see the whole project as a unified thing requires a mythology. You need faith to make out a shape around all those dots of light, to believe in the bear or the swan. The possibility of that kind of faith hovers profitably around the edges of Kent Russell’s debut,”

—Ben Greenman, *The New York Times Book Review*

“An exhilarating collection of essays...Russell writes in an endearing voice that can be at once wryly observant and objectively fair...What’s most impressive about this collection is the way the disparate essays cohere into a memoir-like whole.”

—*Financial Times*

“A surprising, beautiful book, at once tough and tender, hilarious and dark, and above all, deeply original.”

—NPR.org

“The comparison will inevitably be made, so let’s go ahead and just make it: there is certainly a bit of David Foster Wallace in Kent Russell, most certainly in the feeling that you are reading a beautiful, intricate mind.”

—*Paste*

“A ludicrously smart, tragicomic man-on-the-edge memoir in essays.”

—*Vanity Fair*

“He throws himself at their mercy, he fights for them, he admires their power, he jabs at their soft spots, he flees, he circles back. Russell’s compassion for his subjects is not blind, and he doesn’t tread lightly, but he sees them as part of his crew, and he protects them with a ferocity and camaraderie that would make anyone want Russell in their corner.”

—Catherine Carberry, *The Rumpus*

“At times playful and at times serious, these essays explore the author’s relationship with his father as well as masculine archetypes across the U.S. What do hockey goons and Amish baseball players have in common? What about horror films and the Insane Clown Posse? Tours of duty in Afghanistan and Daniel Boone? At a glance, these subjects are disparate and oddly matched. But in the capable hands of Kent Russell, they merge to create a portrait of contemporary American masculinity that is brazen and bleak, strange and often hilarious.”

—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Kent Russell's essays are scary and sublime and the real real deal."

—Chad Harbach, author of *The Art of Fielding*

"For those of us who've been missing Hunter Thompson lately, good news: *I Am Sorry to Think I Have Raised a Timid Son* is as close as we're going to get to his second coming when it comes to full-on gonzo passionate observation and self-loathing transmuted into social criticism. Its larger subject is perhaps the most toxic and entertaining of all of the can-do malevolences abroad in our land – American masculinity – but its more intimate and wrenching subject is that of one father and son, similarly self-sabotaging, masters of hurtful apathy, talkers who reject the talking cure, each shipwrecked with their shame. If you're looking for what's funny and smart and fierce and devoted to the shrinking hope that we can all even still perhaps cultivate virtue, stop right here."

—Jim Shepard, author of *the Book of Aron*

"Kent Russell is one of the most excitingly gifted young non-fiction writers to have appeared in recent memory."

—John Jeremiah Sullivan, author of *Pulphhead*

#### About the Author

KENT RUSSELL's essays have appeared in *The New Republic*, *Harper's*, *GQ*, *n+1*, *The Believer*, and *Grantland*.

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#### 2. AMERICAN JUGGALO

I'd been driving for seventeen hours, much of it on two-lane highways through Indiana and then southern Illinois. Red-green corn sidled closer to the road until it stooped over both shoulders. That early in the morning, a mist was tiding in the east.

I figured I had to be close. A couple of times I turned off the state road to drive past family plots where the houses were white, right-angled ideals. Rising from many of these plots were incongruous humps of grass—homespun cemeteries. I wondered what it would be like to grow up in a place like this. Your livelihood would surround you, waving hello every time the wind picked up. You wouldn't be able to see your neighbors, but you'd for sure know who they were. You'd go to one of the Protestant churches seeded in the corn, take off your Sunday best to shoot hoops over the garage, and drink an after-dinner beer on your porch swing, certain of your regular American-ness. And one day you'd get buried feet from where you lived, worked, and died.

Doubt about this trip unfurled inside me as the odometer crawled on. I couldn't have told you then why I was doing it.

Back on IL-1, I glanced to my right and saw an upsidedown SUV in the corn. It must've flipped clear over

the stalks nearest the road, which stood tall and undamaged. The SUV's rear right wheel—the whole wheel—was gone, but the axle still spun. Stumbling alongside the wreck was a dazed kid in a Psychopathic Records fitted cap. The fingertips he touched to the side paneling seemed to keep him from pitching over.

