

Minor Mensch

Volume 5, Chapter 25

The Sherwood Meat Cleaver

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Saturday, December 9, 2006 at 10:20 p.m.

I'm in Main Gym. I've just returned from a walk. Not around campus, but around Stockton.

After sunset, walking around Stockton is not an activity students are encouraged to do. Because "it's dangerous." Whenever anyone talks about the city, they describe it as a dangerous and horrible place. "You're just pleading for a beating if you go out there at night."

I talk about it in that way too. Maybe not in rhymes, but when people ask, I describe it as a forsaken pit of violence. Because it is. But the reality is I've never actually perceived it that way. At least not enough to feel threatened by it. Not because I doubt the statistics.¹ I trust them completely. The kind of completeness that results from seeing so many of the data points occurring first hand.

¹ Ignoring the gold rush, these statistics are precisely what put Stockton on the map. In particular, the "Cleveland School massacre." On January 17, 1989, a thick-mustached ex-welder (and ex-prostitute; see his 1980 arrest) named Patrick Purdy decided to gun down some little kids. Afraid that these boys and girls (ages six to nine) might be armed with military grade ammunition while frolicking at recess, Patrick put on a flak jacket (a jacket designed to protect him from anti-aircraft artillery; i.e., "flak"). On that jacket, he scribbled the sentence "death to the Great Satin." Not Satan; satin, the lustrous fabric that fancy bed sheets are made out of. (Perhaps this was a throwback to his prostitution days.) Once dressed, he got in his Chevy van and drove it to the Cleveland Elementary School, which sits just a few blocks east of Pacific's campus. He parked it behind the schoolyard and set it on fire. Then, armed with a Type 56 assault rifle (Chinese equivalent of the AK-47, into which Patrick had carved words like "victory"), he walked over to the playground. And started shooting children. Five of them died (four of them Cambodian refugees). And thirty others (including one teacher) were injured. This immediately became a national tragedy, occupying headlines at least until Pan Am Flight 103 blew up. Evidencing its scale, Michael Jackson attended the school in February. This was a 1989 Michael Jackson (post-Bad, pre-Dangerous). Back when he was huge. The following month, George H.W. Bush's administration responded, first by issuing a temporary ban on imported assault rifles, and then, in July, they made that ban, limited though it may be, permanent. This is when (and how) Stockton became a household name.

I've just never felt as though I were *personally* at risk while riding my bicycle past someone being mugged. And not stopping to help him. Or to call the police.

"Yikes", I'd say to myself as I kept pedaling (every one of the hundred times this has happened).

A week later, some new set of figures would be published and the more dire it was, the more I would believe it.

But even if each individual person's odds of being mugged reached 90%, the threat would (somehow) still seem impotent. I just don't feel like it applies to me any more than Stockton's asparagus festival applies to me. If I don't want to be involved, I won't show up.

"Obviously that victim must have volunteered herself in some way" I think to myself whenever I see a man punch a girl's uterus and then run off with her purse.

And when I see police tape around a house, I look at the windows. "There it is: broken glass. The only house on the block without bars on the windows. What did they expect?"

People who want to avoid being burglarized live in gated communities. This has become common sense to Stocktonians. And common advice to all incoming students; students like me, who find themselves emigrating from safer regions of America.²

During my first year here, I took that advice.

Nostalgia II. That was my community.

Every community has a name and mine was one of either three or four bearing the name "Nostalgia."³

5353 Rockwood Circle, Stockton, CA, 95219. That was my house.

I lived in it with Tommy Barr and JoJo something (I never learned her last name).

² Maybe "emigrating" isn't the right word, but Stockton really should be its own country.

³ Despite looking really hard, I never found Nostalgia III; only I, II, and IV.

Tommy and JoJo were both on the lease. I wasn't. They each had a remote control (like a little garage door opener) for the gate. I didn't. If I wanted to get in, I had to page the security guard from a keypad that stood fifteen feet away from the entrance.

Once someone finally picked up on the other end, I'd begin a conversation with that person using technology that made it feel as though I were ordering fast food in 1990.

The first time I had this conversation, I explained to the gatekeeper (a middle-aged woman whose previous job may very well have been at Hot 'n Now) that my name was Courtney Jensen and that I lived at 5353 Rockwood Circle.

She said the name they have on file is Chun Li Zhang (or something; whoever the homeowner was).

"Yeah, that's the homeowner, but I rent it. Well, I'm not on the lease – Tommy Barr and JoJo something are on the lease – but I'm the third roommate."

"I'm sorry, you're not on the list."

I was then disconnected.

I thought about calling back immediately, but didn't know what I was supposed to say when the same person answered. So I just sat and waited, knowing someone would have to come or go eventually... and I could ride my bike in behind that person.

From then on, whenever I'd page the gatekeeper, after I was asked for my name, I'd say "I'm Tommy Barr; I live with Chun Li Zhang at 5353 Rockwood."

That worked *almost* every time. Once a week or so, when it didn't, I'd just do the waiting/brooding thing again. I'd sit on my bicycle doing nothing – sometimes for a minute; sometimes for an hour – until an Asian with a garage door opener finally pulled up. Then I'd follow that man's shiny Honda in, but pedal to my house instead of his.

Usually I'd pedal to my house. Not always. I always meant to, but every house looked identical.⁴ So, early on, there were a couple instances in which I tried to enter the wrong one. I wouldn't enter the house itself; I'd only make it as far as the backyard

⁴ Even the landscaping was the same. Here's the tiny lawn, here's the patch of bark dust, and here's the one tree that looks like somebody planted an upturned broom. Every house.

(through the identical wooden gate) before realizing “that lemon tree is smaller than the one in my backyard.” Or “that lemon tree is larger than the one in my backyard.” I would then sneak back out, close the gate behind me, and figure out which yard had the lemon tree that was just right.

