

Minor Mensch

Volume 7, Chapter 4

Day Two in Taiwan

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Tuesday, January 2, 2007 at 2:33 p.m.

That's what my computer screen says, but I think it's actually tomorrow here. Tomorrow at 10:33 a.m. I haven't figured out how Taiwanese time works yet, but I'm pretty sure that's it.

I went to bed for forty minutes last night. So did Dave. And then about two hours ago, he left for work. Me too. Except I didn't leave for work, which is what Dave did. I just got up (out of the tiny child's bed I slept in), microwaved some cottage cheese (which converts it into soup), waited for it to cool, and ate it. That was breakfast.

After breakfast, I noticed that Dave's apartment contained no people. His landlords left before he did. So I made a bunch of noise (mostly grunting while stretching) and then sat down on the landlords' furniture. One chair at a time until I settled on my Goldilocks piece: a dark leather sofa facing the Buddhist shrine.

That's where I've been sitting ever since, accomplishing nothing. Nothing at all. Unless this journal entry can be counted as an accomplishment. But I think I'm done with it. This is all I'm going to write. At least until I have something worth saying. And for that to happen, I need to actually do something first. But before I do anything, I have to take a shower. And Dave's shower has a sink in it. That's not why I haven't used it yet, but it is something I think of as weird.

The entire bathroom looks like (and probably is) a converted closet. It's about three square feet with a shower head, a tile floor, and a sink. And there's no toilet. One pees in the drain and doesn't poop unless he's planning to get that down the drain too. This means you either have to have diarrhea or the willingness to cram the bulk of it down by pressing on it with your foot and grating it against the drain cover until it dissolves its way through. And I have neither diarrhea nor a foot-to-feces fetish. At least not right now. Maybe later.

In the meantime, I'm off to the sink-and-shower closet (to bathe, not poop), and then it's off to explore Taipei. I'll report back later (when I have something worth saying).

Tuesday, January 2 at something o'clock p.m.

I don't know what time it is. But I do know it's tomorrow night here.

After writing the previous entry, I got in the shower, tried to recreate the activities one does while taking an ordinary shower, got out of that shower (perhaps no cleaner), put on some extremely wrinkled, slightly damp clothes, and then wandered around the city.

While wandering around, I came to a decision. This one: Dave lives on Chun Li's street (the original SNES version).

I didn't bring a camera¹, so I didn't take any pictures, but one does not need a camera in these situations. It's the 21st century. The Internet is already a thing. I can do a Google image search for "Chun Li" and find plenty of pictures of Dave's/Chun Li's neighborhood.

So I'm going to do that. I'm going to download one of those pictures and post it here.

I'll be right back.

(On the next page. Finding the right picture takes time. More time than it would take to read the last couple inches of this page.)

¹ The only camera I own is a Voltron Star Shooter from 1985. It's a plastic "Defender of the Universe" robot-lion-man with a lens in his chest. As a twenty-six-year-old (one who does not identify at all with people from Portland, Oregon), I didn't feel like packing this camera into my carry-on bag. (The Portland bit will only make sense if you've spent time there. If you have, I'm sure you've noticed how desperate people my age are to appear "unique". They would definitely carry my camera around, wearing it like an oversized necklace, hoping it would become a defining characteristic of their personal identities, like how height becomes a part of a basketball player's.)

Okay, you know what? I'm not going to do that. My search for an appropriate picture of Chun Li's street produced mounds of cartoon porn and little else. Capcom seems to have lost the market on graphic representations of their street-fighting, law-enforcing, child-loving, patricide-avenging, undercover Interpol agent.² Now all I can find is pictures of her privates; digital vaginas surrounded by a likeness of Chun Li's form.

Instead of posting one of those, I'm going to describe to you what I saw (while on my walk; not in my Google search). And I'll use a thousand words to do so (the suggested value of a photograph). And then I'll use a couple thousand more words. Because I saw a lot. One picture couldn't possibly capture all of that. It would probably require a few. So here are a few photographs worth of paragraphs:

Like Chun Li's section of town, Dave's is filled with people sitting uncomfortably for what appears to be no reason, doing things I don't understand. Some of them are crouching rather than sitting. Water is often involved. And a lot of them are doing their sitting or crouching under (or at least near) hunks of meat, which are dangling from a ceiling that doesn't look sterile.³ Or they're just sitting next to a bunch of caged chickens. And they may or may not be surrounded by tall, thin signs with Chinese writing on them. I like it when they are. It helps me believe Chun Li is on her way.

