

Minor Mensch

Volume 10, Chapter 4

PUNXSUTAWNEY VALENTINE

© Courtney Jensen | www.CourtneyJensen.com

Friday, February 2, 2007 at 6:41 a.m.

Happy Groundhog Day, I guess.

I never knew which holiday happened on February 2nd and which one was on the 14th until I gave Kristen a valentine on February 2nd.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!”, I said as I handed her a statue made out of melted crayons that smelled like meat.

“Too excited to wait until Valentine’s Day?”, she asked me without smelling the statue.

“What?”

“Valentine’s Day is in two weeks.”

“What?”

Kristen then explained to me that Valentine’s Day was on February 14th. “Today, February 2nd, is Groundhog Day”, she finished.

“Has it always been that way?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. Weird. I had no idea.”

I was twenty-three.

That was the one-page version of my Punxsutawney Valentine story. There's a several-page version I could tell (which explains how the crayon statue acquired its meat scent). I feel like I should tell that version. I'm going to. This:

On September 5th, 2003, I turned twenty-three.

I was a birth survivor. I eluded abortion, I made it through infancy (not even SIDS could bring me down), and then I survived a couple decades of whatever comes after infancy. Way to go, Courtney.

But I had no time to celebrate. Because I was in college. More specifically, I was in the fifth year of my undergraduate. And the academic year had already begun.¹

I didn't spend that academic year living on campus (because twenty-three-year-olds don't usually live on campuses). Instead, I was living in the basement of a house in the West Hill Estates (1335 Ranier Loop).² The house belonged to a guy named Mike Taylor, whom I met at the gym (the one where I'd been working since I was a teenager). Mike built the house himself. He and I were the same age, he inherited nothing from his parents, and I was living in his basement.

He was charging me \$300 a month. And that covered everything. It was a good deal. This wasn't in the fifties, when \$300 was a lot of money. In 2003 dollars, 300 of them was a serious bargain. And that bargain was necessary because I was seriously poor.

Not poor for no reason though. I was poor because Willamette was expensive. Especially for someone who wasn't taking out any student loans.³ My entire check (minus \$300) went toward tuition. And that check was funded by personal training. And being a personal trainer meant that the gym was taking 30% of whatever I made... as long as what was being made was money.

¹ At Willamette, classes always started in August. So while my non-Willamette friends were sleeping in, enjoying their last few weeks of summer, I was doing talk-alongs with my Nakama Japanese tapes.

² The house had (and probably still has) two bedrooms in the basement. I was in one of them; Alvie was in the other. Sort of. Alvie's old baseball cards were in a bunch of boxes in the other room's closet.

³ That's not to say I had no help at all. My parents were going halvesies with me. They volunteered to split the cost of tuition for a very specific reason. One that I won't explain here because it's a totally unrelated story. And kind of a long one. Much too long for a footnote. All that matters for *this* footnote (i.e., for *this* story) is that I was a twenty-three-year-old paying collegiate halvesies with a twenty-three-year-old's income.

That last little bit (“as long as what was being made was money”) is important.

The people who wrote the employment policies at the gym were astonishingly stupid. So when I scrutinized their work, I found some loopholes. And it was the combination of those loopholes and Tammy’s livestock that kept me well fed.

Okay, “well fed” might be a little misleading. Let me rephrase more honestly:

The existence of the policy loopholes combined with the availability of Tammy’s cows kept this basement-dwelling, twenty-three-year-old undergraduate student / personal trainer from starvation.

Tammy was one of my personal training clients. Definitely one of my favorites (out of all the clients I remember).⁴

We started working out together in late 2001 and met regularly for a couple years.

She must have been in her late thirties, she played tennis (I assume very well), and was a horse rider / farmhand.⁵ She was married (I assume very happily) to a husband who was a physician / farmer (they owned a farm).

♪ And on that farm they had... about fifty cows (not how the song goes, I realize).

