

Minor Mensch

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Childhood

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I found out yesterday that I have a 0.0 grade point average. This shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did. I'm a month and a half into the semester and I've done nothing. Not even *almost* something. If I make it to class at all, I just sleep on the athletic training table in the back of the room. I claim it's because I have back pain and it hurts too much to sit in the little wooden chairs.

"Okay" says every professor.

I interpret "okay" as permission, even though it sounds like a question when they say it.

I guess I was just hoping that, when the time came to assign grades, their permission would come with a little bit of charity (of the grade-inflating variety).

But no one was feeling charitable. Probably because I'm such a noisy sleeper.

And unfortunately, bad grades aren't like menses; they won't work themselves out on their own. So that motivated me to get to work. Or, rather, it motivated me to *plan* on getting to work. I found out about my 0.0 yesterday afternoon. The serviceable part of the day was almost over already. So I planned on starting my scholastic work fest today. But when today happened, I wasn't in the mood.

Whenever I plan on something and I don't follow through, I get really disappointed in myself. So I've decided not to make any more plans.

This feels like a better plan.

It's like a New Year's resolution to never make another New Year's resolution. The only one worth making.

And while resolving in this way, I'm still living at Van Ness's house in Lodi.

"Living" feels a bit strong. I'm staying here. The former implies some amount of longevity. This is my sixth day and I have two to go. Hardly long enough to qualify as "living." But the stay is nice.

The only un-nice part is the commute. My back and forths (between here and Pacific) happen in Van Ness's Suzuki, which is basically a four cylinder golf cart. And I do this back and forthing at approximately the speed limit.

California drivers don't like this.

This evening, while I was on my way back to Van Ness's, a man in a pinot-purple semi-trailer truck (with trailer in tow) liked it the least.

I know this because he decided to teach me a lesson.

His lesson plan involved drafting. "If you can't exceed the speed limit to my liking, I'll NASCAR your ass all the way to Lodi!" he seemed to be saying from behind his gigantic steering wheel.

He got so close to me that, to the other drivers, it must have appeared as though I was actually towing his truck (and its trailer) with a golf-cart-sized Suzuki.

I spent the drive imagining what they must have thought as this giant optical illusion went barreling down the highway at approximately the speed limit.

That image pleased me enough to make the whole experience worth having.

Worth it for *me*. One can be pretty sure the truck driver quantified his cost-benefit analysis differently. I bet he spent the rest of his drive (probably to Washington) on his CB, complaining about "this dawdling asshole in a teal Suzuki taking up the whole goddamn road."

While I'm only *pretty* sure of that, I'm *totally* sure that, whenever this man is asked what he does for a profession, he says "I drive truck."

My certainty comes from the fact that my dad was a truck driver. For ten years. Exactly. He quit on the tenth anniversary of the day he was hired.

And his dad (my grandfather) was a truck driver too (for the same “outfit”). I know nothing about *his* dad. Or any prior generation, although the automobile is only so old (and I don’t suspect we were a horse-driving people). But I do know that my grandpa is a Claire and my dad is a Craig. And that make me, Courtney, a third generation CJ.

I think, during my youngest years, there was a paternal fantasy that I would uphold the legacy; I would keep those family wheels spinning (all eighteen of them). But I think my dad gave up on that idea when, as a pre-adolescent, every car ride I took produced a puddle of vomit in my lap. And one time in my mom’s purse.

The only thing I could do well on the road was sleep on the bunk in the back of the cab (preparing me for grad school, during which I would sleep on the athletic training table in the back of the class).

That and I loved the CB (citizens band radio). It’s how I got to know truckers. But not while my dad was one of them.¹ Only after he quit (mid-eighties). That’s when his CB found a new home in the garage.

At that time, I was a student at Myers Elementary School (Jewel Street in Salem, Oregon). And we lived on Crescent Drive, which was about half a mile away if I took the Beaver Loop shortcut to Kingwood. If it was too wet to take the shortcut (a dirt path that may or may not have been private property), and I had to stay on the roads the whole time, it would add a couple minutes to the trip. Those were a couple minutes I couldn’t play on the CB.