Nobody ever called the cops (common mistake?), or if they did, it was done to no effect (probably because Stockton cops have larger problems to worry about). But the panic of “oh my god, I’m in some anonymous Asian’s backyard” prompted a hearty habit of looking at the actual address on a house before opening its gate.

Once the address had been verified, I’d walk my bike into the backyard, lean it against the lemon tree, enter through the sliding glass door that led into the kitchen, and then head straight up to my bedroom (the tiny, worst one at the top of the stairs; the one that faced the giant bands of power lines).⁵

Campus was a few miles away. Four according to MapQuest, but I could probably cut a half mile off of that by riding my bike down the levee and then across the “Wood Bridge” to Baun. I’d leave my bike in the POC for the day, and then, when the day was over, I’d ride it back home, hoping the Nostalgia gate would open for me when I got there.⁶

If I needed food, I’d ride to the Grocery Outlet on March Lane (which already went out of business), park my bike inside the store, and only buy what could be stuffed into my backpack and pockets.⁷ If I had some other kind of appointment (medical or whatever), I’d usually go without my backpack.

I was on Pershing Avenue, almost to Hammer Lane, when I was hit by my first car. It smashed into my back wheel and spun my bike to the ground. I managed to land on my feet and wasn’t injured.

After the car that struck me sped off, I inspected my bike.

⁵ I never found any component of this experience to be worthy of a future bout of “nostalgia.”

⁶ On a few occasions, I went to the wrong community altogether because, other than the name on a sign, most of these look identical too. And if I timed it right (an Asian behind the wheel of a Honda was pulling in at the time), I didn’t bother looking at the sign; I just drafted him right in. And then had trouble finding my address.

⁷ I had – and still have – a coat that can hold a full gallon of milk in each pocket. And I used those pockets like little communists (putting each to work according to its ability).

Some of my spokes had been broken.

I tried to get back on and just keep riding, but the wheel had been warped into a gentle wave, which meant the brake pads were in near-constant contact. It felt like I was riding a “Spinning” bike set on maximal resistance. I was standing up, putting all my weight into it, and going eight miles per hour. And my bike was hissing like a chorus of snakes. So I stopped.

I can’t remember why my front wheel had no brakes (it was a Wal-Mart Schwinn; things happen), but this is how my back wheel joined the brakeless class. If I wanted it to spin, I couldn’t have pieces of rubber permanently clamping down on it. So I yanked them open and started freeriding. Now, with no brakes at all, I just had to give myself plenty of room to stop, which I would accomplish like a Flintstone (drop my feet and drag).⁸ For most of my rides, this didn’t cause any problems.

But JoJo (the roommate I barely knew) was the type of person who made everyone aware of her birthday. The reminders would begin a month in advance. And she also made sure everyone knew the types of things she would enjoy receiving. After noticing that sushi appeared on her gift registry, I decided to get her a certificate to a nearby restaurant. And I took the afternoon to pedal around town until I found one.

I was riding on the sidewalk, headed east on Rose Marie Lane, when I decided brakeless bicycling was no longer a good idea.

To my left was a row of hedges. To my right, the type of cars that would speed away after hitting and killing me (I learned to spot the type). Straight ahead, a man – roughly my age – stepped into the sidewalk. Maybe forty feet ahead of me. He was wearing a sports jacket that was the length of a nighty and the girth of a bread loaf.

I dropped my feet and began removing the soles from my shoes, but didn’t swerve. Oncoming traffic and ugly bushes both felt like worse destinations to volunteer travel.

Upon my approach, the man reached into his bread-loafed jacket and pulled out what I interpreted to be a pistol. If it wasn’t a pistol, a) the story would be less interesting, and b) I don’t know why he would have been manipulating it as though it were (the way he reached for it, held it, and aimed it).

⁸ Note the awkwardly sung lyric in the Flintstones theme song when Fred and co. are taking the Rubbles to the drive-in movie: “Through the courtesy of Fred’s two feet.”

I immediately lifted my feet, skipped off the curb into the oncoming traffic (which suddenly felt less threatening), and pedaled faster than I thought myself capable, no longer worried about how that might affect my stopping distance.

I made it back to the POC un-killed.

I parked my bike in the garage, caught my breath, Googled some local sushi restaurants, and then walked to the nearest one. I bought JoJo a \$25 gift card and never rode my bike around town again.

From that day forward, the only rides I ever did were on the levee, commuting back and forth between campus and home. And it was on those commutes that I saw all of the muggings, looking down on them from my elevated riverside vantage.

As I pedaled past without stopping, I would chase my “yikes” with something like: “I couldn’t even stop if I wanted to.” I would say that sentence out loud because I needed the volume to convince me.

A few minutes later, I’d lean my bike against the lemon tree, head up to my room, look out my window at the power lines, and wonder where my first tumor would be discovered.

This continued to be my routine until my bike was stolen.

I didn’t see it go, but I’ve always been fascinated by the creativity with which vehicles change ownership in Stockton. The current carjacking trend may be the most creative.

The thief will crawl underneath a parked car and lie there until the owner approaches. As soon as the driver side door swings open and the first foot lifts to enter, the grounded foot’s Achilles is slashed with a Rwandan machete.

Because that’s still the leg bearing most of the weight, when the thick band of tendon coils into the back of the victim’s knee, the body connected to that leg collapses on the concrete beside the now-unlocked car. Apparently this is easiest when the target is a woman wearing high heels, but everyone is said to drop their keys on the way down. And at this point, the thief rolls out from underneath the car, grabs those keys, plugs them into the ignition, and drives away.

For months now, Pacific has been sending out emails that remind us to always check the undersides of our cars before approaching them (or at least before reaching a striking distance).