Unlike Chun Li's street, the people in Taipei aren't riding bicycles; they're driving motorized scooters (perhaps they've just upgraded since the SNES days). Nearly half of them are driving those scooters on the sidewalks, slaloming through the pedestrians.

In alpine skiing, crashing into the poles is called "blocking" and it happens all the time. In Taipei scooter maneuvering, crashing into the pedestrians doesn't seem to have a name, but it happens just as regularly. The scooter drivers then flee the scene (racing away from the wounded pedestrian) just as nimbly and devoid of emotion as a skier leaving a violated pole.

I can sit (or crouch uncomfortably) on the corner of any backstreet intersection and wait. Within an hour of that crouchy waiting, I'll see a leg-struck pedestrian go down.

² I don't know if patricide is the right word. She's avenging the murder of her father; she's not avenging her own killing of her father. There's probably a more accurate word here. Extra-patricidal revenge?

³ Most of the dangling meat hunks are entire animals. The only thing missing is their skin. If it's not a whole animal – if it's just a cut up piece of one – I'm unable to identify which "cut" it is. Or what kind of animal that cut came from.

And then I'll watch the operator of the scooter that struck him speed off as quickly as he sped in.⁴

I realize this sounds really horrible, but a lot of that horror is mitigated by a system of karmic justice that does a pretty good job of issuing retribution wherever it's due. And it's not a big procrastinator either. If punishment is in order, it won't wait for the next incarnation to deliver. It gets right to work.

In this case, the scooter-riding perpetrator may only have three or four city blocks left before he himself is plowed. Not by a fellow scooter, but by a fast-moving Nissan.⁵

After this collision, the man in the Nissan, exhibiting a characteristic lack of concern for the welfare of others, will drive off. He won't call an ambulance. He won't get out and check any vital signs, see if the other motorist is alive. He won't even stop. And he'll continue to not stop until he arrives at his destination. Because stop signs don't exist. Nor do speed limits. Or respect for other vehicles slighter in stature. Larger vehicles simply have the right-of-way. They never yield. Or look to see if the intersection is clear before entering it. Only smaller vehicles are expected to look, take notice of larger threats, and yield accordingly. In the (frequent) case of an accident, the smallest entity loses. And the largest one speeds off as if racing down the slope; just a few more gates to clear before the finish line.

There appears to be a single auto manufacturer whose vehicles avoid constant collision: Mercedes-Benz. If the car you're driving bears some other company's hood ornament, then I can guarantee it begins and ends with a devastated bumper.⁶ Although this *might* be more attributable to the way Taiwanese drivers negotiate tight parking, there's definitely no shortage of real, airbag-deploying crashes.

How a Mercedes avoids bumper damage: the owner of the car drives it into the city, parks badly, and doesn't leave. He gets out, but he just stands there, right beside it, waiting for a young, probably anonymous girl to get in.

And one will. He doesn't have to wait long.

⁴ That old bumper sticker slogan "if you don't like the way I drive, stay off the sidewalk!" must have originated here.

⁵ Somehow most victims survive these collisions. They recover with crutches. I bet Taiwan has more crutches per capita than any other country (or Chinese subsidiary) in the world.

⁶ I can hardly imagine the carnage that would ensue if Taiwanese streets were to be populated by horse-drawn carriages and rickshaws.

After just a few minutes, there will be an interesting exchange of eye contact. This is how a girl/stranger graduates from passerby to passenger.

They both get in the car and drive away.

One can be pretty certain this is for sex.⁷ And equally certain that no romancing occurs prior to the depositing of semen. The Mercedes owner just drives her back to his house, which I suspect is on the perimeter of the city. And is probably unclean by Western standards (poopy toilet paper in the wastebasket, etc.; we'll get to this). After the ride, the two of them get to work as hastily as Taiwanese traffic karma.

Following intercourse, I don't know what happens. I've only been here for about a day. But one day is long enough to tally up a pretty bulky catalog of observations. Not all of them about traffic.

In terms of the topography, Taipei is similar to Stockton: it's a huge, flat, sheet of concrete.⁸ But Taipei's sheet is quite a bit filthier than Stockton's. If Stockton's can be likened to the bedding in a basic room at the local Super 8, Taipei's wraps the double bed mattress in a roadside Econo Lodge after the apocalypse.

