

Minor Mensch

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THE SUN ROOM

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Sixty-nine days ago, Van Ness gave me the key to Room 111. That's the computer bunker in Main Gym. Vacation aside, it's been my home ever since.

Like all homes, this one came with some pros and cons.

These pros:

- 1) Free rent.
- 2) My largest commute is mere feet away.¹

And these cons:

- 1) My fourth largest commute is to the bathroom. The only toilets in the whole building are in the locker rooms. And those locker rooms aren't located in an especially convenient spot. That's not terrible if you just work in the building. But if you *live* there, and you wake up needing to use the bathroom, it's unlikely you'll be able to fall back to sleep after doing so.
- 2) Even if I just resolved to pee and poop my pants, sleep would still be a challenge. The basketball court and my office share a wall; a single ply of cinderblocks that divides the sleep-deprived me from the dribbling undergrads. Their basketballs are constantly crashing into that wall. And it's much louder than you'd expect.

¹ There are nine that I do regularly: work shifts, work meetings, classes, academic meetings, labs, lab meetings, the gym, the bathroom, and the grocery store.

- 3) When I do manage to sleep, I'm awoken every weekday (at some point during the morning) by Yenko, the custodian. He comes in for ten seconds to "clean" the room. He never skips a morning and never misses an opportunity to greet me with "hello, my friend!"

The pros, outnumbered though they are, have always outweighed the cons. The cons were often annoying, but they could be managed with very little effort. I could pee in bottles and cups, hold my poop for uncomfortably long periods, wear earplugs, and return Yenko's greeting with one of my own.² And then go back to sleep.

Life marches on.

But it marched into some unfortunate terrain when I left for vacation.

Between my departure (December 20th) and the date that I returned (two days ago), Room 111 was taken over. The Main Gym employees decided to convert it into a utility space. And to make it available to everyone. And they also decided that it should have a catchy name. It's no longer "Courtney's house". Not that anyone ever called it that. But that's kind of the point; they didn't call it anything. And now they do. Now they have a name for it: "the sun room".³

"Is there a multi-purpose room in the building that I could use?", a wayward graduate assistant asks.

"Oh, sure, why don't you use the sun room?", he's told.

"Where's that?"

"Room 111."

"Would I be able to set up an office in there?"

"Sure can!"

² "Thank you, my friend!"

³ This is an unusual name for a room with no windows. Obviously it refers to the collection of Sun Microsystems computers being stored in it. But that's a really misleading thing to name a room after. When you hear "sun room", your first thought isn't "I wonder how many 1993 computer stations they have in there. Do you think there are more than ten?"

This wayward graduate assistant (whose name is Jason) used to have his own office somewhere else in the building. He doesn't anymore.

Right after I left, the university apparently decided it would be a good idea to remodel Main Gym's locker rooms. Remodeling is a job that's done by construction workers. Those workers wanted an office. Jason's was the closest one. Jason was displaced.

Remodeling the building is probably a good idea. If Pacific wants to be attractive to prospective students, this is a step in the right direction. Though an inadequate step. The whole building should be torn down. I still look for Gene Hackman (dressed up as Coach Dale) every time I enter it. Updating the locker rooms won't change that.

The last time Main/Hickory Gym was updated, the seventies hadn't happened yet (or so I'm told). And it was probably a decade or two outdated the moment the construction was complete. So I would say this round is at least forty years overdue.

But forty years is a long time. Could this really not wait another four months? They couldn't wait until summer when everyone leaves? It seems like the ideal time to do major construction on any building would be when that building is unoccupied for a whole season. Apparently not when it's Main Gym's turn though. Instead, do it now. Right now. And in doing so, ensure that the following things happen:

- 1) *Ensure that the entire building does not contain a single bathroom.* There are at least twenty fulltime staff and faculty offices in here. And not one bathroom. The occupants of those offices can't not be bothered by this. It ruins my day a little bit and they must be more burdened than I am (considering that I pee in bottles and in my mouth). But defecation is a challenge. I'm not going to consume it and it's way harder to angle it into a bottle. I do still have some options though, made possible by the implementation number two.
- 2) *Ensure that Yenko's closet is relocated to "the sun room".* All janitorial supplies are now stored in my home. While this is a huge inconvenience, there's a silver lining here. Or at least a transparent one: industrial strength trash can liners. The building's supplies of toilet paper and trash bags are now stored right next to my sofa. And I'm not above defecating in those bags. Unfortunately, I can't do this during the day because Yenko's shift begins at 4:50 a.m. and goes until around 1:00 p.m. And he leaves the door open during that shift. So if I were to poop in a garbage bin, it would be a public event. After Yenko leaves for the day, I would be able to do this in private... but for number three.

