

# Failure to Adult



A free Adulting 101 short story  
for members of Lisa Henry's  
Hangout

# FAILURE TO ADULT



LISA HENRY

**F**ailure to Adult is a free short story set in the Adulthood 101 universe.  
Please don't share outside the group!

- Lisa

AND THANK you to group member Sylvia, who wrote the incredible song featured in this story!

## FAILURE TO ADULT



Nick doesn't know where Jai found the ukulele, but one thing he's sure of is that it signals a disturbing new chapter in their relationship. They've been travelling in New Zealand for three months now—that's twelve whole weeks without Jai dumping him, and for the first time it occurs to Nick that maybe Jai's *not* perfect and totally out of Nick's league.

Because Jai has a *ukulele*.

Maybe Nick's the one who's too good for him?

It's a crazy, dizzying thought.

They're staying at a farmstay place just outside Dunedin, and it has sheep and alpacas, and it's *amazing*. Except it's also cold as balls at night, and it's supposed to be summer, and Nick is not a fan of that wind that blows straight off Antarctica. He half expects to get torpedoed in the face by a penguin every time he steps outside, to be honest. And yes, he knows penguins can't fly, okay? The point is, the wind would pick them up, like cows in a tornado.

Anyway, the farmstay is brilliant, and there are sheep and alpacas to get stinky cuddles with, and life is pretty fucking incredible. Nick has no regrets at all about coming to New Zealand with Jai, especially because he's eighteen and is legally allowed to drink here. The first time he bought a drink in a pub he felt like he'd pulled off the crime of the century, except it's not a crime here! Nick is still trying to wrap his head

around that.

He's also still trying to wrap his head around the fact that Jai has a ukelele and that fact that he, Nick, is the kind of guy whose boyfriend has a ukulele. He never saw that coming, to be honest, and he's still processing it. What next? Will Jai grow a hipster beard? That could totally work, actually. But Nick will absolutely dump him if he tries to make his own kombucha. That's a bridge too far.

Although, keeping it real, Nick is pretty sure that Jai is it for him. Like, *it*. It's a big feeling, and Nick is processing about as well as he is the whole ukulele thing. But he's a work in progress, and that's cool. Just because Jai's very much the responsible adult in their relationship and has a handle on his emotions and stuff, doesn't mean Nick doesn't measure up, right?

Well, Nick *thinks* that Jai has a handle on all that stuff right up until that fateful Friday night at the Mosgiel Tavern.

*Omigod.*

Jai gets *so* drunk.

So drunk and messy and handsy.

And it may be the greatest night of Nick's life.

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JAI WAKES up on Saturday morning with a splitting headache and a text message from his mom:

*Take an Advil, honey.*

Okay, so that's weird. How does his mom know from halfway across the globe that he...

And then he sees the notifications from the group chat he's in with his family, and with Devon and Ebony, and Nick's parents. It's blown up overnight while he's been sleeping. He squints at his phone and scrolls back a bit, but it's mostly Devon and Kat, Jai's sister, sharing stupid memes.

Jai groans and drops his phone on the floor. His head hurts way too much to try to figure this out. He needs to sleep for at least another twelve hours first. Or maybe die. Yeah, dying seems like a nice option right about now. He can't remember the last time he got so drunk. Then again, that's not surprising, because he's pretty sure he can't remember his own middle name at the moment.

Except then he becomes aware that there's nobody lying in the bed next to him. For a guy who never used to spend more than one night with the same person, Jai has been surprised at how quickly he's grown used to having Nick with him most of the hours in a day. He'd worried a little at first that he might find it stifling when they were traveling together, because Nick can be a little needy, but he's actually got great instinct for realizing when Jai needs a little alone time. Jai's an introvert, and recharging is important. But it turns out that he and Nick aren't that different. While Jai likes to sit and center himself and just be, Nick likes to lose himself down Tumblr rabbit holes of fandom art and meta about his favorite franchises. All Jai knows is that there are way too many alternative canon universes in Marvel, but hey, it makes Nick happy. And at least he seems to have largely moved on from his hentai obsession, which is nice, and means that they can visit aquariums without Jai worrying Nick will be weird. Well, weirder.

Jai blinks up at the beige ceiling of their very basic room, then summons up the strength to actually swing his legs over the side of the bed and sit up. The sudden shift to vertical doesn't do his head or his stomach any favors, and he has to sit there a while before he even thinks about attempting to stand.

His ukulele is sitting in the corner, leaning against his pack, and Jai stares at it for a moment uneasily. It feels ominous this morning somehow. It feels like he's forgetting something. Something ukulele-related.

Did he take it to the pub last night?

He thinks he might have.

Jai grunts, and staggers to his feet. He shuffles into the tiny bathroom, splashes water on his face in an attempt to trick his body into thinking everything is normal, and then digs through Nick's wash bag—it's closest—for Advil. He swallows two of the pills down, and then shuffles back into the bedroom and pulls on some clothes.