I don't own a car, so these warnings fail to frighten me in the way that they do other students. But even if I did – even if I owned a Honda with bling wheels and a racy hood bra that titillated potential thieves – I think I would still see these emails as a source of entertainment. I would have never thought to violate someone in that way. And I want to hear more.⁹

Part of my desire to hear more is because this particular warning has grown old. The first email I got about it was last year, toward the end of spring semester. I'd already lost my bike by then. I didn't have any form of transportation left to be stolen. And the walk was becoming a bore. So that's when I decided to just give up the commute altogether and sleep on campus. Andy Fields had already taught me the craft of homelessness and I had all the resources I needed.¹⁰ At that point, most of the email warnings (including this one) ceased to apply to me.

That doesn't mean my Stocktonian life has taken place in a bubble of safety ever since though. I admit I haven't seen a good mugging since I quit commuting, but Pacific has an open campus. And being an open campus in the middle of Stockton, its real estate is not without its share of the community's crime.

The first time I ever visited the school was one week after the occurrence of three shootings. Three totally different (somewhat unrelated) shootings all on Pacific's campus in a single week (the week before I got there).

Both fortunately and unfortunately, no students were involved or injured. Fortunately because no students were involved or injured. Unfortunately because that means no

⁹ Don't pretend you wouldn't. I've seen the way everyone slows their cars to take in the wreck on the side of the road more completely. They did it when I was that wreck, on my de-spoked bicycle. Not because they were checking to see if I was okay – if their help was needed – but because they liked what they saw. And if they drove slowly enough, maybe they would get to see even more. The only difference here – with email – is that no traffic gets backed up by the interest.

¹⁰ I started sleeping part-time in Baun and part-time in Travis Stiles' spare bedroom. Although I don't usually like Trivises (Travii?), this one is among a short list of people I admire most in the world. I'm sure I'll explain why later in this journal. For now, all you need to know is that he was, and still is, a Graduate Assistant in Sport Sciences *and* a Graduate Residential Director. So, in addition to drawing two stipends, he has free housing (in one of the fraternities across Pacific Ave.). And that's where I found myself sleeping several days a week.

details were released. The extent of what I was told was the extent of what the students were told: rival gangs were enacting their rivalries on campus property; all of the survivors had been apprehended.

No one was assured “won’t happen again”, but in announcing the capture of the perpetrators, the students were supposed to interpret that as some sort of consolation prize. It might not be the real thing, but it’s all the assurance you’re going to get. Some fragile peace of mind you can bring to the library with you. Take it or leave it.

Much more recently, and far more interesting, is the latest campus shooting. (I was walking my late night laps in Baun when it happened... and as much as I would like to say I heard the gunshots, I didn’t.)

Earlier in the day, a pair of young (early twenties) Stockton townies attended a frat party. They were both men, but I don’t recall their race.

After a few bong hits and some womanizing banter (so the story is told), they left the party. And they didn’t return until late that night, with the intention of robbing the residents (of their X-Box and marijuana) at gunpoint. Unfortunately that gun was pointed at the lead burglar’s genitals when the burglary began (tucked into his belted jeans in order to look macho). When he tried to pull it out (in an equally macho manner), it went off.

A couple days after the incident, Pacific’s official report was circulated. It claimed that the bullet entered the gunman’s body through his scrotum, exited through the back of his left thigh, and split his femoral artery while en route.

While this was an exciting email to receive, I don’t know how they would have known any of those details unless someone followed the burglars to the hospital and interviewed their doctors (or evaluated their medical charts). It just seemed a little bit suspicious. But maybe someone *did* follow them, because a Pacific student was taken to that same hospital in an ambulance of his own. And people definitely followed *him*.

After the gunman shot himself, his accomplice grabbed the gun and squeezed off a few rounds toward the panicking students. One bullet landed, ripping through the soon-to-be-hospitalized student’s shoulder.

And that was it. No one else was shot or injured.

But even if other students were injured – or killed for that matter – my reaction wouldn't change. Even if Patrick Purdy had risen from the dead, strapped on a satin flak jacket, and mowed down half of the student body, I would probably be making the same observation. This one:

Why not just keep the gun in a holster? I realize it looks a little bit less cool than keeping it in a denim waistband, but is that really what matters? If there's going to be a gunfight, and one of the contestants is wearing a holster, one can be pretty sure that person will come out on top. Shouldn't that be more important than how cool you look while driving bullets through your own testicles?

And holster wearers don't aim their pistols sideways either. No matter what the movies imply, it's not going to look as macho when you miss every single shot by upwards of fifteen feet. (These are all issues Sun Tzu would have discussed had the topic been pistols rather than chariots.)

I've gotten a bit sidetracked.

The point of saying all of this is not to propose ways in which I think crime (and its criminals) could be more effective. Or more interesting. Rather, I just wanted to express that, when I went on my nighttime stroll around Stockton (which I returned from a couple hours ago now), perhaps I was feeling a bit safer and more secure than I should have felt.

The city is far more dangerous than campus and campus is a place where violence is not irregular. The internet is full of believable statistics and my inbox is full of creative warnings. But, again, I've just never felt that any of it applies to me.

So, while feeling unrealistically safe and secure, I went on that walk. And in doing so, I discovered that December is a wonderful time of year to appreciate Stockton's culture.

By "culture", I don't mean anything "ethnic" or, worse, "diverse." If "diversity" is what you're after, you have to leave North America to find it. Mexico is too proximal a destination for those kinds of exposures.

When I talk about Stockton's culture, I mean the people who hang Christmas lights.

People started degrading their homes in this way a couple weeks ago.¹¹ And by now, everyone who will be doing any decorating at all this year has already done so. No new houses are going to play dress-up.