I found out about her farm early on – within our first few training sessions – but I didn’t start profiting from it until early 2003, a couple months after a conversation we had in December.

A few days before 2002’s Christmas, Tammy gave me a present: Tolkien’s audiobooks.⁶

⁴ Tammy and Jacqui. Those were my two favorites (again, out of everyone I remember).

⁵ About horse riding: she competed in “eventing”. That’s the *other* English style (the non-italicized other being dressage). I went to watch one of her events once. I drove kind of far to see it. And she didn’t end up competing. “My horse just isn’t into it today”, she told me. “Oh. Well, since I came all the way out here, could you maybe coax your horse into it?” “It doesn’t work like that.” “Are you sure?” “Yes.” “Okay.” So I watched some other people and then I left.

⁶ *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. These are the books that introduced me to the audiobook format (which has since changed my life) *and* they were the gift that taught me how to sleep. At least for a while. When the books were new to me, I would listen to them every single night as a bedtime tale. Rob Inglis would tuck me in and I never once stayed awake through the Tom Bombadil parts. I still don’t know what happens in that part of the story.

Nothing could have excited me more and she seemed to have anticipated that. But she didn't anticipate quite how loud my thanks would be: "oh my goodness, thank you so much!", I screamed at her.

She just smiled. And was probably exactly as flattered as she was embarrassed by my response (a lot of both).

Then she showed me a picture of her family.

It was not professionally taken, but it was the kind of photo that would strike envy into every other family. And strike strategy into every politician ("if I'm going to get anyone to vote for me, I must first acquire that exact family").

Every face – Tammy's, her husband's, their kids' – was beaming and beautiful. Totally faultless. And one of those faultless, beaming smiles belonged to a black kid. The only black person in the photograph.

"Is that your son?", I asked her (while pointing unnecessarily at the black kid).

"Yup", Tammy responded proudly.

"Is he, um... is he yours?"

Tammy put the photo away and told me a ridiculously touching adoption story. One that I won't repeat here (out of respect for Tammy and her family).⁷

I think I responded with something like "wow." And then a brief phase of silence.

Eventually I interrupted that silence with this: "Tammy, would you be willing to stop paying me for personal training and instead just give me cows as tips?"

"Okay, sure." She sounded a little bit confused by the question, but was willing to go with it.

I don't think she understood that this is how I planned on bypassing the gym fees (that 30% of profits the gym was taking off the top of every session we did).

⁷ "Out of respect for" is something I'll probably never say again. Not because it's a cliché but because I can't think of another person for whom I have enough respect to actually withhold a story.

There was a very specific reason she failed to understand that part: I didn't tell her. I left that part out on purpose because she was the most ethical person I'd ever met. And I didn't want her ethics to get in the way of my scheming. Thanks to my lack of an explanation, they didn't.

From that day forward, I never collected a single dollar from Tammy; I only collected cows. And half a hog.

After we had done enough sessions to (hypothetically) earn a cow, she'd give me one. By the time she and I were done – when we had finished our final session – I had received two and a half cows (and half a hog) as tips for a free service.

She wasn't paying the butcher fees but she was giving me the meat at what would have (hypothetically) been \$2/pound.⁸

I had Gene's Meat Market do the butchering. And they charged me around \$160 per animal. That meant I had to come up with \$160 before I could get my mouth around any tender nubs of tip meat. But, as I already explained, I had no money. My bank account usually had about \$3.00 in it and my wallet never had more than \$0.00. So payment for the butchering always required a little additional scheming.

To do this, I would have an "organic meat presale" at the gym. I would sell the meat (in advance) at three to six dollars a pound (depending on what it was). And I would sell just enough to make my \$160 (cash only). Then I would head out to Gene's and pick up my load.

My first stop (after leaving Gene's with a Jeepful of meat) was the gym. I wanted to settle my debts with the "presale investors" immediately so they couldn't change their minds and ask for refunds.

