

Stultification: How Sweet It Is

By Mike Albo

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WHENEVER someone asks where I'll be for the holidays, I always do the same thing: roll my eyes and say, exasperatedly: "I guess I'm going *home* for Christmas. Hope I don't go insane!"

It's been part of my conversational repertory since my early 20s, the time when you start having to prove to yourself that you are a self-governing adult, but before you realize that adulthood basically involves complex and enervating tasks like Internet dating, shopping for jeans, trying to remember your 15 various log-on codes and passwords, and deciphering your Verizon bill.

Now I am 37 years old and I can't wait to go insane at Christmas in that comfortable padded cell known as "home." Instead of being tedious, going home has become an indulgent retreat from my fried-out issue-driven city life. It is a place where I line my mind and body with the fatty lard of my suburban youth and experience not one moment of regret.

For a brief week, I get to be as ugly and out of it as Americans are always accused of being, and no one has to see it.

I have almost no choice. Every year I arrive at my parents' house in Springfield, Va., armed with my healthy self-edifying projects — big leafy Penguin classics, Chomsky-explains-it-all books and a backlog of fortifying magazines. And every year I think I am going to actually read a paragraph of one of these things. But then I walk in the front door, say 'hi' to my mom and dad, stand at the kitchen counter and start eating cheese.

That's not all that's in the house. In case there is a terrorist attack at the Price Club, my mother has stocked up on boxed food, durable bags of meatballs, bins of croutons, an entire spectrum of cereal, jug wine and other pleasures that would never be reviewed in food and wine supplements.

After inhaling some combination of sustenance entirely made of carbohydrates and trans fats, I will go upstairs and change into an infantilizing outfit of fleece sweat pants and an old high school T-shirt that says "Go Spartans!" on it.

Then I go back downstairs and begin to watch television. In this consumer Green Zone, I can finally, really, watch TV. I am unfettered, and free of my ironic eye, op-ed anger and Web site snark, I can enjoy TV the way it was meant to be enjoyed — sitting there with my mouth open, too lazy to get up and go to the bathroom.

There are no Whole Foods here, no Bikram yoga, no concerns about my personal carbon emissions. I lose touch, for once, with my online pals, bloggy buddies, Netflix friends and MySpace chums. Finally I am logged off from the incessant broadband stream of information of my daily life. I don't have to eat properly, act locally, think globally, sync up, detoxify or Move On.

I don't have to check the label of my carefully selected non-animal-tested facial scrub to make sure that there are no secret traces of benzene. I don't have to take only two minutes of my time to provide a free mammogram to another low-income woman by simply signing an online petition.

Instead, I simply sit there, eating Edy's ice cream and watching a marathon of lesbian "Next" episodes on MTV. For once, I have zero concern for the homeless, global warming, my future and Darfur. It's like my brain has been deprived of vital nonnutrients. I sit there on the couch in the living room drinking up the lack of intellectual stimuli like a steamy hammam of nothing important.

Under my bed is a suitcase that contains my old diaries. There are entries from when I was a 19-year-old member of Queer Nation and Act Up, and I would come to the dinner table filled with a defiant anger, quoting Annie Sprinkle, the self-described post-porn modernist sex activist, while saying grace.

If that 19-year-old saw me now, he would roll his eyes. He would think I had been padded and stupefied by the entertainment-industrial complex. He would say that the American consumer machine has swallowed me up in its accommodating mouth.

But I seem to remember that 19-year-old needed this week to relax his white-knuckle grip on reality, too. He would creep down the stairs at 3 a.m., grab a stack of windmill cookies, and channel-surf through the late-night infomercials beaming from the screen like a soothing strobe light.