Not everyone has a Christmas tree yet; those are still for sale in grocery store parking lots and in the middle of the Sherwood mall. But the outsides of houses that aren't decorated yet are not likely to become so. That part of the season is complete. And it provides me with a nice cultural coatrack on which I can hang this season's observations. Beginning with the Christmas pole.

The Christmas pole appears to be more popular this year than it was last year. Last year it was confined to commercial districts; this year, the infection has spread to suburbia.

What I mean by "the Christmas pole":

At the top of a tall, metal shaft, six individual strands of Christmas lights all come together. At the bottom of that shaft, those six strands are spread apart and connected to the ground at equidistant points. The result is a six-sided cone which has a base radius of about four feet.¹²

It looks nothing like a tree. Not just because it's see-through; it's also way too linear and geometrical. I don't understand how anyone in the world could possibly think this looks okay.

"Oh honey, look at the geometry on that curb over there. Isn't it pretty?"

"Oh my. You're absolutely right. It's so beautiful, the way you can see right through it. I could just stare through the skeletal structure of that hexagonal cone all day, watching the way the traffic moves on the other side of it."

¹¹ Whenever I talk about this, people accuse me of some sort of religious persecution; "War against Christmas" they say. But they're not really listening to what I'm saying. First, it has nothing to do with religion. And second, I actually enjoy looking at Christmas-lit houses. I just look at them in the same way that I look at peoples' dogs who have been forcibly dressed in holiday attire (ridiculous vests and mittens, etc.). In both cases, fashion is being applied where it doesn't belong. Because dogs are alive, I find this a little bit offensive. Because houses are not, I'm not bothered by the effort. I find it silly, but also pretty. Sometimes pretty.

¹² The footprint of a taller, commercial pole might cover a bit more ground.

Nobody has ever said anything like this. What then (I wonder) motivates people to continue hoisting these things into their pole holes every year? Or, in the suburbs, dig a new pole hole?

It's not like it's a tradition that we've only recently realized is stupid, but, as a matter of momentum, keep doing anyway.¹³ Geometric hexa-trees are an invention of the industrialized world and they need to go away.

That's not to say that I find all Christmas lights offensive though. I don't. I find regular ("traditional") lights to be very pretty. If there's a row of little bulbs lining a roof gutter and it's cold outside and I can see those bulbs glowing through my breath, the sight of it will immediately soften my hatred of the world. The same can be said for wreathes hanging on doors, candles burning in windowsills, and crucifixes burning in the front yards of homes owned by black people.

(The last one was obviously a tasteless joke, and I can think of very little that's more heinous, but the first two really are attractive. A list to which I may add yule log burnings, though I question the English who refer to the log as an "ashen faggot.")

Even the houses that go way beyond what could be thought of as acceptable (the ones that look like Vegas casinos that get seasonally transplanted into a suburban neighborhood) don't offend me.

Hip-high candy canes line a walkway that leads to the front door of a house so covered lights that there ceases to be any recognizable pattern to them; each string blends into the next and the next and the next until it looks like one giant wad of bulbs. And it's all made worse by those hideous "icicle" lights (which look nothing like icicles) dangling from every danglable surface. And on the lawn, you'll see half a dozen wire deer standing motionless (with another half dozen making mechanical noises as their necks move up and down). An inflatable Santa Claus is waving his giant air-filled mitten at every passerby (backed by the hum of his 24-hour blower). And a weird, old, plastic manger display is not lit up at all, difficult to even see, and missing half of its pieces.

This house doesn't bother me. I recognize it's extremely ugly, but at least it took a lot of hard work to make it that way. I think that's what I hate so much about the Christmas pole. It's not *just* that it's ugly; it's lazy. So that's where I like to direct my contempt.

¹³ Erecting an aluminum yard shaft is not an offshoot of a pagan evergreen bough clipping practice. Don't let anyone try to tell you otherwise.

Being upset by the *merely* ugly seems like a waste of perfectly good hatred. They're just lights. They'll turn off eventually.

Just as ridiculous as the casino houses (though marginally more aesthetic) are those with roofs that spell stuff. Several strings of lights connect and twist into religiously-themed sentences, the most common being: "Happy Birthday Jesus!"

While this is stupid, I can't assign any real scorn here. Mostly because scorn is a finite resource. And if I divvy a helping to *that* house, those scornful kcals are being subtracted from the house with the roof that spells this sentence:

"He is Risen."

This house *has* to receive *all* of my scorn.

"He is Risen" is a rooftop advertisement that the residents sleeping beneath that roof have no idea what their own holidays are celebrating. Despite this, they still manage to regard those holidays as important enough to warrant the effort of organizing displays of twinkling LED sentences. (I've never tried to spell anything with Christmas lights, but I imagine there's serious labor there.)

People always say you can't complain about politics if you didn't vote. I think that's nonsense. One can know an awful lot about politics without having voted. And discourse promotes change. Sometimes. With religion however, you can't know all that much about it (certainly not enough) if you haven't read the books *yourself*. So whether you're a catholic, an excommunicated catholic/protestant, an agnostic, or a hardened atheist, if you haven't read the bible yourself (not just a couple psalms at random while you're pooping, but legitimately cover to cover), you're not allowed to talk about it. Not a single word. Because you sound like a fucking idiot.

To the gentleman who decorated the "He is Risen" house, I have to say: Christmas and Easter are not interchangeable. And the rising on your roof is a reference to the resurrection at Easter. The only thing doing any rising at your house this Christmas will be some yeast-baked goods your wife puts in the oven (unless you take your Viagra that morning).

The holiday that your roof is celebrating happened on April 16th this year. A few months before I started keeping this journal.

And, as much as I enjoy all religious holidays, this one is even sillier than Christmas. With a lot more buildup; it's not just updating the advent calendar every morning.