I only played with it while my parents weren’t home, which meant right after school. If I jogged the shortcut, I might have two hours. Two hours while the rest of my Salemite peers were watching afterschool cartoons. That’s when I was in my parents’ garage harassing truck drivers.²

And that’s where I learned that all of them “drive truck.”

¹ My only real memories from those days are of the skeleton sheets he had on his bunk. I might remember other things if I had spent more time in the cab instead of the sleeper.

² Except when DuckTales was on. That was the only show I watched. The instant it began, I was in our wood-paneled Den, standing on the sofa, scooping peanut butter into my mouth (straight from the jar with a spatula). This was my DuckTales viewing posture. And I watched it on a 27” television that must have weighed five hundred pounds. Only the screen was 27”. The TV was like a house; it had its own shutters. And it rested on a built-in lazy Susan, which sounded like Pat Sajak’s wheel when I spun it to face me. Which I would always do so that I could spend the next half hour running in place on the sofa.

“I’ve been driving truck for sixteen years and I’ve never...” and then they end that sentence by describing some exchange we just had. “I’ve never been sexually propositioned by a child on a CB” or whatever.

I was never sensitive to the un-family-friendly trucker vernacular, but the expression “I drive truck” has always baffled me. It’s like a mission statement to which every truck driver in America is resolutely true.

Thus, when I ask: “you mean you drive *a* truck?”

“No, I drive truck.”

“You drive trucks?”

“No. Truck. I drive truck.”

“Huh...”

I feel like I’m on a walkie-talkie with Chief Joseph.

Anyway, the point of bringing all of that up is that I wonder if my dad would draft a Suzuki in that way. Close enough to appear as though he were being towed.

If “he drives truck” was the only piece of information I had to go on, I would have to suspect the answer would be yes. But knowing he’s a Jensen, I’m forced to assume he’d have a sense of humor about it. At least when it was all over. The immediate rage might be there.

It probably would.

My “probably” is backed by sufficient evidence. Some of that evidence is from behind the wheel, but that’s boring. Much more interesting is an incident with a babysitter in 1988 (back when the CB was still relatively new to the garage, though before it was discovered).

My parents had a Christmas party to attend.

It was one of those work events where people do more dressing up than drinking. And then, while dressed up, they pretend to enjoy themselves much more than they actually do.

“We’ll have to get together” is said a lot without ever meaning it.

And sentences like “you know, Susan told me about your new car” are said in desperation, trying to avoid an awkward silence. But it only leads to a conversation that inflicts far more pain than that which would have come from the silence it avoided.

That was the kind of party my parents would be attending.

It was for my mom’s work, so it would be taking place at the hospital. Because that’s where she worked.

And one of her fellow party-attending coworkers had a daughter who was of babysitting age.

She was hired.

Her first impression was good; she arrived on time (though she can hardly be credited with this accomplishment as her mother was the one who dropped her off).

“On time” was about twenty minutes before my parents planned on leaving. Just early enough that my mom could show her where the bedrooms were and explain how to use the stove (as if it were somehow special or required a password; it’s just a stove).

The babysitter was wearing these fake-fancy, fake-jeweled flip-flops that made it sound like her feet were chewing gum while she walked. One of those annoying mouth-open chewers. Every step a gum-smack.

As annoying as this immediately was, it had nothing to do with the act of child-watching. So my parents grabbed their sacks of whatever (whatever someone brings to a Christmas party at a hospital) and left.

Before they’d even finished backing out of the driveway, the babysitter had locked my brother and me in the basement and started making phone calls.

Party time!

Being as this was the late eighties, we didn't have a way of communicating the situation to our parents. (Even if we did, I'm not sure what the appropriate emoticon would have been.)

So instead, we just lay prone on the wooden steps beyond the door. In the darkness. We could have actually gone down into the basement and turned a light on, but that somehow felt antisocial. We wanted to be a part of the action. So we just lay there watching what was happening above ground through the half-inch window beneath the door.

What was happening:

A bunch of teenagers didn't do much.

