



WILD
WORLD

a novel

Peter S. Rusk

Copyrighted Material

Wild World

Copyright © 2017 by Peter S. Rush. All Rights Reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise—without prior written permission from the publisher, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

For information about this title or to order other books and/or electronic media, contact the publisher:

Prior Manor Press

355 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017

PriorManorPress.com

ISBN: 978-0-9990665-0-8 (hardcover)

978-0-9990665-1-5 (paperback)

978-0-9990665-2-2 (eBook)

Printed in the United States of America

Cover design: James Iacobelli

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

To my family

FOUR DEAD IN OHIO

MAY 1970

When Steve Logan stepped into the sunlight that Monday, he began to make small decisions that would change his life. He felt a very different vibe on the Brown University campus. The mellow spring weekend had turned to an eerie chill. Students were pouring out of classrooms, not in their normal sleepy stroll but in panic and confusion. The action passed in slow-motion chaos as a knot grew in Steve's stomach. What didn't he know?

He grabbed a thin, intense kid with black glasses who looked like he was on the path to Faunce House, the student union. "What's going on?"

"They're killing kids on campus." The boy's acned face was a mixture of fear and incomprehension. He stood perfectly still, looking at the ground.

"What? Where? Here?"

"Kent someplace—shooting protesters. It's on the news."

Steve released the boy, who ran toward the student center without looking back. Killing kids on campus . . . anti-war demonstrations

had been growing since Nixon had invaded Cambodia but. . . It had to be a mistake. As Logan sprinted toward his apartment, his long brown hair trailing like a pennant, he thought how Nixon had increased the venom about college protesters. But shooting kids on campus? He stretched his legs, glad for the power he'd built through lacrosse, as the trees flew by—it was one more block. He had to get home to Roxy.

He dug deeper into his training for more speed. This was fucked up. It couldn't be true. It had to be something else—an assassination or madman with a gun.

Taking two steps at a time up, he flew to the third floor of the wooden New England floor-through. Roxy Fisher, wearing a white peasant blouse, was sitting in the maroon salvaged chair in the living room under a full-wall mural, whose screaming, clashing colors reflected the turmoil Steve felt. Her lips were drawn tightly, and small tears were running from her eyes. Steve bent and kissed her on the cheek, wiping her tears with his shirt.

His roommates, Cal Metcalf IV, a thin, over-achieving Boston prep-school kid, and Andy Powers, with his blond afro, were sitting on the sagging couch. They were watching Walter Cronkite on a small black-and-white TV on the table next to three empty Narragansett bottles. Steve inhaled deeply to catch his breath as he listened.

Today at Kent State University in Ohio, four students were killed and nine wounded when students attacked the National Guard troops as they were trying to prevent the students from taking over administration buildings. The National Guard said they were in fear of their lives by the mob.

“Shit. Shit! Kids are attacking armed troops? We had a half a million at Woodstock last summer and no violence,” Cal said, his face lined with sweat.

“A million march on Washington to end this fucking war. No violence. A bunch of kids at nowhere U, and the National Guard in full battle gear shoots them down. This is fucked up,” Andy yelled at the television in his Long Island accent.

Roxy rose. “I can’t believe I’m watching this. She buried herself in Steve’s chest. “Is this the start of the revolution?”

Steve quietly stroked her head, trying to comprehend the scene on the television. He watched the Vietnam War—body counts—death on TV every night—it was destroying the country. His father’s generation—the World War II veterans—didn’t understand why his generation hated this war.

Steve tried to explain to his father that there wasn’t a Pearl Harbor—the Vietnamese didn’t attack. There were no front lines, no war objectives, just drafting kids as cannon fodder to fight little men in black pajamas. Nixon just expanded the endless war, dividing the country more than ever. And now body counts had come to the college campus. He felt the country had, without warning, begun devouring its young. College students like Steve and his roommates, students who should be making the world a better place.

He felt sick, like when the box on the schoolroom wall had announced President Kennedy was dead. These were just kids, like them, protesting just like them, not thinking of the consequences. Murdered by American troops?