You begin by "lenting" something out of your life for a while. Ash Wednesday happens forty-six days before Easter and that's when all the self-denial starts. You spend forty days denying yourself some ridiculous luxury (in observance of the forty days that Jesus supposedly spent fasting in the desert). One never gives up anything one can't do without, like food. Or even sex.

"I'll abstain from sexual fulfillment, whether by hand or by partner." No one ever says that. It's always something like "I'll abstain from sweets" or some such vague bit of nonsense. It's the self-consciously pious who always abstain from something like meat.

Whenever anyone asks me what I've given up (falsely assuming me to be among the devout), I tell them I've given up ice. Ice to me is Victor Hugo's ball (i.e., dance). "It's never a sacrifice to give up a thing which does not give you pleasure." (That was from the love letters of Victor Hugo, upon his giving up going to balls to rid himself the trouble of going.)

After all the self-congratulating is over ("I made it forty days without a single sweet"), Good Friday happens.

"Good" is a questionable adjective here. If I were to be killed on a Tuesday (whipped all morning, nailed to some sticks afterward, etc.), I think I would find it upsetting if everyone referred to that as "Good Tuesday" for the rest of time. It just sounds like the implication would be "good riddance." But "Good Friday" it is. Jesus dies.

According to Mark, his crucifixion happened at the "third hour"; according to John, it was the sixth. These are on a twelve hour day. All uninteresting. It's assumed he died sometime around 3:00 p.m. on Friday and was buried by 6:00. Give or take.

He laid low on Saturday. And then on Sunday, he pulled a "yeast-in-the-oven." JC be raisin' his holy ass out the grave (first century ebonics).

At least one Mary (maybe two, depending on which gospel you're consulting; and maybe even a Salome) showed up to the tomb with some spices. According to both Luke 24 and Mark 16, they showed up "very early in the morning." According to Matthew 28, it was "as it began to dawn", though John 20 says "it was yet dark."

It was really fucking early. That's what's important. And the tomb was already empty when they got there. So for all we know, this could have happened Saturday night. But we'll be generous and say it was at 6:00 a.m. on Sunday (Easter) morning.

According to Jesus himself, he'd be dead for three days and three nights. And *then* rise. That was his own prophecy (Mathew 12:40). But even if it was just *on the third day*, this is still cheating the clock a bit. I don't know that Jesus can claim a full three days here. 3:00 p.m. on Friday until (generously) 6:00 a.m. on Sunday hardly meets the criteria. That's thirty-nine hours. Nine hours shy of two days. If this were the 21st century job market, and these were billable hours, that would never fly (or, in this case, *rise* or *ascend* or whatever).

But still, on Easter morning (and on December 9th if you live in Stockton): "He is Risen!"

The resurrection itself (the actual event) is funnier than its timing if you consult the Gospel of Peter.¹⁴ Here, Easter is the day that Jesus emerged from the cave. And when he did, he was literally (not figuratively) as tall as a mountain. And right behind him was his crucifix, connected to nothing, walking on its own. And talking. His crucifix was talking. The hunks of dead wood grew a mouth and started having conversations.¹⁵

This is why I find Easter to be so much sillier a holiday than Christmas. And why I find it so bizarre that someone would choose to re-celebrate it on December 9th.

Easter happened seven and a half months ago (if this were Jesus doing the math, he'd just round up to a full year; maybe two). And here tonight, we find "He is Risen" painstakingly spelled out on the roof of a house in the United States of America.

Despite how ridiculous this is, I bet I'll still be saddened when those flickering, outdated words are turned off for the last time this year. Perhaps just because that will mark the passing of another season. And I don't want to get old.

¹⁴ The Gospel of Peter didn't make it into the New Testament, but for no good reason. It's exactly as historic and valid as those that did make the canonical cut. Or at least as valid as the Gospel of John.

¹⁵ One can be pretty sure the Stockton man with the Christmas'd roof doesn't believe in evolution, but if you put this gospel in his lap, apocryphal though it may be, he'd be accepting of the story.

Sunday, December 10 at 5:40 p.m.

I thought of another holiday phenomenon I appreciate as much as I do Christmas poles:

R&B renditions of *Heaven and Nature Sing*.

The title lyric (“heaven and nature sing”) is supposed to be sung in two, maybe three different notes. Not seventy-five. It bothers me when it’s seventy-five. Cramming in more notes per syllable does not enhance the quality of the product. Notes in a lyric are not like Fritos in a bag, where the more you get, the better the value.

This is just one (of many) “spirit of the season” songs that has the power to turn any mood sour. A drum machine and an atrocious teenage vocalist (with vocals cleaned by the magic of studio engineering) is not “Christmas” to me.

“Christmas” is a traditional holiday album playing on a boom box in the kitchen where nobody is, but it’s so damn loud we can hear it from wherever we are.

“Christmas” is a day of overeating following the day in which we actually do stuff (like worry that something we bought for someone won’t be appreciated).

Sometimes Christmas is a series of really terrible movies.

It’s a clump of mostly-burned-out white lights on a row of hedges in the front yard that go on and off with the porch light.

It’s the primary colored bulbs on a bush in the Gonzales’s yard down the street.

It’s cold, maybe raining. I’m dreading going to Granny’s house in Portland because it puts me in a room with too many cousins whose bastard children (fifteen years younger than themselves) are playing with toys that make sounds.

That is Christmas. And it’s severe, but nothing smells better.

Sunday, December 10 at 7:41 p.m.

I just talked to Fred. He added another track to the catalogue of Christmas songs that need to be stopped: the sultry rendition of *Santa Baby*.

And, if I may add one more (now that I'm thinking about it), *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* (which was, originally, apparently, *Reginald the Red Nosed Reindeer*).