When midwestern bugs hit your windshield, they chink like marbles. When I'm feeling indecisive in a car, I mash the accelerator.

When the hip-hop label Psychopathic Records released its seventeen-minute trailer for the eleventh annual Gathering of the Juggalos, a four-day music festival, five people I knew sent me links to it. I suppose that for them it was a snarker's Holy Grail: everyone involved in the video had such a boggling lack of self-awareness that the whole thing bordered on parody. "The Gathering has fresh and exciting shit to do all around the fucking fizzuck," the trailer went. "One hundred rap and rock groups! Helicopter rides! Carnival rides! Seminars! . . . And if you like midgets, we got midgets for you." Mind you, I had no idea who or what any of this was.

The trailer featured bedraggled white folks and nary a complete smile. "Fresh-ass" was used as a compound modifier denoting quality. Willis from Diff'rent Strokes would be there, and Vanilla Ice was going to sign autographs. There'd be wrestling all night, four nights in a row.

I could understand how some might find joy in making fun of these people and their "infamous one-of-a-kind" admixture of third-rate fun fair and perdition. But I was also impressed by the stated point of the thing: "The real flavor, what separates the Gathering from every other festival on the planet, is the magic in the air. The feeling of ten thousand best friends around you. The camaraderie. The family. And the love felt everywhere throughout the grounds. You'll meet people, make future best friends; you'll probably get laid. And you'll realize that the family coming together is what all of this is really about."

I did some hasty groundwork on that boon the Internet and found out that juggalos are: "Darwin's biggest obstacle." "A greasy, fat teenager with a Kool-Aid mustache and no friends who listens to songs about clowns in his stepmother's double-wide mobile home when he isn't hanging out at the mall food court." "They paint their faces, are aggressive, travel in packs, abide (supposedly) by a simplistic code of rules, and tell all those non-juggalos that juggalos live a happier and freer life." I learned that Saturday Night Live spoofed them on the regular. There's a band called Juggalo Deathcamp. "Illegal Immigrants Can Stay, Deport the Juggalos" is a statement that 92,803 individuals on Facebook agree with.

Who were these people? Why did everyone hate them so?

"Juggalo" etymology is this: Insane Clown Posse, the founders of Psychopathic Records, were performing in front of 1,800 at the Ritz in Warren, Michigan, in the early '90s. Violent J, one half of the Posse, was doing "The Juggla," a song off *Carnival of Carnage*. When he rapped the chorus, "You can't fuck with the Juggla . . .," he asked, "What about you, juggalo? Are there any juggalos in here?" The crowd went nuts and the term stuck.

No definition exists. Nowhere in Psychopathic Records' discography do any of their artists—not ICP, nor Twiztid, nor Blaze Ya Dead Homie, nor Anybody Killa, nor Boondox—attempt to delineate what a juggalo is or believes. The artists themselves self-identify as juggalos, but when they rap about juggalos, they do so with awe, incredulity, and more than a little deliberation.

From ICP's "Welcome to Thy Show": "We just glad we down with them, hate to be y'all / and have a juggalo shatter my skull for the Carnival."

From Violent J's interview with Murder Dog magazine: "Juggalos started with ICP and now it's grown into its own culture. It's still very much a part of ICP, but there are other groups that juggalos follow. A juggalo is not just a fan base of ICP. A juggalo is a way of life. . . . The juggalos is very much like a tribe. It's like this wandering tribe who gather every year at a sacred place to have a ritual. It's an ancient thing for humans."

ICP are Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope, a couple of white minor felons from the working-class suburbs of Detroit. In the early '90s, the two of them dropped out of high school, donned clown face, and founded both Psychopathic Records and a mythology called the Dark Carnival. Without getting too deep into it: The Dark Carnival comprises six studio albums, released between 1992 and 2002, known as the Joker's Cards. With each Joker's Card—Carnival of Carnage, Ringmaster, Riddle Box, The Great Milenko, The Amazing Jeckel Brothers, and The Wraith—ICP disclosed more of their Carnival and its murderous personalities and attractions. They envisioned a kind of big-top kangaroo court run by vigilante carnies. A darkly righteous expo that traveled from town to town and blew up racists, tortured wife beaters, bled pedophiles dry, and consigned the wealthy to hell.