And on top of that dirty, topographical sheet is the frequent illusion of a leaf scurrying across the sidewalk. At first I thought of this as magical. As if something out of Hyrule found its way into Chun Li's battle quarters. But then I realized these little scurrying heaps were not leaves at all. They're cockroaches. From this moment on, they looked nothing like leaves. And they felt nothing like magic.

Another non-selling point is how commonly one smells feces. Really powerful feces. Though it's winter, it's warm. And there are a lot of stagnant puddles. And the winter heat allows those puddles to smell like a wet fecal shaft (or diarrhea in Dave's shower). Every couple blocks, one of these little malarial oases offers me a sniff.

⁷ This means that the act of standing beside a Mercedes that has pristine bumpers is an upper class Taiwanese mating call.

⁸ Taipei and Stockton are also similar in how dangerous their pedestrian life is. But not in the same way. Taipei is not defined by it. Danger is to Stockton as my Voltron camera would be to a twenty-six-year-old Portland resident. It's the core of the personality. In Taipei, danger is just an accidental byproduct of scooter density. Committing crimes on *purpose* seems to be a strictly-Stocktonian practice. And while that might color Stockton with a viler palette, the business of wound care isn't going to discriminate application by intentions. I'm sure it thrives comparably in the two cities.

Those sniffs actually remind me a little bit of Stockton during the transition to the rainy season, where the sprinklers and rain contribute equally to the intra-campus marshland. This lasts about forty days. I don't know how long Taipei's puddles have existed.

But it's not just the puddles. Sometimes what I smell actually *is* feces. Human poop. When that's the source of the odor, I'm probably indoors and near a bathroom.

One advantage Stockton has is that its residents are permitted to put toilet paper in the toilet. Stocktonians, as gross as they are, don't collect feces-laden pulps in exposed garbage pails, bringing the smell of outside inside so that it's completely inescapable.

Other times, the smell of feces is not feces at all, but food. A lot of the street vendors sell fermented tofu. And my olfactory detection skills are not keen enough to tell the difference between this mouthwatering dish and a wastebasket full of poopy toilet paper. Although I did eat some (of the tofu, obviously). And it did taste good? Is does. (Those last two sentences were spoken to me as I was buying and then eating it.)

Luckily (for me), street vendors sell other things too. Like this: pig blood cooked into black blocks. This smells fine. And tastes like it smells. Some of the other (equally grim) menu items smell okay too. I'll look into those more tomorrow. Today's observations were a bit unfocused.

Though I did focus on a chicken butcher for a while. I sat on an upturned bucket across the street from him. The type of bucket that, if it only had wheels, would probably accompany a mop. The butcher was also sitting on a flipped-over bucket, but his was wooden and chair-like. And right behind him was a very impressive chicken collection. He kept them in a bunch of corroded cages, stacked up in rows. Each cage was about the size of the chicken it contained.

It must have been half an hour before I surrendered my bucket. Maybe longer. I just sat there and watched him. I sat there watching the chicken butcher (CB) in really dirty, blood-soaked clothes do this:

Without looking, CB reaches back and grabs a chicken at random from one of the cages. He does this with one hand. And no fumbling. If he wasn't a fifty-year-old Asian man, he might have been a god among American middle school boys. With one hand, he was blindly unfastening a cheerleader's bra. Except instead of extracting a middle schooler's breast, he was pulling out diseased-looking junglefowl.

Directly in front of CB is a wooden plank that could pass as a tiny drafting table. It would look fitting if the man sitting on the bucket were a toddler-size architect and this was where he drew his toddler-size floor plans. But he's not an architect; he's a butcher. And this drafting slab is his butcher's table. Despite this, he doesn't place his recently-extracted chicken on it. Instead, he places it on a ridiculously filthy produce scale that's dangling next to it.

He drops the chicken into the rusty scoop hanging beneath that scale for ten seconds. During those ten seconds, it makes an awful lot of awful noise. CB appears to hear none of it. He doesn't even look at it while the noise is being generated. The instant he lets go of it, he turns his back on the scale to face the cages. First, he closes the open, now-empty one. Then, for no reason (and to no effect), he fiddles with some of the others. And then his ten seconds are up.

After not looking at how much the chicken weighs, CB grabs it from the scale. With his right hand, he palms its body like a women's basketball. Using his left, he folds its head to the side. And then he squeezes.

This apparently breaks its neck.

Sitting a few feet away, just past the scale, is a large, plastic garbage bin.⁹ Still palming the chicken, CB takes an apathetic free throw, lobbing the broken creature into that bin.

He then places the lid on it and waits for the chicken to finish its big, dead seizure.