When Montgomery Ward went out of business, that little jingle should have been dragged down with it.

That's all.

Monday, December 11 at 1:21 a.m.

Char came and visited me again tonight. She stopped by my Main Gym office, collected me as though in a handbag, and took me to the chapel to watch "Festival of Lights."

We sat down on a pew right next to Aladdin, who had come here all the way from Agrabah to listen to a few musical numbers and hear some short speeches about "here's what the holiday season means to me."

Aladdin has obviously done a lot of growing up since his Disney days. His hairline has receded clear to his fez and his vest has grown snug. But you can tell that same adventurous spirit is inside of him. I wanted to ask him about the Cave of Wonders, but Char told me not to. I guess she knows him. Weird. If I knew Aladdin, I would have bragged about it to *everyone*.

Just as I was about to ask him anyway, the opening speaker came on. He produced a twenty minute stream of consciousness about sunbeams, during which I stared at Aladdin's pants. And wondered if he ever punished Abu off camera for trying to steal a gem in the cave.

I continued to wonder about this until the first musical piece by the Pacific Choir, which I've decided to call "The Sounds of the Shire." At that point, I stopped paying attention to Aladdin and began picturing hobbits locking arms in pastures.

As that song was ending, another one of Char's friends came to sit by us. She must have been sixty years old and she hissed at Char. That was how she said hello. She hissed. It sounded exactly like Jafar when he became a snake.¹⁶ It scared me.

When she was done hissing, she began complaining to Char about her throbbing ankles. "I just want to cut my feet off" she said.

"Go ahead" I wanted to tell her. "They hurt because you're fat" I wanted to continue. "Carving them off of you isn't going to solve that" I wanted to finish. But I didn't say any of those things.

Really though, she could jumpstart the weight loss by taking off her chainmail blouse. It looked like she was dressed for battle; like she was about to go defend Helm's Deep. Her fashion must have weighed twenty-five pounds. While I was looking at it, she produced another sentence about her ankles and then said "I've just been on my feet all day."

I didn't respond. Not even to myself. I ignored her with all my might, focusing instead on the "festival."

That's when I noticed a man in the choir wearing a Houston Astros hat. You'd think one of the old women standing next to him would have made him take it off. I don't care how big a fan he is – how much he worships Craig Biggio – wearing a baseball cap in the chapel while in the choir, wearing a choir robe, singing, is ridiculous.

Almost as ridiculous as dressing up as Aladdin or wearing a chainmail blouse or the next speaker's subject: Kwanzaa.

Please don't interpret this the wrong way, but Kwanzaa is not okay. There's nothing even nearly okay about it. It's a forty year old fake holiday that people in Africa have never heard of and, until about five years ago, nobody in the U.S. had ever heard of it either.

While there is dignity (a lot of it) in recognizing and celebrating African history (see "Black History Month" for example), Black History Month wasn't invented by a convicted felon who spent his younger years battering women. Rather, it was first proposed (as "Negro History Week") in 1926 by Carter Woodson.

¹⁶ "Perhaps you'd like to see how sssnake-like I can be!" Exactly as snake-like as Char's friend, apparently.

Woodson was a totally impressive African American historian (founder of the Journal of Negro History) who held graduate degrees from both University of Chicago and Harvard when he came up with his annual week of recognition (in February so that it would coincide with Abraham Lincoln's birthday).¹⁷ It wasn't a celebration; it was an attempt to make the Departments of Education recognize black history in their curricula. And it worked. He literally changed history.

Now compare Carter Woodson to Ron Everett, the founder of Kwanzaa (who changed his name to Maulana Karenga to sound more "ethnic").

Ron Everett was a drug-addled monster who stripped women and beat them with electrical cords. And smashed their heads with toasters and rammed hot soldering irons into their mouths. That's why he went to prison. And this disgusting piece of shit is the man who brought us Kwanzaa.

Like the original "Negro History Week", Kwanzaa lasts seven days (December 26th to January 1st). Other than that, it has absolutely nothing in common with Negro History Week. And no self-respecting person of any race (or creature of any phylum) should be interested in Karenga's seven principles.¹⁸ Celebrating in this direction does nothing but degrade African Americans. O.J. Simpson and Ray Lewis and R. Kelly and Mike Tyson (and maybe even Willie Horton) have all inflicted less harm on the perception of African American culture.¹⁹

The real tragedy here is that African Americans have to be judged in this way at all. If you swap Ron Everett for L. Ron Hubbard, you don't wind up with a representative of white culture dragging the rest of us down.²⁰ But get that skin a little more pigmented and all of your nonsense is representing a whole race (or at least a whole ethnicity and all of its culture). And in this case, Ron Everett (along with his embarrassing holiday) is the most unfortunate representative of that culture ever born.

¹⁷ Although, in the U.K., it's in October for no good reason. "It's for the children" is not a good reason. I get that October may be an ideal spot in the academic calendar, but to say "it's for the children" in regard to *anything* is to admit oneself a total bore.

¹⁸ The need for there to be *seven* of them is why the extra letter was added to the Swahili word "kwanza." One letter per principle. I have to ask: could Karenga really not do without the principle "cooperative economics"? He really had to fasten the extra "a" to the end of the word for that one?

¹⁹ Okay, maybe not R. Kelly. But if you swap R. Kelly with 50 Cent, it's probably true. And I actually like Mike Tyson. Quite a lot. Not because he punches people hard, but because he has interesting things to say if you listen to more than the lisp.

²⁰ Or how about our little satin-flak'd Patty Purdy? No one ever looked at his mug shot, and then looked at me, noticed the likeness in skin tone, and thought "I bet he'll do it too."

