

Minor Mensch

Volume 9, Chapter 1

SAN FRANCISCO WITH CHAR

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Saturday, January 27, 2007 at 8:00 a.m. (give or take).

I'm in San Francisco. With Char. Char is still in bed though. Asleep. I'm not. I'm awake. That's how I'm writing this.

And I'm a lot calmer today than I was yesterday. Yesterday, I was a mess. Not even an interesting mess. Just a messy one. An angry, homicidal mess who spent his whole day pacing around Pacific's campus, scribbling furiously onto sheets of computer paper. Those sheets were the day's journal entries (n = 8 entries). And I finished scribbling the last one at about a quarter after seven (in the evening, obviously).

Then I wandered back to Baun, went into my office, set the pile of paper on my desk, turned on my computer, and wrote an email to Fred.

In the email, I told him that I was considering adopting murder as a hobby. Like how racquetball was for a while, but isn't really anymore.¹

I'd already worked out the consequences. If I happened to be successful, or even failed, but just barely (i.e., *attempted* murder), I'd be given a room all to myself in which I could sleep, read, and write. And I wouldn't have to go to an entirely different building to use the bathroom. I'd have one right there in my stall.

¹ Racquetball is nice, but it doesn't require any unrequited loves. It doesn't undepen any ridiculously deep hatreds. It doesn't really do anything. It just wears me out. *But...* if I put my racquet hands to work on some homicides – if I invested my calories in *that* direction – the effort might gladden my days a bit; the investment might pay dividends in cheer (or so I explained to Fred, with quasi-sincerity). I even found a bottle of perfume in the lost and found. "Insolence for women", or some such. And I took it, having the Solyony trick in mind (i.e., perfuming my hands so no one could smell the kills on them). It seemed like a nice gesture of preparation (useless though it may be; why not just wash my hands?). Note: these were all yesterday's thoughts (and yesterday's symbolic preparations). Not today's.

That all sounded quite a bit better than the conditions of a life in which racquetball was my hobby.

But, again, those were yesterday's thoughts. Yesterday, when I was really unstable.

After sending the email, I looked down at the pile of paper I'd been scribbling on all day. Even the penmanship looked angry. I started skimming the furious strokes – the paper engraved with them, the ink so heavy and agitated – and I realized something: it would be a problem if the pile were to be discovered. I'd definitely lose my job. Whether I'd go to prison on grounds of “we just think he'll probably become a criminal soon” (i.e., prophylactic incarceration) was debatable.

So I decided it was a good idea to destroy them. Tear every entry into a thousand tiny pieces. Get rid of any evidence that might encourage someone's post hoc prediction. Like this: “I totally saw that coming.” Or maybe “the signs were all there.” That's what I wanted to avoid.

“Did you hear about Courtney?”, an uninteresting Pacific student whose name I don't know will ask some other uninteresting Pacific student whose name I don't know.

“Yeah, I knew him well. I used to work out in Baun. Saw him all the time.”

“Me too. Shit's in shambles now. Baun is. Blood all over the goddamn ceiling.”

“Yeah, I saw it this afternoon. Can't say I didn't see it coming. The red flags were all there, you know?”

“Oh, I know. Did you read his journal entries? That's some fucked up shit.”

And then the news will be heard, playing in the background. The local anchor will ask his viewers “do you have a murderer living in *your* gymnasium?” Or maybe “do you know how to identify a maniac?” And they'll chase whichever question they ask with “find out tonight at nine!”

Ripping up my journal entries felt like the best way to avoid all of that.

But I didn't want to lose the actual thoughts. Those thoughts were precious to me. Little bits of sacred anger. So I decided to type them out first. Become a scribe unto myself. And *then* rip them up.

I closed my email, opened up Word, typed half a sentence, and then the phone rang.

I didn't answer. I just decided to go to Main Gym instead. No phones, no people.

I turned off my computer, gathered up my pile of paper (extremely careful not to leave any sheets behind), walked over to Main Gym, hunkered down in my bunker, and opened up my laptop.

I pulled up both Word and Windows Media Player.

Windows Media Player was for Whir.² I put it on repeat. And listened while I typed. It probably took me eight or nine repeats to type out the whole pile of entries. And in doing so, I realized something. This: I'm no longer *doing* homelessness; I'm actually *becoming* homeless.

There's a really important difference between the two. And at this point, one would not mistake me for someone who's just playing a role. Yesterday's entries were fucked up. Real curbside doomsayer stuff. Serious ranting. You'd expect to see its author wearing a sandwich board that says something about hell on it. (I'm a little bit saddened that it didn't take more to drive me to mental illness. I hoped I'd be more resilient than that.)

Though I feel much better today.³ (Better enough to recognize how unbetter I was.) It wasn't the epiphany that I've descended into madness that made me feel better. If anything, that was a little bit upsetting. What made me feel better was Whir.