From Violent J's memoir, ICP: Behind the Paint, which reads a lot like Bukowski's Ham on Rye: "Every kid who came through the line was just like us. They looked like us, dressed like us, talked like us and all that. NO!!!! I'm not saying that we influenced them and their style; I'm saying that they already had the same style as us. We were all just different forms of SCRUB!!!! We were all the same kind of people! We were all the world's UNDERDOGS. We were all pissed, and ready to do something about it."

In the early days, this "something" sounded a lot like class warfare. For instance, there's this, from the liner notes to Carnival of Carnage:

If those of the ghetto are nothing more than carnival exhibits to the upper class, then let's give them the show they deserve to see. No more hearing of this show because you can witness it in your own front yard! A traveling mass of carnage, the same carnage we witness daily in the ghetto, can be yours to witness, feel and suffer. No longer killing one another, but killing the ones who have ignored our cries for help. FREE PASS FOR THE GOVERNOR'S FAMILY! Like a hurricane leaving a trail of destruction, the ghetto on wheels! My views may be ugly, but so are the bloodstains on the streets I roam. If there is no change soon tickets will be issued to . . . The Carnival of Carnage.

This was more or less of a piece with the greater gangsta rap ethos of the early '90s, albeit espoused by two white clowns. But after Carnival of Carnage, ICP focused their creative energies on rapping about new nemeses and gory set pieces for their Dark Carnival; fanciful descriptions of retribution took precedence over politics. J and 2 Dope became like superheroes (at one point producing their own comic book series), and their slant-rhymed fantasies of comeuppance stood in for mobilization. If anything, their political beliefs could now be described as apocalyptic.

Or at least that's how some juggalos have perceived it. In 2006, one juggalo named Jacob Robida attacked three men in a Massachusetts gay bar with a hatchet and a gun, fled to West Virginia, kidnapped a woman, and drove to Arkansas, where he killed her, a police officer, and himself. In 2008, two Utah juggalos armed with a knife and a battle-ax attacked a seventeen-year-old, hacking at him twelve times. A juggalette from Colorado got her juggalo boyfriend to stab her mother to death. Two Pennsylvania juggalos took a boy into the woods and slit his throat in 2009. Police in Utah, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and California consider



juggalos a criminal gang. So does the FBI.

The man in the ticketing trailer told me someone would be by shortly with my press pass, which I had lied to get. Nobody assigned me to go to the Gathering of the Juggalos, and I couldn't have said why I was standing there in the buzzing heat at the entrance of Hogrock Ranch & Campground, a hundred-plus acres of cleared land in the Shawnee National Forest just outside tiny Cave-In-Rock, Illinois. Next to me was a shirtless kid named Squee. I'd helped him carry a gunnysack down the steep declivity that connects the overflow parking to the camp-ground. I'd said, grinning conspiratorially, "Let me guess: This shit's full of beers, right?" He'd said, "Fuck your beers, dude, we're smoking that weed. This shit's full of Powerades. Gonna sell these shits."

Squee rapped on the trailer's window ledge and told the ticketing man, "Uhh, I lost my car." "You lost your what?" the ticketing man asked. "My hoopty." "Can't help you." Squee turned to some other kids who were getting their bags checked at the gate and said, "Shit, I was in a tent with four juggalettes— sounds good, right?—Camry keys in my pocket, getting my drink on, my brain on. Now I can't find that shit." He glared at the kid next to him and said, "I told you it was a stupid idea to get that fucked up on the very first night, Randall."

Sandy the PR agent, my age and attractive in a round-featured midwestern way, rode shotgun in a golf cart that skidded to a halt in the dirt in front of the trailer. She handed me a lanyarded, laminated card that had the dimensions of a child's placemat at a chain restaurant. It was emblazoned with the Psychopathic Records mascot, the Hatchetman, and the letters "VIP." I'd never been credentialed before.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Sandy said, reaching her right arm over her left shoulder for me to shake from the back of the cart. At the wheel was a freckled child. "This is Justin. He works here, kind of." Justin turned to me slowly. His smile was wide and shingled with loose baby teeth. He floored it.

We bounced down the dirt pathways that web Hogrock. "This is normally a biker camp," Sandy said, "but sometimes also a Baptist kids' camp. This is the third straight Gathering here. Every Gathering's been in Michigan, Ohio, or Illinois. Seven thousand went to the first; twenty thousand went to the last. This business is a day longer than Woodstock."