He does nothing but harm to the goal of “restoring the rightful power and proper place of African people in the world” (Maulana Karenga, 2000, in his annual Kwanzaa address). Karenga is just redoing all of the damage that Carter Woodson worked so hard to undo.²¹

But in tonight’s speech, I heard no such denunciations. No bitterness. No actual honesty. Just mindless praise. And that praise put me in a bad mood until the next musical number began; a song that sounded as though it was completely (or at least largely) plagiarized from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. This was not uplifting; it was creepy. But its creepiness was distracting. So I stopped thinking about Kwanzaa.

After that song, some really cheap candles were passed out to everyone in the pews and we were instructed to participate in a “passing of the flame” (each candle lighting the next until every hand in the room had a fire in it).

As soon as every candle was lit, the show was over. It was time to begin moving toward the door and filing out, with the elderly in the front of the line, moving at the pace a garden grows. The mass of people that formed behind them were clearly annoyed by that pace, but unable to honk a horn. So they just crowded together closer and closer. Everyone in the chapel mashed themselves together so tightly that it started to look like rush hour on a Japanese subway. This is bad when every single person in the room is holding a fire. I was sure someone was going to light my shirt, or maybe my hair, moments after Aladdin’s pants went ablaze. But somehow we all made it out not dead.

Next stop: Burns Tower.²²

²¹ And it’s actually offensive that Kwanzaa would be placed on the calendar at Christmastime when its felonious, woman-battering founder referred to Jesus as “psychotic.” Even I’m offended here and I’m not a Christian. Or a woman. Or a black person being unfairly judged and degraded.

²² Burns Tower is what you see in every photograph of campus. It was built around a water tower. They didn’t tear down the water tower first; they just piled a bunch of concrete around it, which means the top half of the building is totally useless. Even the lower half is architecturally weird. And, although this is the “bell tower” too, it has no bells. It has speakers that play recordings of bells. It is *not* the clock tower however. The clock tower is an entirely different structure, located by the parking lots and lawns south of Main Gym (halfway between Main Gym and the Chem. Lab). That tower was dedicated in 2002 by ex-president Bill Atchley’s widow, Pat (making it the “Atchley Clock Tower”). Bill was already dead at that point. He died in 2000 while campaigning for John McCain. Pat waited two years before dedicating Pacific’s minor tower with dirty money (as the story goes). I’ve never found actual evidence of this, so it’s possible it’s just a really widespread urban legend, but that legend says Pat used stolen money to build it. Sometimes “stolen money” is the extent of the story; other times it’s money she stole from the university.

At Burns Tower, we watched a different set of old people plug in a few strings of Christmas lights that were wrapped around a nearby tree. "The annual lighting of the tree" they called it.

Okay. Done. Then it was off to the dining hall for refreshments.

This wouldn't have been so bad had karaoke not been the entertainment. Or even if karaoke was the entertainment, but it wasn't being monopolized by geriatric folks who were trying to sing Christmas songs, and reading the lyrics off a thirteen inch Panasonic TV (on which the bouncing ball either wasn't there or wasn't working).

There must have been ten senior citizens at it all at once, the whole lot of them humming something incoherent to their own key and beat. It sounded like what a church would sound like if you mic'd everyone in the audience during the hymnals.

Instead of staying to eat the microwaved pancakes, Char and I left. I didn't see Aladdin on the way out. He was probably stealing some apples from a vendor somewhere. Wherever the marketplace is.

Monday, December 11 at 9:24 a.m.

I was thinking about my latest entry. This is why I'm alone in life. All I do is mock people. About really personal things too so that my ridicule cuts extra deep. Luckily I have a Char in my life who a) appreciates it, and b) participates. And participates astonishingly well. I have to actually compete when Char is in the room.

Monday, December 11 at 1:00 p.m.

I just received my first Christmas card of the year. I was hoping, being as I'm homeless, that I wouldn't receive any this year. Because reading a slogan about joy or peace on earth (printed in some sort of papyrus font on folded cardstock) doesn't boost my spirits. It just wastes my time. And more than that, it wastes *your* time, sender of Christmas cards. Probably quite a lot of it as you have to actually go to the grocery store and buy it (maybe even spend a couple minutes picking it out). And then sign it. And mail it.

None of these things is instantaneous. And while cheap, they're not free. And certainly not without the hassle of figuring out how to address it to me (mailing it to Baun Fitness Center with an "Attn: Courtney Jensen" at the top evidently works).

I guess I just don't understand the point.

If you really want to cheer me up, take a nap beside me and wait for me to fall asleep first. And then stick around so that when I wake up, I don't do it alone. That would definitely bring me a bundle of holiday cheer.

But if you're not going to do that, don't bother doing anything at all (especially if "anything" is sending me a piece of cardstock with some writing on it). And, when you do nothing for me, don't feel guilty. Because you know I'm not doing anything for you.

Monday, December 11 at 7:09 p.m.

I'm in Main Gym. I've just returned from a walk. Not around Stockton, but around campus.

I didn't cover as much ground as I did on my Stockton walk. For a reason I'll explain in a minute.

Before I left, Pacific circulated an email about an incident that happened at the Sherwood Mall. This is just north of campus. Go up Pacific Ave. about a mile (between March Lane and Robinhood Drive) and it'll be on your right. Across the street from Delta (the community college).

According to the email, the "Sherwood Mall incident" happened yesterday at about a quarter after five (i.e., during peak shopping hours). After describing its timing and location, the detail grew fuzzy. One Stockton resident used a thing to stab another Stockton resident. It had nothing to do with Pacific or its students. The culprit has been apprehended. Take your peace of mind with you to the library.

That was the summary (in as much detail as I could provide when I left for my walk).

While on that walk, I ran into a police officer. And I had to ask her. This is why my walk covered so little ground. And it was totally worth it.