² Whir is a Smashing Pumpkins song. It's an outtake from *Siamese Dream* that was released with the rest of their B-sides on *Pisces Iscariot*. I was fourteen at the time. But I didn't hear it until I was twenty-two. When Danielle and I first got to Willamette, she made me a mix tape. Unfortunately, the only tape *player* I had was in my Jeep. And that player was permanently occupied by my Nakama Japanese tapes. I never studied at home. Not once. The only off-campus studying I ever did was while I was driving. My grades suffered accordingly. But I wasn't going to remedy that suffering by making better use of my home life. So Danielle's tape sat on my backseat for at least a year. Then one night (after that year was up), I left the library at about 8:00 and didn't feel like conjugating verbs about my aunt and a man named Suzuki-san at the train station. So I swapped my Nakama tape with Danielle's mix tape. Whir was the first song. And I was stunned. I had been driving for about ten seconds – I hadn't even left the parking lot yet – and I just re-parked. I sat there and listened until it was over. And then I rewound the tape and listened again. When it ended for the second time, I got out of my car and started walking. I wasn't going anywhere. I just decided that, instead of driving home, I needed to walk aimlessly for a while. I probably walked five miles worth of circles around campus. And I wasn't un-stunned at that point; I just got tired of walking.

³ So much better that I've decided this morning's entry should commence a whole new volume. This one. Volume Nine. A happier, healthier, much more emotionally centered volume.

Fred and I once had a discussion about music. Over three bottles of wine (a champagne, a cab, and a sherry). And to Mark Knopfler's *Local Hero* soundtrack.

At some point during the conversation, the difference between Lennon and McCartney came up. A huge cliché, sure. And picking a Beatle in isolation misses the whole point of the music.⁴ But there is a point to be made here. And credit to be earned by the person who makes it (which, in this case, was Fred).

The point is this: McCartney was a musician. That's why his songs are all coverable. An inherent property of good music is that it can be played by other people and still sound good. By comparison, if someone tries to cover a Lennon song, it's guaranteed to sound horrible.⁵ Because his songs weren't really music. And Lennon wasn't really a musician. They were magic and he was a magician. His songs, stripped of their magic, were awful. His *performances* are what mattered. The timbre of his voice, the cadence, the melody, maybe a hen's claw, whatever; the recipe was perfect. The magic was there. But that magic can't be reconstituted by its ingredients alone. So people should just stop trying.

There have been a few songwriters who have each had a few moments of that magic. And Lennon may have had more of those moments than any other. But to me, no song has ever been written that's more perfect than Whir. (And it almost betrays the spell for me to say.)

I doubt it's even a good song. As far as musicianship goes, it kind of isn't. I'm not particularly impressed by any single item on the list of ingredients. But when you get the whole recipe into the cauldron (the timbre of Corgan's voice, the melody, the hen's claw, whatever), the magic is there. And whenever it plays, I always feel either better or worse about being me.

This time I felt better.

⁴ Unless you're picking Harrison. It's not a defensible case, but it's an interesting enough case to *attempt* its defense. In short, Harrison wrote some of the best Beatles songs: Here Comes the Sun, Something, I Me Mine, While My Guitar Gently Weeps... Or maybe if your argument is for George Martin (an even more interesting case to be made there). If your argument is for Ringo, I don't want to hear it. He wrote next to nothing (Harrison helped him on Octopus's Garden) and the songs that Ringo sang, *Wonder Years* aside (Cocker sang it better), aren't that good (e.g., Yellow Submarine wasn't a song; it was a gimmick). Ringo was just the luckiest man ever born. Though he might be owed more credit as a drummer than he's paid. At least according to my brother (who is also a drummer waiting for his due). He compares Ringo to Phil Rudd, suggesting the simple beats can actually be harder to perfect than the flamboyant stuff.

⁵ With one exception: Eddie Vedder's version of You've Got to Hide Your Love Away. No other exceptions.

When I had finished typing up the entries, I ripped up the paper versions, put them in one of Yenke's garbage bins, peed on the scraps (just a tiny bit), closed Word, finished the last play of Whir, and then brought up my email.

Fred had written me back:

I appreciate the murder sentiment. I remember in the Lamma Island days, I used to fantasize about chopping Caleb into hundreds of tiny pieces, taking him out in a little boat, and distributing him throughout the harbor. Looking back it seems sort of hilarious to waste all of this passion on something (and somebody) so silly and inconsequential in the big picture. The transgressions, whatever they were, seem so ludicrous now. But anyway, I understand whence you come.

Just keep writing and try to sleep. The quotation thing is funny. Write about that too. It's all quite funny. Remember, people's repugnance is really the only subject there is. I'm starting to think that it's what makes them sympathetic too. My hope is that the latter (loving people because of, not in spite of, their worthlessness and utter lack of appeal) will somehow make me a grown-up. Maybe even a good writer.

Chew on that for a while.

When 2003 was brand new, Jacqui went to the Courthouse Athletic Club to sign up for personal training. It was probably a New Year's resolution. Zoë objected. "Mom, you don't need a trainer", she told her. Jacqui didn't heed that objection. Instead, she said something like this: "Zoë, you shut your fucking mouth!", and she got one. It was me. And through my role as Jacqui's trainer, I eventually met Fred. Then, after a second eventually, I discovered Fred's secrets. (He's the Wandering Jew, which means he has been alive for twenty centuries. That's how he's so brilliant.) And then, after one final eventually, Fred sent me that email.⁶

I must have read it a hundred times before my cell phone rang. It was about a quarter after nine and Char was calling. She was on her way to my bunker.