From my small mop bucket across the street, I can hear the seizure banging against side of the plastic.

CB looks busy while this happens.

The seizure eventually stops.

He removes the lid and pulls the now-limp animal from it.

⁹ It's one of those industrial-looking, thirty-two gallon, heavy-duty bins (no wheels). The kind you'd see at any mid-90s state fair, sitting at the base of every lamppost. Except, instead of the standard grey color, this one is orange. When it was new, it probably had a Nickelodeon-tinted brightness to it, but it has clearly been faded by the years. And by the content. The only thing that ever goes into it seems to be dying chickens, which spend their remaining calories seizing all over it. The bin is even filthier and more sickening than the produce scale, where each of those chickens pointlessly spends its final moment of life.

The things he does to the animal at this point explain why his drafting table and his clothes are so bloody.

He might mutilate the once-upon-a-fowl for ten minutes. And then he starts over on a new one.

This time, as he extracts the chicken from its cage with his behind-the-back, single-handed finesse, I no longer think of him as a would-be god among middle schoolers. Now I just see him as a butcher.

...

I watched two more rounds. And then I got up from my bucket. The entire day seemed a bit gloomier than it had been when I first sat down. And that gloom became my mood as I finished my walk around Dave's neighborhood.

Up and down the street (though mostly up) were a bunch of doorways leading to basement shops. From the outside (and from a distance) I might have believed that any one of those shops was the one where Gizmo was purchased. And they might have felt more mystical had I sat on a bucket and stared at them rather than the butcher. Maybe I would have heard Howie Mandel's voice squeaking out of a Mogwai from a shadow in the basement stairwell. Instead, I just walked down those stairs and noticed that the shopkeepers shrink wrap every item they sell (shoes, magazines, etc.). This is weird.

Plus, those shopkeepers don't grow century-long beards and smoke ancient pipes. Or burn an absurd amount of incense in a room with no ventilation. Any combination of those would have been a welcome aid to my imagination. If the shopkeeper can't look the part himself, he could at least pollute the air a little bit with that conjuring cloud of mist and magic. But instead of growing out beards and lighting aromatic things on fire, they just thumb through porn while watching nine-inch televisions.

To communicate with the owners of these shops, I point at things. Silently. And then I hand them exact change. I tried having conversations, but I don't know Mandarin or Taiwanese. And they don't know English. And I don't think they're eager to learn it. Questions such as "how much is this?" or "can I buy this now please?" don't elicit the kind of responses that would suggest commission-based employment.

When my shoulder got tired from all the pointing, I gave up and went back to Dave's apartment.

Dave's apartment sits above the Taipei Montasorry Family Garden. I realize I spelled Montessori wrong. So did the Taipei Montassory Family Garden.

The point of mentioning this is to inform you that Dave lives on top of a kindergarten. The entrance to this kindergarten is about ten feet to the left of the entrance to Dave's apartment, which has a doorman who is currently and constantly flipping through a magazine of Asian porn, sitting in front of a nine-inch television. Sometimes he puts the magazine down and plays himself at cards. Not computer solitaire. He shuffles a deck of well-worn playing cards and deals himself a hand.

I'm sure those cards will be up for sale someday in an underground second-hand store, shrink wrapped. And I think *that's* what I like about Taipei. It's the character. It's not about the promise of Mogwai magic. Because all of that magic is betrayed when I sit on a bucket and really watch. And when Taipei's scurrying Zelda leaves are stripped down to their cockroach form. But the stripping away of the magic *is* the appeal. What's left is a kind of character that Stockton will never have. Taipei needs no century-beard to reveal its charm. I'm happy to be in this post-apocalyptic Econo Lodge double bed sheet of a town just the way it is.

...

Okay, I don't know how many words that was. I didn't count. But it's everything a few non-pornographic pictures of Chun Li could have accomplished had my Google search been less titillating. I'll come up with some new observations tomorrow. Sniff and taste some more of Taiwan's charms. And as soon as I have something else worth writing about, I'll be back.

And I hope I'll have figured out how to tell time by then. I still have no idea what time it is here. But it's late. Dave works in the morning and I've returned to the tiny child's bed next to his "shower". I think I'll probably rinse off the day and go to sleep. If my several meals of fermented tofu and bricks of pig blood give me diarrhea, I can take care of that while I bathe. No point in filling up the wastebasket with *my* feces when there's a whole family of landlords contributing to the same bin. But they aren't contributing anything right now. Right now, they're all sitting on the Goldilocks sofa.