There's definitely no sign of Nick.

That's not a surprise. Their cabin room is kind of tiny, and even though Nick is kind of tiny too, it turns out that small spaces do not contain him very well. He's probably outside hugging an alpaca. That's where Jai usually finds him.

Jai slips his feet into his unlaced boots, and pulls on his jacket. Then he braces for sunlight and cool air, and pulls the door open.

On any other morning Jai would appreciate the view of the rolling green fields, and the sunlight sparkling on the morning dew. Today, each dewdrop is like a shard of glass in his eyeballs, and he makes a sound like a dying whale as he moves down the creaking steps and onto the grass.

He finds Nick where he expected—sitting on a log by the ashes of the firepit in front of their cabin. Nick looks rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed, the bastard, and he's holding what appears to be a steaming cup of coffee between his palms. He grins broadly—too broadly—when Jai approaches and sits down beside him on the log.

"Coffee?" he asks, and hands the mug over.

Jai loves him. Nick is the greatest human being who ever lived. Those guys who went to the moon? Fuck those guys. Nick is better than them. He sips the coffee and moans, and feels slightly more human.

"Do you feel better?" Nick asks. "Or do you want to run your fingers through my pretty hair?"

"What?" Jai rasps, blinking slowly at him.

"I have pretty hair," Nick says with a shit-eating grin, which clarifies exactly nothing.

"Okay," Jai agrees warily. Sometimes Nick goes off on weird

tangents, and Jai's learned that the easiest thing to do is to just let it happen.

Nick's still wearing that grin though. "Also, my ass is bangin'."

Jai frowns as he gets a sudden flash of last night. Maybe he told Nick his ass was banging? Doesn't sound much like something he'd usually say, but—

Oh shit.

Oh *shit*.

He didn't *tell* Nick his ass was banging. He *sang* it.

The events of last night come back in a rush.

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THE PUB WASN'T CROWDED. There were less than twenty people in it, but maybe that was a crowd for Mosgiel. And Jai was drunk. He'd started with a beer over dinner, but now it was hours later, and he couldn't quite remember the number of times he'd been up to the bar. Nick was drinking as well, but not as much, which was smart, because Nick was a lot smaller than Jai, and a lot less able to handle his alcohol.

Jai was handling his *amazingly*.

"Jai," Nick said warily, "what are you doing?"

"Shush. Jus'... jus' listen."

Nick tilted his head. "Why are you holding your ukulele?"

"Because," Jai said, swaying toward him like a sailor on the deck of a storm-tossed ship, "I have something to tell you!"

Nick's eyes were as round as saucers. "With a ukulele?"

"Yesh. Yes."

"One second." Nick held up a finger on one hand while he dug in the pocket of his jeans with the other. He pulled out his phone, unlocked the screen, and then held it up. "Okay, go."

Jai strummed the ukulele. "Oh Nicky, Nicky Nicky Nicky Nicky!" he sang. "You love hobbits cause you're only as tall as one!"

Nick's jaw dropped.

"But I don't *care*," Jai sang. "Wanna run my fingers through your—" He strummed loudly. "*—hair.*"

Nick's mouth twitched.

"You have pretty *hair*," Jai continued. "And I don't want to *share*." He missed a few strings, but it didn't matter. "*You.*"

Nick's body rocked with silent laughter, and Jai dived into the next verse.

"Nicholas! You have a bangin' ass! Better than Legolas!" Jai drummed his fingers on the ukulele. "Let me be the lord of your ring, you sweet young thing!" He pointed at Nick. "Now shake your money maker!"

Nick shook his head instead, and mouthed, "No!"

Jai was undeterred. "Let me hear it go *ka-ching!*"

The crowd clapped and whooped.

"Don't encourage him!" Nick yelled, but he kept his phone recording.

Jai dropped down into what he hoped was a kind of a lyrical bridge. "We're on the road like two knights, traveling the realm. Only we don't wear tights..." He stopped for a swig of beer. "'cause chafing. Also it's too cold."

Jai suspected he'd lost track of what bits were meant to rhyme, but the crowd didn't seem to mind.

"Nick," he sang, "your ass in tights would be a thing, to *seeeeeee!*" This was where he tried for a Freddie Mercury falsetto. He thought he did okay, but the look on Nick's face told him that maybe he'd missed it.

Jai dived into a frantic ukulele solo. Since he didn't know how to play the ukulele, it was mostly some fast strumming.

"*Nick!*" he sang soulfully, "you make my heart beat *quick*. You're such a weird little *guy*. I love you so much I wanna *cryyyy!*"

The publican was making his way over toward them now, and Jai bleakly sensed that his moment in the spotlight of the Mosgiel Tavern was about to come to an end. He dived into an impassioned crescendo.