This, I have found, is what most people do at parties. And this particular group of partiers may or may not have been having more fun than my parents were having.

Being as my brother and I could only see feet, we didn't have a lot to go on. We couldn't tell what the strangers in our home were eating, whether they were drinking, if they were ugly, etc. We recognized the bubble-gum flip-flops, and knew those feet belonged to our sitter, but everyone else was in shoes.

Even as a child, I remember being astonished at how much can be learned about a person's personality based on the look and behavior of his or her shoes. Because we had nothing else to look at, my brother and I studied those shoes (in the way that the Mayans mapped the stars; if they had better things to look at, no barefoot, crystal-owning, tiara-wearing, 21st century adult would be anticipating an apocalypse in 2012).

We weren't paying attention to peoples' shoes for the same reason that I would be paying attention to them today though. I was eight and my brother was nine. Gleaning insights into the human condition didn't interest me then. I was more concerned with immediate threats to my survival and wellbeing. Are they stealing the five-hundred pound television I use to watch DuckTales? Are they stopping in front of our door because they're going to kill us?

I remember one set of shoes that must have passed us fifty times, always in a hurry. Today, I can safely assume this person was either afraid of getting caught or the right antianxiety medication hadn't been invented yet. Back then though, this was someone to worry about. The erratic behavior was troubling.

Another person just stood in front of the door the entire time, for hours, feet slowly rocking back and forth, heel to toe, back to heel, back to toe, and so on. It only took a few minutes to lose interest in him. I imagine the top half of his body had arms crossed over his chest while he spent every moment of every conversation with a forced smile, nodding in the direction of “yes.” Hardly a threat. Plus, I’m sure he had no idea we were even there, staring at his shoes. And if he found out, he probably would have been more scared of us than we were of him. Or it would have at least given him the creeps.

Other people would stop in front of the door, pivot as though participating in a shuttle run, and then head the other direction. We figured these people were just forgetful. And they happened to be in front of our door when they realized something like “oh, damn, I left my cola in the other room.”

Others would shift their weight from foot to foot as if dancing quickly and badly. The first time someone did this, it concerned us. Until we realized she was just waiting for the bathroom, which was right across the hall from our basement door/habitat.

Other than the design and behavior of peoples’ footwear, the only other thing I remember is the music.

My dad’s stereo equipment was in the den (where I watched DuckTales).

The den began a couple feet to the left of the bathroom, so it could be seen from our post, although my brother’s station on the stairs (to my right) afforded him a better view. And we never traded positions. It would have made too much noise. And we were trying to go unnoticed.

What didn’t go unnoticed (by the teenage strangers) was that this was an unusual time for music in our house.

The CD player wasn’t purchased until 1991. But vinyl had already gone out of fashion. And my dad wasn’t big on the cassette tape, thinking of it as a “phase.” He had a tape *player*, but the only tapes in his collection were a few Maxell dubs of the records he was listening to at the time. These were stored in a wooden box that I’m pretty sure he sawed and carved himself.

In an attempt to document what each tape contained, my dad wrote on them with a pencil. I don’t blame our intruders for not knowing what to expect before hitting play.

They were all James Taylor and the Eagles.

They settled on the Eagles for a few minutes until someone came forward with a tape of his own. A mix tape in which you could occasionally hear Casey Kasem's voice (or some such radio personality, indicating that it was a recording of some "hot hits" kind of countdown).

This became the lullaby that ultimately sent my brother and me to sleep.

The next thing I remember was the basement door opening. I looked up in a panic, only to find my mom standing in the doorway, looking down at us.

I don't know how to describe her reaction other than it's what one would expect to see on a mother's face upon returning home a little bit early to discover her children asleep on the basement staircase.

"Where's Dad?" my brother and I began to ask as we emerged from the pit, looked out the window, and stopped wondering.

There he was, chasing teenagers off the property.

My dad is not like a Norfolk terrier who runs down cats and car tires only to discover that he has no idea what to do with them once caught.

It's not *just* that my dad was nimble enough to always do the catching; he never had a moment of indecision.