Roxy turned and stared at the TV, small tears still seeping from her eyes. She was so vulnerable. Steve wanted to protect her because she had recently lost her father and sister, and her relationship with her mother was badly frayed. She leaned back against him and he surrounded her shoulders with his arms. He could smell the baby shampoo in her hair. Could he leave her for law school? He felt her quiver in his arms, and he pulled her tighter.

“Roxy, you’re from Ohio. Is that some radical hotbed?” Cal looked over his glasses at her.

“Baloney with mustard on rye is radical. Why not Berkeley or Columbia?” She turned her head to Steve, and he could feel her rising sadness. He wanted to go back to yesterday, to Spring Weekend with Judy Collins singing on the green and Roxy’s head in his lap. It was all so peaceful. How had the country come to this? The Vietnam War was wrong, and protesting was now punishable by death.

“Shut up,” Cal snapped. “Let’s hear the rest.”

The students were unarmed, and observers said they posed no direct threat to the Guardsmen. It is reported that two of the dead were students on their way to class, who were not part of any demonstration. Two male and two female students were killed. Over sixty rounds of ammunition were fired at the unarmed students. Officials are questioning why the Guardsmen were issued live ammunition and who gave the order to fire.

The students were protesting President Nixon’s speech on April 30th, announcing the invasion of Cambodia by U.S. forces, further widening the war in Southeast Asia. Governor James Rhodes justified the shooting, calling the protesters, “un-American, bent on destroying higher education in Ohio.”

The television replayed tear gas and troops with fixed bayonets marching across the campus as students scattered in every direction. Steve imagined Cal fleeing in fear as the bullets cracked and Andy gasping for air as the tear gas cut off his oxygen. And he was pulling Roxy to safety while she wanted to confront the troops. It happened at Kent State to kids just like them. It could have been in Providence or any other college town. The country would not be the same—it couldn’t go back. But where was forward?

Andy paced in a circle, his mustache flexing as he tightened his jaw and his blond afro seeming to grow. Finally, he pulled up and

spat out, “They trained a generation of killers of women and children in Vietnam. Now it’s come home. Maybe they will napalm this place and put us all out of our misery.” The longest hairs of his handlebar mustache quivered as he spoke.

Students around the nation are calling for strikes on campus in solidarity with the students killed at Kent State.

Andy stood with his thick arm raised and shouted at the television, “That’s right! We’ve got to shut it down!”

Cal jumped to his feet, fist raised.

“I’m so afraid. What’s going to happen next?” Roxy’s body tensed. Steve felt cold at the anger in the room. Was all he had been taught about America wrong? These were executions like in some Third World dictatorship. He always believed in the heroes, the good guys with white hats. Too many Westerns and war movies? No, he knew his history, and this was bullshit—just plain wrong. Was this the beginning of the revolution? Kids against kids—young against the old? But what would he do? He stroked Roxy’s shoulder. Her moist eyes were set with determination, and he moved a strand of her dark hair from her face to behind her ear. Who were they? He had thought of politics in the abstract, like most people. But this time, it was very real to him and her. They weren’t going to be spectators as the country went up in flames.

“We can’t just watch this on TV,” Roxy said. “Are you going to stay with me?”

Her green eyes danced under her raised eyebrows. He squeezed her hand. “Yes.”

Cal and Andy were chanting at the tube, “Shut it down! Shut it down! Shut it down!”

Roxy pulled Steve’s arms to her chest. These deaths had changed the stakes. He wasn’t afraid but confused. Yesterday, life had been

perfect. He wanted to take her away to live in a cabin in the woods or on some commune. But that wasn't going to happen. He wasn't going to run; he had to live up to his expectations. Life had seemed sorted out, with graduation only weeks away and law school. Now she wanted him to stay. So he was without a plan or a defined goal, questioning everything he thought he knew.

What was today about? Assassinations, riots, Black Panthers, peace marches, and Woodstock. Graduation at the end of the month had been the goal, but now he didn't know what would come next.

"Yes," he said trying to imagine some heroic gesture. "We can do anything."

Roxy smiled her liquid warmth, and he pulled her tightly to his chest, not wanting to ever let her go. What he was watching was wrong, he knew that, but what could he do to make it right? They turned and joined the chant. "Shut it down! Shut it down!"

What would he, could he do?