After delivering that batch, I'd head back to Mike's house and pack the rest of the stock into his many freezers.

⁸ This, like my \$300/month rent fee, was also a bargain. I wasn't being charged for the weight of the cow as a whole (fur and organs and blood and hooves and all). Or even the total hanging weight. I was just being charged for the meat that went into my freezer. And that meat was as good as it gets. Tammy's cows freely range-roamed across fifty acres, their diets were totally organic, and they were killed on-site (not hauled off in a truck somewhere first). The meat was as good as meat can be.

I brought my first cow home sometime around Groundhog Day, 2003. That was the day I started my all-beef diet (my only variety being the seventy pounds of hog I got with my second whole cow).

Every morning at about 7:00, I'd go upstairs (the kitchen was upstairs, right next to Mike's bedroom) and get half a dozen pots and pans started. Four on the stovetop, two in the oven.⁹

I'd cook up my entire day's beef supply, cram it into a bunch of Tupperware, shove the Tupperware into my backpack, and then begin my day (head off to school or wherever).

My meat-only diet went on for the whole year, Groundhog Day to Groundhog Day.¹⁰ And between the two Groundhog Days, Kristen and I started dating.

On the first night of February (2004), I decided to make her a valentine. I didn't have any money, so I surveyed the resources I did have:

A Jeep, some pots and pans, a couple freezers full of meat, an i486 desktop computer, a laptop I was borrowing from one of my professors (the Gateway I had accidentally run over in my Jeep), and a bunch of crayons.

I decided to use one of my meat pots to melt all of my crayons, harden those crayons into a block, and then carve the hardened crayon block into a statue of Kristen and me dancing.

I did.

I gathered up my crayons, put them in one of the pots I'd been cooking meat in every morning, melted them into a pool, let the pool cool down, solidifying into a giant clump of once-upon-some-crayons, and then carved the hardened crayon block into a statue of two people dancing. A statue that smelled like Crayola and meat.

⁹ I'd cook up about a dozen pounds. And I ate nothing else (hog half aside). I didn't even use condiments (because I couldn't afford them). Just straight up unseasoned meat bricks every single meal of every single day.

¹⁰ Give or take a couple weeks in either direction. On a few occasions, some of my classmates approached me with what appeared to be genuine concern, after noticing that I never missed a class without taking at least a few bites from beef-filled Tupperware. Including anatomy lab (while working with the cadavers). I explained to them that I was just poor, really hungry, and in possession of several cows. My explanation didn't seem to lessen their concern.

The next day, I went to Kristen's house.

"Happy Valentine's Day!", as I handed her the meat crayons.

"Too excited to wait until Valentine's Day?"

"What?"

"Valentine's Day is in two weeks."

"What?"

"February 14th is Valentine's Day. That's in two weeks. Today, February 2nd, is Groundhog Day."

"Has it always been that way?"

"Yes."

"Huh. Weird. I had no idea."

I had been holding out the melted crayon dancers the whole time. Kristen finally took it.

"What is it?", she asked me without smelling it.

"It's us! Well, it's us made out of crayons."

She said sentences like "I love it!" and put it on display in her bedroom.

That encouraged me. So on the real Valentine's Day, I made her another (albeit much smaller) melted crayon statue.

And for Christmas, I made her another (a garden gnome with a hat heart).

I tried to melt the crayons differently for that one. I thought I might get a better result if I melted them in the oven (in my meat pan) instead of on the stovetop (in my meat pot).

That was a bad idea.

It was about 3:00 a.m. when the fire alarm went off.

Mike asked me to move out.

If I owned a house and was giving a twenty-three-year-old college undergrad a good deal on a basement bedroom, and he was buying whole cows, eating nothing else, and setting the fire alarm off in the middle of the night by baking crayons, I'd probably ask him (me) to move out too.

So I did.

I moved out.

And then I moved in with Follas.

And that's an even longer story.