Tents sprouted from every inch of available flat land on either side of the path. Pup tents, two-person tents, bivouacs, walk-in affairs with air-conditioning. Back in the woods, red tarp domes showed between trees like pimples under hair. Next to most were dusty American cars filled to the windows with stuff: beers, empty motor oil bottles, liters and liters of Detroit's bottom-shelf Faygo cola, pallets of Chef Boyardee, chips, chocolate, powdered Gatorade. Ruddy juggalo faces poked out of tent flaps at the approaching burr of the golf cart, adding to the surreal feeling of touring an encamped American diaspora.

We drifted past the seminar tent, the second stage, the auto-graph tent, the freak-show tent, the adipose food booths. The sky was as dully off-white as the inside of a skull. I'd read that these four days would range in temperature from ninety-six to a hundred degrees. Sweat-wise, I was already beyond recall.

"I did the whole Gathering last year," Sandy said. "I'm not staying past sundown tomorrow. I hope you brought something green, or an orange." Justin slalomed around shirtless juggalos. Seen from behind, most had broad, slumped shoulders and round, hanging arms. They were not stout. These people were grubbed with fat. They looked partially deflated. You think I'm being cruel, but these were the most physically unhealthful people I'd ever seen. "Because if not, you're shit out of luck. Unless you especially love carnival burgers, or fried curds from out the back of someone's RV."

We visited a swimming hole nicknamed Lake Hepatitis that was the kelly green of putt-putt hazard water. A waspy helicopter you could ride in for forty dollars. A trailer full of showers, a wrestling ring, and the half-mile-long valley that held the main stage on one end and a small fair at the other. It turned out that Justin was the son of Psychopathic Records' VP. My credential flapped in the false breeze, whining like a musical saw.

Justin braked hard on a narrow bridge that spanned a parched creek. There was a backup of cars looking for open campground. Not more than twenty-four inches in front of us sat twin girls on the rear bumper of a white minivan. They couldn't have been a day over fourteen or a biscuit under 225. They wore bikini tops, and the way they slouched—breasts resting on paunches, navels razed to line segments—turned their trunks into parodies of their sullen faces.

The air here was dry and piquant. Cigarette and pot smoke convected, chasing out oxygen. One of the girls called out to Sandy, "You're really pretty," emphasizing the "You're" as though being pretty were suspect. Juggalos swarmed the bridge, and when the traffic stopped, they closed in, hawking whatever they had. Hands shot into the cart, holding cones of weed for fifteen dollars, glass pipes for ten dollars, bouquets of mushrooms for I don't know how much, Keystone Lights for a dollar, single menthols for a dollar. A clutched breast was pushed through the fray and jiggled; a disembodied voice demanded a dollar.

Then somebody screamed, "WHOOOP, WHOOOP!"

Understanding how this sounds is important, as it forms a refrain to the entire Gathering. A single "WHOOOP, WHOOOP!" is like a plaintive, low-pitched train whistle Dopplering from afar. The Os are long, and there's a hinge between the first "WHOOOP" and the second. You sort of swing from one syllable to the next.

The crowd fortified the call, returning it deeper and rounder. "WHOOOP, WHOOOOOOOOP!" Sandy overturned her handbag, found oversize sunglasses, and put them on. "Just say it. Just do it," she said. Thinking myself a funny guy, I did a kind of Three Stooges "Whoop whoop whoop!"

Which I know now was wrong. "WHOOOP, WHOOOP!" is juggalo echolocation. Its not pinging back means trouble.

The twins screamed, "Show us your titties, bitch!" at Sandy. A tall guy with a massive water gun screamed, "Man, fuck your ride!" and sprayed us with a stream of orange drink the pressure and circumference of which made me think of racehorses. A "FUCK YOUR RIDE!" chant went up and around the crowd, and garbage was thrown. I would describe what kind of garbage, and how it felt to be the object of such ire—but I had so much garbage thrown at me at the Gathering of the Juggalos that showers of refuse became commonplace, a minor annoyance, and describing one would be like describing what it's like to get a little wet on a winter's day in Seattle. Justin, bless his heart, floored it, parting the crowd with the derring-do one is capable of when one's father is running shit.....

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