⁶ In the email, "Caleb" is a pseudonym. It felt inappropriate to use the real name. And obviously Jacqui didn't say those *exact* words to Zoë, but she said something. And whatever it was led to everything I just talked about. And that's how I became me. Though I'm still working on becoming me. It takes a lot of time. Trying to become an adult version of a Courtney is a serious undertaking. There's a lot of sloppy clay left to carve and throw. My date with the kiln is still years away.

“I’ll be at your office in five minutes”, she told me.

“Okay, should I be ready? Like you’ll get here and we’ll head straight to San Francisco? We’ll go right to your apartment?”

“Yes. I do not want to hang out in your custodial closet.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It smells like a closet that someone lives in.”

“That’s because I live in it.”

“I know. That’s why I said that.”

“Right. Obviously. Okay, I’ll be waiting outside.”

“Four minutes.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Four minutes later, I was in Char’s passenger seat and we were on our way to San Francisco, speeding. We got to her apartment in what I took to be record time. And then, in what I also took to be record time, we got drunk. Lethally drunk. It surprises me that I’m alive enough to type the tale (Char might not be; she’s still “asleep” in bed).

After about five minutes of focused consumption, we left her apartment. On foot. And we were still passing a bottle back and forth as we walked.

When the alcohol started to wear *on*, we lost our ability to walk like people, but we managed to stagger our way to a bar called... something. I can’t remember what it was called (but it did have a name). And at that bar, we watched a band whose name I do remember: Social Studies.

There are very few underground musicians/bands who deserve to be above ground.⁷ Social Studies was not one of them. They weren’t good. It was neither music nor magic.

⁷ Michael Peimani/Perfume, Stephen Seehorn, Derby, Euromotion... That’s all. I can’t think of any more.

But Char and I were very drunk. And a high enough BAC can counterfeit any amount of magic. And that means Social Studies was amazing and we had a wonderful time.

Plus, their drummer bounced a lot. He was like Timmy at my age after having learned nothing in life (with the exception of percussion, sort of).

With all that bouncing, and all that alcohol, I found myself on the dance floor.

Professional dancing is beautiful. Ballet, jazz, etc. These should be celebrated. But that's not what I was doing. And if you've ever met me a single time, you know club dancing is *really* uncharacteristic of me. And I already look back on this episode with a cringe. But at the time, I was far too drunk to anticipate the coming of that cringe.

I don't know if the band was still playing when we left. Maybe they'd finished their set; maybe they were just between songs. But Char and I decided to stop dancing, leave the bar, and go make out on people's porches.

Not the porches that were inches from the sidewalk though. We wanted to make out on the porches of *real* houses. Houses with fences and gates. "Homes" if such a thing exists in San Francisco.

"Hey!", I drunkenly mumble-shout at Char.

"What?!", Char yells back, with one eye closed and the other held open by an intensely cocked eyebrow.

"Let's pretend we own *that* one!", while I point an unsteady finger at nicest house on the street. The kind of house nobody would buy without intentions of raising a family.

"Okay!", Char grunts while already in the air, leaping the gate.

"Hold on, I'm still peeing! I'll be there in a sec!"

Char waits patiently for me to finish. And then I hop the gate, climb up the steps, and we kiss. Her back is pressed against the front door; my body is pressed against hers.

Five or six, maybe eight seconds of kissing happens. And then one of us shouts "okay, let's pick another house!"

And then we'd pick another. And another. And so on.

I think I peed on the sidewalk in front of every single one of them. Only because of how badly I needed to pee, not because of some vestigial limbic drive to mark my territory (though I wasn't *opposed* to the idea that my pee was earning us some property deeds).

We must have pretend-owned a dozen homes before deciding we were too tired to continue (or not inspired enough by the remaining real estate). It was kind of like an adult version of a couple kids "playing house" except that our version of the game involved trespassing at 3:00 in the morning. And we weren't really behaving like adults.

Eventually we made it back to Char's apartment. And went straight to bed. And fell asleep immediately. I was still wearing my shoes. One of them came off during the night.

I woke up some time around 8:00 a.m. That was over an hour ago (that's how long I've been writing this). And Char is still asleep.

When I first woke up, after taking off my other shoe, this happened:

"Char?", as I tapped her on the shoulder. And then I tapped some more. "Char?"

"Uhhhh?", she moaned without opening her eyes.

"Will you wear a blouse today?"

"Uhhhh?", with her eyes still closed.

"Never mind. Go back to sleep."

I scooted to the foot of her bed, opened my laptop, and started writing this. I'm still sitting on the foot of her bed. And she's still asleep in the remainder of that bed.

And right now, a little bit nauseated, and a little bit dehydrated, I don't feel like adopting murder as my hobby. I will not make club dancing my hobby, but I think racquetball is probably fine.

And right now, I hear the stirrings of a Char. And that means my journal entry is done.