This was why my brother and I felt it was our ethical duty to root for the fleeing teenagers. We knew that, if they were caught, they would have been killed.

Unfortunately, the window we looked through was into the backyard, which was completely enclosed by a seven-foot fence. And no teenager could run as fast as my dad. Despite this, I would like to think that they all managed to hop that fence, safely into the neighbor's forest. And then find their ways home from there.

The odds are not encouraging.

I wouldn't be surprised if at least two of them were caught that night. While trying to clear the fence, one leg up, a giant Jensen paw snagged the collars of their shirts and

yanked them back into our yard. The only place either of them would ever be seen again was on a milk carton.

Then (as my not-all-that-far-fetched imagination tells the story), once the killing was done, my dad would just throw the corpses onto the compost pile. This was a season (and an age) in which compost burnings were both permitted and expected.

A couple months later, during some weekend morning while my parents were sprinkling that compost around the garden, readying our yard for spring, I'd be sitting at the kitchen table eating breakfast. I would look at the faces milking my cereal and have no idea. Because I only ever saw their shoes.

The only person from that night who I can be sure survived was the babysitter. She didn't run. Maybe because her bubble-gum flip-flops would have compromised both her speed and stealth. Or maybe because she had nowhere to go; my mom was her ride home. Either way, she just stood there, looking deeply shamed.

While my dad was out back, presumably killing people, I heard my mom explaining to her that they had come home from the party early because it was so boring. Two hours into a three-hour party and they'd had enough.

The babysitter didn't respond. She just stood there looking at her feet, which I'd grown so familiar with.

My mom then pulled out her purse and gave her something like ten dollars. Whatever a babysitter was paid during the late eighties.

She did this because, as a Nelson (her maiden heritage), she always holds up her end of a deal. She then took the babysitter outside. They both got in the car and my mom drove her home.

It was at this moment that my dad came in the back door, wiped his feet on the mat, and went straight to the sink to wash his hands. I suspect he was scrubbing the blood off.

Still a little bit out of breath, he looked at my brother and me and said something like "bedtime."

Knowing that tone, we rushed upstairs, pretended to brush our teeth, and tucked ourselves in.

My last thought, as I lay in bed for the night, was that I'd never felt more loved. To witness someone fight for you like that. When it wasn't even necessary. All he had to say was "get out" and he would have been obeyed. But that wasn't how my dad handled parenting. If someone made his children sleep on stairs, that person was killed.

That's love.

And that's also the last time we ever had a babysitter.

Thereafter, Granny (my dad's mom) would fill in whenever one was needed. But filling in meant that she had to drive down from Portland. The commute took almost an hour each way. So she only showed up a few times. Only when she was *really* needed. The rest of the time, my brother and I just stayed home by ourselves. This seemed the safer option. And I don't know that it was as illegal then as it is now.

While we were home alone, he and I invented ways to keep ourselves entertained.

At first, we would try to organize magic shows. We'd plan out our acts and then practice them until both parents got home. And then we'd do our recital. Somehow the magic portion of the show was always lost. "That was a great puppet show" our mom would say with equal parts enthusiasm and dishonesty.

When we couldn't figure out the difference between magic and puppetry, we gave up. Instead, we became architects. We'd gather up every single chair and bed sheet in the entire house and make a really elaborate maze-fort.

Whichever parent came home first would get pissed and make us take everything down immediately.

After a few discouraging episodes, it was time to move on. And what we moved on to was the single activity that defined our childhoods more than any other: Jensen's Marvelous Medicine.

I didn't read George's Marvelous Medicine until I was in my twenties, but what my brother and I were doing was basically the same thing (except that neither of us ever asked for seconds).

We would take turns making little concoctions that the other would have to drink.

No one had to drink the entire thing, but at least one swallow. And not one of those “it touched my lips” sips; a full, complete swallow.

The first person whose throat could not be seen stretching with the ingestion was the loser.

As an adult, sentences like “okay, fine, I lose” would seem an appropriate thing to say when the first mystery concoction is presented. But when you’re a little child, dignity in made up games is important enough to take that gulp of faith. So we did.