3) *Ensure that Jason, the thirty-two-year-old graduate assistant, shows up at 9:00 in the morning, referring to Room 111 as “my office too.”*

I get that Jason’s old office is now property of the construction workers. It’s where they keep their tools and take lunch breaks (or whatever it is a construction worker does in an office). This explains the loss of Jason’s space. But it doesn’t excuse his immediate adoption of *my* real estate. A lot of it. He’s claimed ownership over way too much. I’m beginning to feel like a pow-wow “engine” here. Stockton’s own Panama Joe. Not that I ever had any real claim to the land. When Van Ness granted me the easement, we both knew it was tentative. But why is Jason here at all? That’s what confuses me. What’s the point? He “studies” pedagogy. That’s P.E. How do you *study* P.E.?

Jason probably has an answer to that question. I’m sure that answer is crap, but I bet a lot of people ask him what he does and I doubt he responds to any of them with silence. Or with the truth, which is that he “studies” how to observe kids while they play tag or soccer or do things with beanbags. Sometimes it might be tetherball or shuttle runs, but that’s really about it.

I loved P.E. when I was a child. Especially capture the flag. But I was capable of teaching it as a child. So I have a hard time regarding it as an academic discipline.

Learning physics: tough. Takes a lot of work. Learning how to be near children who are playing and notice what they’re doing: probably less tough.

Why then (I wonder) does Jason need office space? Why does he need a “sun room”? He only has one duty on campus (his own coursework aside). He “teaches” a one-credit badminton class at 10:00 a.m. That’s all. His whole tuition waver comes from that. He has no other obligations. But before he teaches this class, he comes to “my office too.”

“If you don’t teach until ten, why are you here at nine?”, I asked him.

“I need to prepare.”

“For what?”

“Badminton!”, he barks at me, as though my question wasn’t a valid one.

“Huh.”

I decide not to ask him anything else. I'll just wait for him to leave.

At 9:55 a.m., he leaves.

At 10:55 a.m., he returns.

He doesn't go home when badminton is over. He comes back to my office.

He's not paid to be here. His stipend covers badminton, which ends at 10:50 a.m. But five minutes later, he's back in my office. And he stays in it until 5:00 p.m. He just sits there (at the desk he seems to have claimed) the whole goddamn day.

Jason is married and has children.

I know this because of the portraits he put on my desk. Three framed portraits.

My desk, which is not particularly close to his, now has photographs of an average-looking wife and two average-looking children on it. I have no idea what their names are but I see their faces smiling at me from inside their Walgreens frames. Frames that are currently sitting atop *my* desk, not his. He doesn't have any room on his. That's where he keeps his piles of "scratch paper" (you know, in case he needs to take notes). Because I don't keep piles of trash on my desk, I now have Jason's family photos on it. Next to my microwave. And my current roll of toilet paper.

Jason must really hate his family.

Not just because he doesn't keep the pictures on his own desk but because he comes to this room at all. He doesn't go home to them at 10:50 a.m. I started writing this journal entry at 5:20 p.m. and he had been gone for about fifteen minutes.

While his wife was at home, attending to their toddlers all by herself, Jason was sitting in front of a computer (for six hours) alt-tabbing back and forth between minesweeper and espn.com. Six hours. 11:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. I spent most of those hours just watching him. I bet he played over a hundred games of minesweeper before he left.

Jason: go home. Seriously. I would, but I'm homeless – this *is* my home. You on the other hand, have an actual house. One that you're avoiding because it's where your wife and children are.

From now on, whenever I discuss Jason in this journal, I'm going to refer to him as "Jason, the Bad Dad" (or JTBD for short).

I do have some sympathy for him though. He was displaced by the construction. And that has to be an inconvenience. But his bad parenting has displaced my soul. My *soul* is now homeless. And that's a greater inconvenience.

One that I'm sure will have me spending a lot more time this semester wandering. Walking around, looking around. Accomplishing nothing.

I've done a little bit of soulless wandering so far. During the construction workers' lunch break, I wandered through their partially-renovated locker rooms. They're only half-finished, but I get the idea. And it's a bad idea.

The amount of work being done is extensive but they're not changing the floor plans. The locker rooms still have old, prison-style gang showers. I said this a couple months ago, but I'll say it again: nobody wants to use a gang shower. Nobody. Not even the Village People.

There's only one (very small) advantage gang showers have over Baun's private suites.

Every couple weeks, while I'm taking an after-hours shower in Baun, I'll hear someone call my name. And the privacy actually makes this exchange *more* awkward. The most recent episode happened two nights ago (the night I got back) at about 1:00 a.m.

