

Friends by Fight: the Conformist

Alex woke up and put on the clothes his mother had laid out for him. It was the morning of his first day of school in his new home—Toronto, in the Canadian province of Ontario. His first year of school was completed back in Munich, Germany, and had gone with little incident. He put on the perfectly pressed short-sleeve white shirt, pulled up a pair of lederhosen—the leather shorts of Bavaria—and tucked in his shirt. Finally, he fastened the buttons of the finely decorated leather suspenders.

Running the Canadian branch of a big international conglomerate was his father's *baby*, but Alex was, without a doubt, his mother's baby. Like most mothers, she ensured her son was dressed respectfully and in good taste. Unfortunately, for Alex, taste is relative, and hers came from the other side of a wide cultural divide.

The ideals of this upper middle-class neighbourhood in 1960s Toronto were WASP'y. Alex's mother took pleasure in following her own German cultural norms by dressing Alex far too formally for grade school. There was no malice in her intentions, she simply had no idea her traditional German cultural attire would create conformity problems for her young son. It was common for her to dress Alex in fancy shirts and slacks that were formal enough for adults to wear to church, weddings, or job interviews rather than a child in a second grade

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classroom. Alex's day would soon consist of sitting at an old, wooden desk plastered with gum; finger painting; sitting on the floor during story time; sliding down polished hallways while chasing kids—or being chased—and playing outside at recess.

It was Alex's first day of school, in a new country, and with a new language—and he shows up wearing lederhosen. He was greeted by jeers, heckling and gawking.

Later, in the schoolyard during recess, Todd Morgan teased Alex by calling him a girl. "Look at the girl in his girly shorts."

Alex perceived this as an insult and, not one to cave into bullies, went straight up to Todd with a very deep scowl on his face, far too serious for a second grade boy.

"Was war das?" Alex demanded.

"Huh?" The word dropped out of Todd's mouth like a stone.

Alex took another step toward Todd. "Was hast Du gesagt?"

Todd had no idea what Alex was saying, but he did know a challenge when he saw one, so he gave Alex a brisk shove.

In a split second, Alex retaliated, giving Todd a forceful heave.

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Todd went to tackle Alex but the tackle was dodged, and, in the process, Alex was able to secure a strong headlock.

“Na, hast Du was zum sagen?” Alex asked Todd, now pinned to the grass. Todd was on his side, with his head and neck being squeezed tight. Todd went to take a swing at Alex but only connected with his kneecap, which turned out to harm Todd more than Alex. Alex tightened his hold.

Meanwhile, the schoolyard became a maelstrom of children from all grades, drawn to the commotion of the skirmish between Todd and the new boy in the leather shorts.

Mrs. Hoffmann noticed the shift of mood on the schoolyard and was first to intervene. She grabbed Alex by the suspenders and yanked him off Todd. She considered just then how convenient it was to have boys with handle straps.

“What is this?” Mrs. Hoffmann questioned in a ruffled, exhausted voice. “Get up!” she almost, but not quite, shouted at Todd. Todd got up and dusted off his shirt. “Come with me, boys.” She left them no choice as she grabbed Alex by one arm, and Todd by the other. They made their way across the field, through the hallways of the school, through the secretary’s office, and to the principal’s office. Mrs. Hoffmann sternly directed Alex and Todd to seats placed outside the door of Principal McLean’s office. “Sit down, boys. Alex, you sit over there.” She pointed to a chrome and plastic chair to the right of the door. “And Todd, you sit over

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there.” She had him take a similar seat, adjacent to Alex. The principal wasn’t in his office yet. “The two of you wait here, for Principal McLean. And behave yourselves.” She turned around and left the office to apprise the secretary of the situation.

Alex and Todd slouched in their chairs with their chins down on their chests, moping about their predicament.

Once Mrs. Hoffmann left the office area, Todd lifted his head and laid blame on Alex. “This is all your fault.”

Alex, in an attempt to be cordial, shrugged his shoulders and smiled. They sat silently for a while longer, and then, out of restlessness, Alex brought out his house keys from his pocket. From the key ring, he pulled a magnifying glass from its leather cover. He focused it on a freckle, to see it up close. He then investigated a single hair follicle, checked out the minute hand on his watch, and examined the dirt on the palm of his hand.

“Hey, what’s that?” Todd enquired.

“Hmm?” Alex held up the magnifying glass.

“Can I see it?” Todd asked.

Alex signaled him to come over. Being new to the English language, he was still too shy to speak, although he could understand almost everything.

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Todd got up, and went over to sit next to Alex. “Can I see?”