"Marry me, Nick! Spend your life on my dick!" And then he added a

caveat too important that it didn't matter if it didn't rhyme. "Only sometimes I'll take your dick toooooo!"

Jai dropped dramatically to one knee, and the pub erupted into cheers.

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"AND THEN WE got thrown out of the pub," Nick tells him cheerfully, shutting off the video on his phone. "And Mad Dog and Macca drove us home."

Jai squints at the phone, and then at the sunlight, and then at Nick. "Who?"

"Mad Dog and Macca," Nick says. "They seem nice."

And somehow getting into a car with a stranger called Mad Dog isn't even the stupidest thing that Jai did last night.

"Oh, Jesus," he says. He shoves his coffee mug at Nick and rests his head in his hands.

Nick rubs his back gently, and leans against him. "Also, my dad wants you to call him."

"What?" Jai grabs for his own phone, and opens up the group chat he was ignoring earlier. He scrolls back—way, way back—and there it is. The same video that he just watched, that Nick posted to the group family chat.

Well, at least he knows now why his mom knew he needed an Advil.

Jai straightens up and turns to face Nick. "You posted this, and your dad saw it?"

Nick looks cheerfully unrepentant. "Yeah!"

"Why?"

"Because it was *funny*, Jai!" Nick wrinkles his nose. "Anyway, I told him I didn't accept your awesome marriage proposal, but I'm not super convinced he believed me."

The drunken marriage proposal, Jai can live with. But the horror of

asking to be lord of Nick's ring? The only reason Chris Stahlnecker let Jai sweep his son off to the other side of the world in the first place was because Jai convinced him that he was a responsible adult. And that was after a bunch of hideously embarrassing interactions, including one time Chris saw Jai's dick. Jai is pretty sure he's used up whatever scant trust and goodwill Chris ever had in him to begin with. He can never return to the States. He'll have to live here forever, with Nick, in a hobbit hole.

Nick would probably love that, actually. He's still grinning like an idiot as he rubs Jai's back.

"So, the thing is," he says at last, "apart from my dad possibly wanting to kill you, is that last night was amazing."

Jai cocks a brow. "Amazing?"

"Yeah!" Nick leans in and pecks him on the lips. He tastes like coffee and toast. There was *toast*? Jai needs toast. He also needs to focus, because Nick is still talking. "Because when we first got together, and even when we came here, there was a part of me that thought you'd get sick of me and—"

"Nick!" Jai feels his stomach swoop in way that has nothing to do with his hangover.

No, just listen!" Nick thumps him on the back. "Because you're awesome, Jai. You're smart, and you have these big Zen thoughts, and you just basically have your shit together, like emotionally and stuff. You've figured out how to just *be*, and that's kind of cool. And I haven't figured that out yet. I'm not a *be-er*."

Jai groans. "Please don't say beer."

"*Be-er*," Nick says. "Beer. Ha! Anyway, guess what? It turns out that you're an idiot too, and you can do dumb things. Really, *really* dumb things like serenade me in a pub with a ukulele and a *terrible* song."

Jai's mouth twitches. "I don't think you're in any position to judge. It was your poems that inspired me."

"Hey!" Nick punches him in the arm. "My poems are great!"

They're not. They're really not. But Jai's songs might be *worse*.

“But the point is,” Nick continues, “is that last night you were a total drunken idiot, and, Jai, I’ve never felt closer to you!”

A laugh bubbles up inside Jai.

“And for the record,” Nick says, “I totally intend to spend my life on your dick, except next time you propose, can I be at least twenty-five? And can you be sober?”

Jai slings an arm around him. “Jesus, Nick. Did you just make a life choice? Who *are* you?”

“Right back at you, idiot,” Nick says, and beams. Then he wrinkles his nose and chews his lip. “But I’m serious. You have to call my dad.”

Jai groans again, and prays for the sweet release of death.

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NICK HAS SPENT EIGHTEEN—ALMOST nineteen, thankyou—years with his dad trying to teach him that actions have consequences, so he knows exactly how to read the look on Jai’s face when Jai returns to their cabin after making the phone call. He figures that being made to feel like he’s about five years old and two feet tall is enough of a punishment for Jai’s hangover, so he uses the electric hotplate to fry up some bacon he got from the farmhouse this morning, and lets Jai lie on the bed and look like death while he feeds it to him in small pieces. It’s like feeding a sickly baby bird.

“Also,” he says, “you know how last night you said you loved me so much you wanted to cry?”

Jai quirks his mouth. “Yeah.”

Nick’s belly flutters. “Did you mean that?”

“With my whole heart,” Jai says, and how did Nick ever get this lucky? But hey, Jai got lucky too, right? They both did.

“Same,” Nick says, and leans down and kisses him. “Total same.”

Then he lies down with him, and they nap the rest of the day away.