Every game started in the same way: one of us would wait upstairs while the other was downstairs in the kitchen coming up with his first mixture.

Then, a few minutes later, chef number one would come running up the stairs with a plastic cup half full of something brown.

If I went first, I would usually just stir together a few randomly chosen condiments (e.g., strawberry preserves, ranch dressing, and tabasco sauce).

If my brother went first, he’d want to mix peanut butter with a condiment (ketchup, mustard, etc.) but there would never be any peanut butter left. Because of my DuckTales ritual. He’d inform me of that while handing me my first drink.

I’d finish my swallow, show how committed I was to the game by taking another, make a face of disgust while running in place until that swallow was over, and then I’d guess the ingredients:

“Tomato sauce and Sunny Delight?”

“And milk.”

“Eww! Hahaha!” We both giggle. And then “my turn!”

Dressings, sauces, seasonings, and juices (or sometimes an oil) are all good game openers. One can’t push the other too far too quickly because it’s a game of escalation. If you indulge your creativity in the early rounds, the game becomes poisonous before it’s meant to.

So my answer to his tomato sauce, milk, and Sunny Delight mixture might be mayonnaise, bullion, and apple sauce.

He probably guessed two out of three. "I got the bullion wet first so you wouldn't see the grains."

"Hahaha!" We giggle again.

A minute later someone was swallowing tartar sauce and a mashed up banana.

This degree of repulsion would last a few more rounds, and we were usually able to guess the ingredients. At least most of them.

It would end with something like "ginger ale, paprika, and that glossy, hard, clump of fat that was collected off the bacon pan three days ago and kept in the fridge by mom for an unidentified future use."

A recipe like this was reaching the ceiling of foulness achievable in the kitchen. So, in the spirit of escalation, this is when one of us would make the first move into the bathroom (quietly so that the person waiting upstairs couldn't tell).

When you're the first to include bathroom ingredients, you can't make it obvious. The foundation of the recipe would still come from the kitchen; we would just add a special "secret" ingredient.

"Gross! What was that one?!"

"Relish, that runny water that leaks out of the hotdog package, and Pert Plus!"

"That was a good one! I knew it though! I knew it had some sort of soap in there! I just thought maybe it was dish washing detergent. I didn't know you went to the bathroom."

This opened the boundaries for both sides to begin using personal hygiene products.

"Hydrogen peroxide and cinnamon."

"That's what I thought because my mouth is still bubbling and it won't stop!"

The hydrogen peroxide was always a popular ingredient as it could be combined with just about anything to create a different kind of mouth-feel. It wasn't really gross; it just felt weird.

After a few more rounds, one of us would be the first to go with the all-bathroom cocktail: liquid hand soap, nail polish remover, a six-second focused spray of air freshener, a single squeeze from the tube of Aim toothpaste that was discovered in the bathroom drawer when we moved in, and a few drops of dechlorinator for the fish tank.

That would be a hard one to figure out. And being both gross and hard to distinguish, that would set the stage for the next progression.

The victim of a brew like that would immediately sneak off to the garage. The door to the garage was connected to the kitchen, so it wasn't too hard to keep it undetected the first time around.

What made the garage such a great resource was that my dad, after quitting the truck driving outfit, became a machinist. That's still what he does. So the selection of automotive substrates was just as vast as the options available in the bathroom.

"Eww! That one was SO gross! What was it?"

"I don't know it was something from the garage!" This meant that it was probably a combination of motor oil and metal shavings off the floor, left over from machining a piston (or whatever).

We both giggle and then the person whose gums are now bleeding from the metal shavings says "gross!"

"I know, huh?!"

Once there were no restrictions on ingredients, the game actually started to get boring because it became harder and harder to top the previous beverage. So the anticipation of a masterpiece began to fade.

This was usually when our parents were getting home anyway, so the timing worked out. But sometimes, we'd reach this stage early and be forced to look harder. There must be something hidden here somewhere, in some ancient bottle, that would lend

itself to the god brew (we'd think as we riffled through the cabinet in the garage's bathroom).

One day, while looking in this way – checking every drawer and shelf in the garage for something new – we found the CB.

