

Minor Mensch

Volume 6, Chapter 2

Home with Jacqui, Timmy, and Phoebe

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Wednesday, December 20, 2006 at 11:10 p.m.

I'm home (Frank family home).

Win and I left Stockton at six-something a.m. Call it seven. We drove all day, each fell asleep at the wheel several times, and then, about six hours ago, made it to the gravel strip of Eola Drive. This meant that we (or at least I) only had a mile left to go (roughly).

As soon as we rounded the last corner of the driveway (down by the cherry orchard) and started up the home stretch, I saw Timmy and Phoebe run out onto the back porch and begin waving fiercely, their tiny arms hurricaning violently through the air.¹

When we got close enough, they started running alongside us. They weren't trying to race; they were just joining us for the remainder of our trip and using Win's pickup as their pace car.

As soon as we parked, they opened my door for me and latched on, delivering hugs that were just as fierce as the waves that preceded them.

Fred, Jacqui, Adam, and Zoë came out at this point too, though they issued slightly less adrenal greetings. "We missed you" as Phoebe is smashed more tightly into my pelvis by an overlapping hugger. "It's so nice to have you home", leaning in to issue one last hug over top of a still-clinging Timmy.

¹ My favorite Salinger line comes from my favorite Salinger book, *Nine Stories* (although not from my favorite one of those stories, *A Perfect Day for Banana Fish*). The best passage appears in *The Laughing Man*: "Over on third base, Mary Hudson waved to me. I waved back. I couldn't have stopped myself, even if I'd wanted to. Her stickwork aside, she happened to be a girl who knew how to wave to somebody from third base." The reason I bring this up is to say that, all else aside, Timmy and Phoebe are a pair of kids who know how to wave to somebody from a back porch. I've never met their equals.

While this was going on, Win got out of his truck and popped his back in at least a hundred thousand directions. He then issued some greetings of his own, we all wished him a safe rest of his trip (he still had another hour to go), and he climbed back into his driver's seat.

Given how long we had already been on the road (and how long it had been since either of us had slept, not counting the few minutes we each got behind the wheel), the last leg of his trip was probably the most painful Salem-to-Portland commute ever commuted. I'll find out later. I haven't talked to him since he left, but he looked exhausted when he started back down the driveway (to much less fanfare than when his truck was arriving).

By the time he had disappeared at the bottom of it, I was already inside. I was home. And happy. For the first time in a while, I'm really happy.

But so far Zoë and Adam have been in and out and I've barely seen Fred. Ten minutes after I extracted Timmy and Phoebe from my hip (still latched on like fleshy barnacles), Fred was paged.

"Do you have to go in?" I asked immediately.

I do this every time his pager goes off; before he's even looked at it. Before most people even realize his pager is making a noise. My question comes so immediately, it's as though I'm being evaluated in a timed reaction test. And I've been instructed to deliver my line the instant I hear the trigger noise. And I'm trying my hardest to impress ("what astonishing reaction time you have!" the study administrator will say to me).

I hadn't noticed I was doing this – or at least that it had become such a pattern – until last summer when Fred started trying to beat me to the punch. "Do you have to go in?" he'd ask himself out loud the instant his pager began to chirp. And when I found that he and I were saying it in perfect unison (me worried I was about to lose Fred for the night, Fred making fun of that worry), I asked "do I really say that every time?"

"Every time" Fred assured me.

"Oh."

This time he really did have to go in.

He had to go operate a dead fetus out of a fourteen-weeks-pregnant would-be-mother. Or something like that. That's what I gathered from his half of the phone call. If it wasn't that exactly, it was at least something similarly tragic. He left in a hurry. And he's still there. At the hospital or the clinic or wherever. Maybe he's doing some consoling. Or maybe he's playing chess on the internet.

Either way, it's Phoebe who's brought me the most cheer so far.

And the reason I'm so cheery while I'm here, I've realized, is because I giggle in a way that I rarely do while in Stockton. Here, some perfect little moment is always on its way; I can count on them appearing as regularly as appetites. And I always find myself vibrating uncontrollably when these moments arrive. There's no un-giggle-able subject either (not even dead babies), so in public, it can be a bit inappropriate, but tonight's Phoebe-induced giggles were all very appropriate. And equally touching.

After dinner, she and I stayed at the kitchen table. She scooted down the bench in order to sit snuggly close, and then she began telling me all about spiders. She told me that spiders live in trees ("in*SIDE* of trees", emphasis hers). She continued: "But only Red Biters. Only that kind of spider. And only in Stockton and America. Not in Oregon or London or Britain. And mostly just in boy trees. And they eat the blood of fish and puppies. And they like your pets' blood the best. And so that's why you can't go back to Stockton."