Not only did this officer have access to details as a result of her job, but she was actually *there*. She was in the mall at the time. Granted, she was off duty (and outside of her on-duty jurisdiction), but that's even better. It makes for a far more attentive witness. And she was happy to tell me everything. Everything goes like this:

A Cambodian Stockton townie named Len Prak walked into the mall with a meat cleaver. Not a knife. A cleaver. (She was very clear on this detail.)

Prak "couldn't have been older than twenty; probably late teens." She couldn't remember his exact age; apparently numbers aren't her thing (she's much more concerned with the styles of cutlery).²³

He wandered up to a stranger at the Whimsy Family Entertainment Arcade (a shitty mid-mall arcade where minorities play Dance Dance Revolution) and rammed the cleaver into him. Right into his face.

Apparently this wasn't done in rage, or even the slightest aggression; it was just a casual blow – cleaver to stranger – no more emotional than asking that stranger for the time.

Once Prak had checked that activity off of his to-do list, he yanked the cleaver out of his victim (who apparently survived), and walked over to the Christmas tree booth.

Assuming this was item number two on his agenda, he grabbed one, didn't pay, and wandered off with it.

In one hand, Prak was still carrying his meat cleaver, now dripping a trail of blood. In the other, he was dragging a Douglas fir. A tree which had spent the last month of its life denied sunlight and water as though "lenting" its way toward Christmas. I'm sure it was shedding a lot of dead pine needles on its new journey. And I can only imagine what the trail behind Prak looked like as he continued his stroll around the mall. The drops of blood being smeared into streaks by the branches, the browning needles dotting those streaks.

At this point, most of the employees fled. They ran out of the mall and didn't stop running until they were home.

²³ Being a young Cambodian living in that area of Stockton, I have to wonder: had he been born just a couple years earlier, might he too have been one of Purdy's victims?

One can hardly blame them. It's December. These are seasonal contracts; they're teenagers with no job security, let alone a vested interest in the success of their respective employers.

Now understaffed, and presumably concerned about safety, many of the store owners and managers rolled down their security gates (trapping the customers inside). But others stayed open for business. Those who did quickly became victims of looting (which makes me wonder about the real motivation behind those who closed their gates; was it really about safety?).

Eventually a Christmas shopping construction worker, who had been taking a break from his shopping and was waiting in line at the food court, decided to tackle the cleaver-wielding, tree-dragging maniac.

A few mall security guards followed his lead and then some police officers took it from there (and one of them – off duty though she was – is who told me this story).²⁴

One can learn a lot about people – and how they reason – by their reactions when confronted by a Prak. Not confronted by his blade, but by his presence.

I understand fleeing (in the interest of self-preservation). And I admire the construction worker who did the tackling. But what about the shopkeeper's decision to stay open for business? Or the other shopkeeper's decision to close his gate... motivated mostly by the looting? (If there was a nobler motivation, it did not come through in the police officer's narrative.) Although I have no evidence, it wouldn't surprise me if at least one shopkeeper closed his own gate (locking in his shoppers) and then ran around the mall looting from his competitors.

Is this what the holidays mean to people? Free stuff, victims be damned?

To a Stocktonian, I think the answer to those questions is (if ever there was a "resounding") yes.

²⁴ That officer also told me that, so far, she's brought someone down on campus every single day this semester... at gunpoint. On campus. Every day. At gunpoint. Although I got the impression that she only works on weekdays, meaning this may have been a very slight exaggeration, it still communicates something interesting: I never hear about these. None of them. No emails are ever sent with the purpose of keeping the students informed. Given the level of detail about the Sherwood meat cleaver, however, it's hard to feel entirely surprised.

And this *almost* convinces me that Stockton is one of the rare places in which Kwanzaa could potentially be a force for good. Because I think even Karenga would be above this degree of misbehavior.²⁵

And maybe “He is Risen” was the construction worker. The one who did the *actual* rising this year, having risen to an occasion of *real* need on the perimeter of a food court. (This seems possible; I doubt an accountant was up on such a steep roof with a staple gun and some strings of lights).

Maybe this is what Christmas should mean to me. And I should have been paying closer attention during the “what the holidays mean to me” speeches at the Festival of Lights. Instead of ridiculing a heavily armored hissing woman and a man in an Astros hat, I could have been learning something. Something about acceptance or compassion. How I should judge people less fiercely, mock them less savagely (with the purpose of cutting deeper into their sensitivities than would be possible by Prak’s cleaver). Maybe that’s what I should be taking away from all of this.

Even if it is, this moment of self-reflection will pass. It is me, after all. And in a few weeks, I’m sure I’ll read the next batch of statistics describing Stockton’s crime trends. And I’ll be entertained. And I’m sure this data point will hardly make a difference. It is, like every other point, just a story. And like all the other stories (e.g., those that resulted in “beware the Achilles machete” emails), it fails to concern me. Even when the blood is still wet, the impotence isn’t cured. I just don’t feel that Stockton’s crime applies to me any more than its asparagus does. Not even while the cleaver is still dripping. Or while pistols are emerging from bread-loafed sportswear.

Now, since I didn’t really get my walk in earlier (I spent the whole time talking to a cop), I’m going to head back out. But not on campus. I’m going to go walk around Stockton and see what else is being celebrated this year. What other out-of-season holidays are on display in the most vulnerable, un-gated communities of this dangerous and horrible town (or, to quote myself, this “forsaken pit of violence”).

And maybe I’ll figure out a way to brew a bit of compassion while I’m out there.

²⁵ If there were women to be sexually assaulted here, I might change my mind. But considering the ungovernable state of Stockton’s majority, Karenga’s seven principles may actually promote a healthy change. Or at least aim people in a better direction; offer a little holiday guidance. Maybe.