Alex handed over the magnifying glass. Todd looked around to find something interesting to magnify. He found a dead ant. He descended on the carcass with great enthusiasm, spreading himself out on the floor with one eye closed, and the other up against the magnifying glass. “Look at this!”

Alex dropped down alongside as Todd pulled the magnifying glass up between them. They pressed their heads together, each closing opposite eyes, investigating the intricacies of the dead ant.

“Weird eyes,” observed Todd.

“Ya. Und legs. See?” Alex replied as he pointed to the barbs on the ant’s legs.

They went on being astounded by one observation after another until they were interrupted by an adult male voice. “OK, boys, what’s this?” Principal McLean asked while walking through the doorway on the way to his desk.

They jumped to their feet in unison. Alex looked to Todd for a reply. “We were just looking at stuff through this,” Todd replied, holding up the magnifying glass.

“I hear you two were in a bit of a scuffle.” The principal peered down at the boys accusingly.

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There was silence.

“Well, it seems to me that the two of you are getting along well enough.” He had softened his tone somewhat.

More silence.

“Since the two of you have worked things out so amicably, you don’t need to hang around here. You can go back to your classrooms. But no more fighting anyone around here, or anywhere else for that matter. Resolve your problems without violence. If I see either one of you in my office again, for fighting, I will take punitive action.” Then he added, “That means you’ll be in big trouble.”

Alex and Todd parted ways by the doorway of the secretary’s office, going in opposite directions since they were in separate classrooms. They met as enemies and parted as friends.

* * *

Class was in session and the hallways were empty. Alex had difficulty finding his way back to his classroom. He was still very unfamiliar with his new environment. When he reached the door, he stood before it, wondering what he should do next. Should he knock on the door, or should he just open it, and walk straight in? Would he have to explain to the entire class why he was late?

Alex knocked on the door.

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“Enter,” said the voice from within the classroom.

Alex turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. He had the class’s undivided attention. All eyes were on him and his lederhosen. Mrs. Hoffmann pointed out the desk Alex was to occupy. As he made his way through the class everyone gawked or snickered at him. He accepted the situation with a very stern frown, hoping everyone would soon lose interest in him, and his attire. Alex took his seat. “OK, class. Where were we?” Mrs. Hoffmann regained control of the class. Most of the class focused on the lesson, but some of the children were more interested in Alex and his lederhosen. They continued to stare at Alex. Some even whispered to each other, making up insults.

* * *

The lunch bell rang. Instantly the classroom erupted with chatter. Under the cacophony of children’s voices Derek whispered to Alex, “Nice shorts. Where can I get a pair of those?” Derek tilted his head and batted his eyelashes.

Alex knew he was being teased, but he smiled and continued walking to the cafeteria.

“I said nice shorts. Where can I get a pair?” Derek persisted.

Alex kept walking.

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They passed through the double doors that opened up to the cafeteria. Derek had acquired a small audience that followed behind them, giggling.

In the cafeteria, students were starting to stream in. Alex stopped abruptly and turned to Derek. Derek stopped as well. The two stared at each other, in a silent standoff. “Nice shorts,” Derek said with a smirk.

Alex curled up his fingers into a fist, and smashed Derek square in the mouth. Alex did a good job in delivering the upward travelling punch. In fact, he knocked out one of Derek’s front teeth. Derek spit the tooth out with a wad of spit and blood. As most kids do, he started crying at the sight of blood. Derek walked out of the cafeteria, crying all the way to the washroom. Luckily, for Alex, no teachers intercepted him along the way.

Alex bent down to pick up the displaced tooth. He wiped it off with his white, well-pressed shirt, and caught up to Derek in the washroom. “Entschuldigung.” He corrected himself with an attempt at English, “Um, I’m sorry.” Alex was very genuine. He hadn’t wanted to hurt anyone. When he got Derek’s attention, he extended his hand out to him, offering him the missing tooth. “Um, for za tooz fairy.”

Derek froze with confusion. He didn’t know whether to be angry or grateful. “Thanks.” He decided to be grateful, and took possession of the tooth. The bleeding had stopped, and he had already washed away any trace of damage. Derek

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smiled with a big, dark gap in the front row of his upper teeth. “Don’t worry; it was ready to fall out anyway.”

* * *

After lunch, Alex returned to class. He dreaded, as anyone would, having all eyes on him, so he made it to class before the other students. He sat there, alone, with his lederhosen concealed beneath the desk as the classroom began to fill. He sat there with his crisp, white shirt (which wasn’t so crisp or white anymore) and big, leather, Bavarian suspenders visible to anyone who cared. Some of the students, mostly girls, chuckled and snickered. One very precocious girl called Alex ridiculous. Many of the students left him alone. Word had spread that Alex vehemently defended himself against any ridicule.