This was her first (of many) "stories" that ended with the sentence "and so that's why you can't go back to Stockton."

By about the third one, I was tearing up as much as I was giggling. The whole thing was just so sweet. After the last one (fifth maybe?), I gave her a Frank-family-style hug and tried to explain that, whenever I go, and wherever, I'll always come back... like a recurring carbuncle. And there'll be a time when she grows to hate it – this oily, festering hunk of biology that never quite leaves for good – but for right now, it's a promise she can appreciate.

My promise satisfied her enough that she changed the theme of her next story. This one was about her conception and fetal development. She told me all about how she used to rub the egg with the palm of her hand. "Like this" as she demonstrated her technique. But she only rubbed it in that way until she was big enough to do gymnastics in the uterus. "Like this" as she demonstrated her technique.

Had I not known what Fred did for a living, I'm pretty sure I could have guessed. I feel confident this is the only four-year-old ever to discuss this subject. Certainly in this way. And it was the last story she told for the night; the only one in which her closing words were not "and so that's why you can't go back to Stockton."

Instead: "And so here I am."

"Me too" I told her. And then, after a brief pause, I repeated myself, in the way that people often do and I always find annoying: "me too." (The second one being a bit quieter than the first, but using the same amount of breath.)

After that, things wound down and everyone slowly surrendered to bedtime.

I did too.

And now I'm back in "my" room, lying on "my" bed, looking out "my" window at "my" view, exactly as I was while writing my first entry into this journal. Except tonight, Timmy and Phoebe are in that bed with me, both of them already asleep. And "my" life is wonderful. It's not Stockton outside.

Thursday, December 21 at 3:09 p.m. Brightly colored, twenty-foot-long, inflatable nylon tubes connected to electric blowers do not make me want to purchase a Nokia cell phone. And parking a pickup truck on an uneven, forty-degree-inclined steel frame ramp (to display its suspension or parking brake or something?) does not make me want to purchase that vehicle. Those are two of the decisions I made this morning while Jacqui and I were driving around town running errands.

After those errands, we went to lunch at our usual spot: Fuji Rice Time (which people either call Fuji or Rice Time; nobody calls it Fuji Rice Time). It was just Jacqui, Timmy, Phoebe, and me. And it was delicious. I realize better sushi restaurants exist all over the world, but I don't know that this one could ever be anything but my favorite.²

² And I don't mean "my favorite" in the same way that a teenage girl who wears more than one bracelet on each wrist means "my best friend." This girl always has more best friends than she has bracelets. And that bothers me. There's an implied singularity to words like "favorite" and "best" and I, unlike teenagers, respect that implication. And Rice Time (I never call it Fuji) is my singular favorite sushi restaurant.

While sipping our miso soups, waiting for our food to arrive, Timmy made a joke that was neither funny nor memorable, which is why I don't remember it. Otherwise I'd quote it here.

Instead of giving him a courtesy laugh (which would ultimately hurt him more than it would hurt me), I used this as a "teachable moment" (an expression I've hated since the first time I heard it; mostly because the people who say it are those who should not be teaching anything, no matter what kind of moment presents itself).

I explained to Timmy that there's nothing worse than talking *just* to have a voice. And although "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" is terrible advice, swapping "nice" for "interesting" converts it into a very useful rule. "So before you contribute to a conversation, ask yourself if what you're about to say is interesting. And if it isn't, don't say anything at all. You're Timmy Frank. You can do much better than that."

Timmy's response: "I know. Actually, something just told me to make that joke."

"What told you?"

"I don't know. I think it was just my instincts."

After laughing loudly enough to draw attention to our table, I started in on my praise, explaining that the agony of listening to his first joke was totally worth it for the brilliance of his follow-up line.

I didn't get to finish paying Timmy the compliments he deserved though, because halfway through, the waitress approached the table to drop off our food. And as she was doing so, she issued a line of her own. A line that strengthened my position on "if you don't have anything nice to say..." being terrible advice.

As she put the first plate on the table, she paused (still holding that plate), and turned her head to face Jacqui. Looking squarely into Jacqui's eyes (and still holding the plate), she said: "oh! You're a grandmother!" She then released the plate and reached for the next one.

This was the same waitress who, while delivering our food last time we were here (over Thanksgiving break), told us how bad it was; how bad the food was that we had just ordered. Then she finished putting it on the table, said nothing else, and walked off.

This time, the waitress obviously thought Jacqui was my mother and Timmy and Phoebe my children (the latter assumption being just a bit more believable).

“Oh! You’re a grandmother!”

“Thanks for the insult” Jacqui said loudly, as the waitress was reaching for her second plate and miso soup was pouring out of my nose.