It was actually my brother who found it. “Courtney, come down here!”

“Whoa! Is that the CB?!”

“Yeah.”

“Does it work?”

“I think so.”

We had found a new hobby. No more marvelous medicine.

While we were pushing all of the buttons, turning all of the knobs, trying to figure out how to talk to a trucker, we heard our mom's car pull up. She never parked in the garage, so we still had a minute to un-push the buttons, un-turn the nobs, and get back in the house.

We did.

We returned the CB to some resemblance of its undiscovered self and raced out of the garage, through the kitchen, and into the dining room (trying to get as far away from the garage as we could so we wouldn't be suspected of any mischief).

Mom's key was in the door when we got there.

The door opens. We greet her. “Hi Mom, how was your day?”

“It was fine. What did you guys do this afternoon?” She puts her stuff down in the dining room and heads toward the kitchen.

“We read some books. Did you have a good day at work?”

She looks at the counter, where some condiments are sitting next to bathroom products. “Why is the hydrogen peroxide in the kitchen?”

“Oh, I cut myself.”

“Where?”

“It healed.”

Being a nurse, she obviously had some awareness of how fast the human body is capable of healing a cut. Especially one that’s severe enough to require hydrogen peroxide.

She didn’t say that though.

Instead, knowing my mom, she just made a mental note to keep her eye out for more suspicious substances appearing on her kitchen counter, looking for some kind of pattern.

She probably considered asking us about it, but what would that question sound like out loud? “Have you guys been mixing hydrogen peroxide with peanut butter and salsa and then eating it?”

Realizing how ridiculous that would sound, she just quietly walked the bottle back to the bathroom.

And I wasn’t worried. Because that phase was over. We would be leaving no more hygiene products or automotive chemicals on the kitchen counter next to dirty cups. No more clues that we were up to no good.

We had a great run, as carcinogenic as it may have been, but it was time to move on. We had built all the character that we could with those tools. Perhaps most importantly, I learned how to eat *anything* as though it were food (a skill that explains a lot about my diet today).

I may have a weak stomach for travel, and would be terrible at “driving truck”, but if I swallow something that I tell myself is “foodstuff”, I can incarcerate the shit out of it inside my prison-guts.

And that's what I took with me from that phase.

The next phase – the CB phase, interrupted only for episodes of DuckTales – was about to begin.

This is where I would learn all about truckers and how they reason. And it's precisely how I came to know what the man in the pinot-purple truck would be saying about me this evening (and for the rest of his trip back to Washington).

And maybe my dad would have tailgated me in the same way. He probably would have, but only for a minute.

A couple years ago, I told him about our marvelous medicine phase and he found it funny, issuing some "oh, me too" sentences in response. Although I think he would have had a lapse in that humor (if only briefly) had he found out about it in the eighties.

And that's why I assume he would have drafted me in the moment, but appreciated the Suzuki-tows-truck-and-trailer image shortly afterward.

I have yet to ask him about the babysitter episode. I still have no idea what happened in the back yard that night. It's a question I've wanted to ask, but how many years removed does one have to be before aggravated murder settles into comedy? What's the half-life on that one, I wonder.

For a Jensen, probably not long. (I say this, knowing it would only take me about a month.) But still it's never come up.

Either way – even if every teenage stranger in our home did survive that night – the whole babysitting episode has done far more to shape the graduate student version of me than any experience in a classroom.

Whenever I need to get some work done, I still lock myself away somewhere; some place in which I can see others, but they can't see me.

While I no longer have a basement staircase, my Baun Fitness Center office is a great substitute. I sit inside of it with the lights off so that the mirrored glass allows a one-way window to the exercisers. And I evaluate them as though they too are teenage partiers (which some of them actually are). I can see more than their shoes, but they're still unable to see me.

While this sounds like seriously creepy voyeurism, that's not really what it is. There's something about the feeling – studying people's interactions like a ghost – that concentrates the mind. It gives me a depth of focus that I can't find anywhere else.

And this concentrating is something I'm going to have to get started on if I want to remedy my 0.0 grade point average by the end of the semester.