It was the last recess of the day. The school bell rang, and the classes discharged into the schoolyard—a mass of children—screaming, squealing, talking, laughing, snickering, giggling, yelling, farting, whispering, and sometimes even crying.

There stood Alex, all alone in the yard, with his lederhosen, big Bavarian suspenders and all. He noticed other kids in the yard, whispering, giggling, and pointing at him. He felt very lonely and awkward. He didn’t know where he should stand—everywhere felt like the wrong place. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere

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to take shelter from the pointing fingers and insensitive scoffs. Since he couldn't vanish, he went over to the monkey bars.

Two second grade girls moved away from the bars as Alex approached. Alex jumped up, and grabbed hold of the bar. He held on, and swung back and forth for a little while, but that quickly became boring, so he swung his legs up and hooked his knees around the bar. He pulled the rest of his body up and sat on top of the bar, overlooking the entire schoolyard. He noticed a group of boys, much bigger than him, probably from third or fourth grade, walking in his direction. Alex looked down onto the four boys as they stood below him.

“What the hell is that?” the biggest of the four boys inquired.

Alex fixed a scowl down onto the boys, studying their faces.

“It looks like a dress or something gay like that,” exclaimed the awkward, chubby kid wearing a baseball cap. He wouldn't have been so outspoken without Les around.

“If you ask me, he looks like a fag,” Les added, using a word he learned from his older brother.

Alex heard the word *fag*. He didn't really know what it meant. Once again, he knew he was being insulted, which meant he was obliged to defend himself. He tried to fight back, with sarcasm this time, but that didn't work considering his limited command of English. As a result, his attempt to stave off any physical

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aggression was short-lived. He knew exactly what was going on—he was being called a sissy.

To be called a weakling, or sissy, was intolerable to his young and immature sensibilities. The fact that he might get beat up didn't enter his mind. He jumped down from the height of the bar and landed in a deep squat to absorb the shock of his landing. He stood up and found Les to be a head taller than him. It didn't matter. Alex moved forward, reached up with one arm, put Les into headlock, and pulled him down to the ground.

The scrap was on. The two rolled around—stood, fell, groaned, and grunted—but no one cried. Dust flared up into the air like in a junkyard dogfight. The schoolyard population was immediately drawn to the scene of the fight, including Mrs. Hoffmann. But before she could stop the commotion, Alex landed a punch right to Les's stomach, right in the diaphragm. Les dropped to the ground, gasping for air.

Alex was scared. He put a hand on the spot that received the blow. "Are you OK?" he asked, with a genuine concern that was evident to all the onlookers.

Les nodded his head while taking deep and laboured breaths.

Suddenly, just as Alex was trying to comfort his opponent, he was pulled up to his feet by the suspenders again. Mrs. Hoffmann was there to meet his confused

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gaze. “You again? Two fights in one day—and on the first day of school. Troublemaker.”

Les was laid out on the ground, still short of breath. Alex had a fat lip as well as many scuffs and scrapes. Once again, Alex was hauled off to the principal’s office—this time with a new partner-in-crime.

Just like before, Mrs. Hoffmann sat them down in chairs outside Principal McLean’s office. Once she had deposited the boys, she returned to patrol the schoolyard.

Alex ran his tongue along the swollen portion of his upper lip. He inspected the scrapes on his knees and elbows, not to mention his bloody, dirty clothes.

He knew he would be in trouble when his mother saw the missing buttons, grass stains, blood stains from Derek’s tooth, and ground-in earth.

Les watched Alex assess the damage. “Looks like you got pretty roughed up,” he observed with a grin.

Alex couldn’t tell whether Les’s grin was crooked or genuine. He assumed the best, shrugged his shoulders, and replied, “Ya, vait till my muzzer sees zis,” breaking away from his shyness to speak English.

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Les paused for a minute. Here was something he hadn't previously considered. "Is that who puts them clothes on you?" Les's English wasn't perfect, either.

"Yes, my muzzer," Alex replied. "I do not choose." Alex thought for a moment. "You can veer vat you vant?"

"Pretty much," Les replied.

"How old you are?" Alex asked.

"Eight," answered Les

"I vish I vas eight," Alex said.

Before Principal McLean returned to his office, Alex had made another friend. It is not unusual for boys to strike up a friendship after a fight. Hierarchies are established, and then the boys know where they stand.