I was using a shower in the women's locker room because Baun was closed. And gender ceases to matter after hours. Stocktonian women tend to be a lot more hygienic than their male counterparts and their showers exhibit this difference nicely. Plus, they have nicer tiles. Warmer colors. So I was standing in a shower in the women's locker room, staring at a strand of hair that was stuck on the wall that appeared to have been plucked from a teenage Rapunzel's head. And I was feeling deeply depressed. Not depressed because of the hair but in spite of it (in spite of the distraction). I was just generally bored and tired and sad to be back.

I'd probably been standing there, staring at that piece of hair for thirty minutes when I heard a female voice shout this: "Courtney?!"

At this point, the gym had been closed for several hours. And I was naked in the women's locker room. One always feels a little bit out of place in this situation.

“Hi”, I said. And that’s all I said. It’s all I ever say when I’m caught in this position.

I don’t know what my response would be if the person outside my stall said “Andrea?! Is that you in there?”

The fact that it’s my name being shouted (who else would be showering at 1:00 a.m.?) eliminates any real panic I might have otherwise felt.

Thus: “hi.”

At this point, the person usually says “it’s Jen” (or whoever it is). But on Saturday night, my “hi” was reciprocated with nothing. Just silence.

I decided my intruder must be expecting something further from me. So I spoke again: “I’d respond with a guess of my own, but... if that guess were wrong, it’d sound like I was expecting someone else.”

It was Jen. And Jen is wonderful. But I was showering.

I’m really happy to have Jen in my life. And I may have been happy to have her in my shower. But having her just *outside* of my shower did not enhance the experience. I wasn’t bathing to cleanse myself. The purpose wasn’t to wash off filth, but depression. And having an awkward conversation across a stall door did not help me accomplish that goal.

If it had been a gang shower though, then Jen would have either been *in* that shower or she would have never approached it.

That’s the only benefit to gang showers. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

Okay, I think that’s where I’ll leave this entry. With that thought. It’s a quarter after six now and I have “the sun room” all to myself for a while. I should probably spend that time napping. I can’t find my earplugs, but I can ball up some toilet paper, shove those balls into my ears (to drown out the sound of the basketballs next door), and rest up for tomorrow. I’m assuming tomorrow’s schedule will be as bad as today’s. Although this was my first weekday back, my hunch is that every weekday will be exactly the same. The door will open at 4:50 a.m. and it will stay open (with the lights on) until 5:00 p.m. And there’s nothing I can do to change that.

It's still my home, but only because I don't have a better option. I just have to accept that my homelessness will be permanently worse. And that's okay. It's like aging. Our bodies slowly deteriorate and you have to accept it. Because you don't have a choice. You have to accept that you were born as a body and a body is a terrible thing to be. Even if you try to fix it – if you do your best to remodel it – you're still going to be stuck with the biological equivalent of gang showers. There's no way to change the course. Life just gets worse and worse until it doesn't anymore. The law of personal entropy (as I presently coin it... without really having thought about it... or checking to see if that's already a thing). Everyone ever born, just like everything else in the universe, will get worse and worse until it can't anymore. And then it dies.

Somewhere in Kristen's basement, I have a box that used to contain hash browns. "Recipe Choice: Loose Shredded Hash Browns." That's what's printed all over it.

A few years ago, I removed all of the bags of hash browns and stuffed it full of old newspaper clippings. Mostly sentimental bits about people I knew or some event in which I was involved (or whatever). The rest of the articles were about Mike Tyson or Jose Canseco. Those were my two favorite athletes growing up. Canseco should have retired after the 1988 season. He became a bore in 1989 and never became un-boring. I don't know if I ever clipped an article about him after that. Tyson should have retired even before Canseco, but he never became uninteresting. He just became sad. And in one of the articles in that box (from the *Statesman Journal*, published after one of Tyson's post-prison losses) they quoted him explaining something he had recently realized about life: that it isn't about gaining, but about losing. And learning how to accept that. Few passages have ever moved me more.

The reason I bring this up: if Mike Tyson can keep moving forward, however painful the course, why can't I? I get the impression that his life is deteriorating (racing toward maximum entropy) much faster than mine. Yet he rebounds with philosophy (and not *just* self-pity). So what's my problem? If anything, it's that I lack a sense of proportion. Even with the worsening state of my homelessness, my life isn't all that bad... yet. I'm sure it'll get there, but along the way, I should bear the loss with a Tysonian disposition. And confront my JTBD problem accordingly. That doesn't mean I'm going to punch him in the face tomorrow morning. Or bite off bits of his anatomy. I'll just learn to accept his family's occupancy of my desk. And to tolerate the loss of even more sleep. But instead responding with newsprint philosophy (which future children will save in hash brown boxes), I'll just wander around more. And look at stuff. And sometimes write it down. And other times poop in garbage bags. And maybe I'll start leaving those bags on JTBD's desk. On top of the piles of "scratch paper" that outrank his family photos.