"Alex, you again?" the principal stopped in front of Alex. Then he walked over to his desk and took a seat behind it. "Come here, Alex."

Alex obediently walked over to the desk with a feeling of despair. Alex was contemplating why he was the one who had to step up to the desk; he hadn't started the fight.

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“That’s three fights in a day, Alex.” Principal McLean pointed out in a proud tone, indicating that nothing gets by him. Alex wondered how he knew about the other fight since he hadn’t been caught. Do principals have spies, he wondered.

“This is the first day of school, and you’ve managed to get into three fights already.” He put down some papers he had been inspecting and looked straight at Alex. Alex didn’t return his gaze. “So I suspect this is a trend you’re setting. And I intend to stop this trend by getting your parents involved.”

Alex didn’t say a word. The shyness of speaking a foreign language caught up to him again. Les looked on with a shallow feeling of pity for Alex and wondered if Alex was going to snitch. Les didn’t have to ponder for long.

“Les, you can return to class,” Principal McLean instructed.

Les obeyed and walked away slowly.

Bureaucrats seem to see their administrative world in black and white. Mrs. Hoffmann, like Principal McLean, had perceived Alex as a troublemaker—simply because he was the guy on top. The guy winning the fight usually takes the blame. The fact that Alex was in several fights in a short time only confirmed their suspicions that he had started all three. Three skirmishes in a day proved he was a scrapper, possibly even a bully.

Principal McLean called Alex’s mother to report the problem.

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Alex found himself in a difficult situation—he was forced to wear attire that was certain to put him on the defensive, yet, when he defended himself, he would be punished. To complicate matters, Alex didn't want to hurt his mother's feelings by criticizing her taste in clothes.

Once Principal McLean got off the phone with Alex's mother, he instructed Alex to return to class.

Once again, Alex had to make his way through the communal stare of the class. This time there was little to no heckling.

After what Alex perceived to be an eternity, the school bell rang and class was out for the day. Alex made his way out the front door of the school, only to be greeted by the pensive frown of his mother who sat behind the steering wheel of the car parked directly in front of the school. Alex opened the car door and hopped into the front seat.

“My God, Alex, look at you!” she said in German, very upset and concerned for her son's well-being.

Alex didn't say a word.

“What happened?” She stopped herself. “Well, I think I know what happened. The school principal called me today to tell me that you were in a number of fights.” She wasn't angry—more concerned. “Are you hurt?”

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“No, I’m fine,” he replied, also in German, thankful that the swelling of his fat lip had subsided. He didn’t want his mother making any undue fuss.

Alex explained to his mother that he was being teased, but he did not tell her why, simply telling her he had defended himself. He assured her that he hadn’t started any of the fights—which was true, for the most part.

Later that evening, when Alex’s father returned from work, Alex was lectured by both parents. He was told that fighting is not a means to an end—that it is not a way to resolve a conflict. His father told him that fighting is very primitive, and that he would like to see his son exhibit more sophistication when confronted with such conflict—a very adult perspective for a child to attempt to apply.

* * *

The next morning Alex was sent to school wearing a light blue, short-sleeved, button-down shirt, socks up to the knees—and lederhosen with decorated suspenders. As he opened the car door and set foot on the asphalt, he gave his mother a last, silent, imploring look, but the plea went unnoticed.

He walked up the stairs to the entrance, opened the door, waved back at his mother rather solemnly, and entered the school ready for another day of combat.

On his way to class, he came across Derek. Derek approached him with a smile that was missing a tooth. “Hey, Alex.”

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Alex returned the smile. “Hi.”

As it turned out, Derek had a solution to Alex’s predicament. “Alex, come here for a minute,” Derek insisted.

Alex reluctantly complied and followed Derek to an empty stairwell. Once inside the doors, Derek said, “Here, let me help you out.”

Derek unbuttoned the suspenders, removing them completely. Alex didn’t protest but was curious as to what, exactly, was going on.

Then Derek pushed Alex’s socks down to his ankles.

Alex still didn’t protest.

Next Derek un-tucked the shirt, and undid the top two shirt buttons.

To show Derek that he understood at last, Alex mussed up his far-too-well-combed hair.

The two laughed. “There! That should make your day a bit easier,” Derek assured Alex.

With his suspenders in one hand, Alex gave Derek a pat on the shoulder with the other.

“Tanks very much.” Alex was beaming with relief. He put the suspenders in his backpack and made his way to class. As he entered the room, the kids that were

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geared up to jeer at him were disarmed. All they saw was a relatively normal kid wearing shorts—that may or may not have been made of leather.