

Recherches de Sac et Cord

On December thirteenth, I finally ended my life. It started with a brief email to my dissertation committee: "I write to withdraw my Ph.D. candidacy. I apologize for any inconvenience this will cause and I thank you for past assistance." I spent two hours writing this email. I wanted it to be perfect—both simple and complex. I can't help but feel proud of the result. The first sentence is entirely clear, yet frustratingly opaque—there is no reason, no motivation, no psychology to be found here. The second sentence is my favorite—does it sound patronizing? Well, that's the point.

Naturally, this email invited questions, but I had no intention of answering them. I stopped checking my email. I didn't answer my phone. I ignored the increasingly exasperated messages on my voice mail. I have high standards for self-destruction and I wanted to do it right.

What were the implications of this email? Well, to start with, I threw away eight years of higher education. I turned my back on a government grant that would have supported my research through my dissertation and beyond. I abandoned two papers under review at journals (though not top journals). I walked away from an assistant professorship held open for me at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast (an equally terse email was all that was necessary to scotch that). But it wasn't just my career that I left behind. As I said before, I ended my life.

So, I canceled my lease. I closed my bank account. I changed my cell phone number. I said goodbye to my friends.

As you might expect, my friends had lots of questions. I lied to every one of them. I told each one a different story—I made them up according to my mood—attempting to vary the level of my own guilt as well as to mix in both the plausible and the absurd.

I told my friend Lisa that I had completely fabricated all of my data for the past two years. I said the journal editors had discovered this

when they noticed that all of my correlations ended in five. I explained the agreement with the editors that allowed me to withdraw the papers and leave school quietly. She was skeptical, but circumstantial evidence was on my side: didn't I just withdraw my dissertation proposal and quit school? Wasn't I packing and shipping my books?

I told Jennie that I had embezzled my grant money and that I was thinking about going on the lam. She offered to lie for me if necessary. I told my English grad pals that I had lost faith in the scientific method after reading too much Foucault. I think they were impressed. I told my old college friends that I had gotten fired for sleeping with a student. I thought that they should have been a bit more surprised. I told my therapist that I was striking back at my on-sabbatical dissertation advisor for my feelings of abandonment. My therapist didn't approve, but she still cashed my check. I told Seth that I had gotten a great new job in Europe—with the stipulations that (1) I begin immediately; and (2) I cannot reveal my new employer. It turns out that, as I had suspected, Seth is not too bright. To all of my friends, I gave fake forwarding addresses and fictional cell phone numbers.

I told the boy that I was fucking (for the record: not one of my students, not since the previous semester) that I was quitting school to enter the priesthood. His response was a theme with variations. Theme: "Wow, I didn't know you were so religious." Variations: "To think that you can, like, know someone and not know if they, like, believe in God!"; "I totally can't believe you want to be a priest!"; and "Do you, like, feel a calling?" Finally, I said "This is why we don't talk," grabbed him by the shoulders, and pushed him to his knees.

Three weeks later, I'm hurtling through the heartland—speeding west into a poppy red sun. In my car I have ten thousand dollars in cash, a bottle of Scotch, and six CDs of the most aggressive hardcore music I could find. My life is over—unrecoverable—and it's time to celebrate. Where am I going? Home. My mother is in Tampa for the winter, which leaves her house empty, buried in snow, all for me.

Back here, my father has a theory. He has a strong suspicion that somehow my mother is to blame, but he is unable to discover an actual mechanism. He says things like: "I think you and your mother know why you quit. I have my ideas, too." He never elaborates on this. Instead, he says things like "After all the money I spent on college..." and "I'm not telling anyone about this—don't call your aunt and uncle."

My mother, via telephone, has her own theory: I'm depressed. So I go to the psychiatrists, I tell them a story, and I fill the prescriptions they write for me—SSRIs, benzodiazepines, atypicals. All with brand names designed to convey classical serenity—names invented for their pseudo-Latin authority. I mix and match them: today the gladiator Ativan battles under the imperial gaze of Remeron and the Empress Celexa. Who is tomorrow's challenger? I am still searching for the drug cocktail that will give me the dopamine euphoria, but all I get is a jittery serotonin burn.

When I first got here, I went out. I hit the bars. I met people. The problem with meeting people is that they want to know what you "do" and where you "work." It turns out that I neither do nor work. I tried several different responses to these questions. At first, I said that I was a gentleman of leisure, or a gadabout, or a drifter. Later, I said I was "in-between things" or "ironically unemployed." Then I decided my afterlife should be solitary.

After a while, I stopped leaving the house except to buy provisions. And only in the middle of the night. And drunk. What did I do all day, home alone? I did home improvement. I improved my home, assisted by Mr. Jim Beam. I converted my absent sister's bedroom into a study, installing bookshelves on the walls. Then, I unpacked my library. Yes, I did. The final step: a huge walnut desk from the attic placed in the center of the room, facing the windows. That is where I sit every day. I sit at my desk, in my vault, insulated on all sides by a foot of books, working on my projects.

I have projects. Many of them seem trivial. I keep a careful record of my daily food intake—recording every gram of protein,

carbohydrate, and fat. I ensure that I am receiving at least one hundred percent of all necessary vitamins and minerals. I mark passages in my books that I will return to in the future. And lately, I have begun to grow tropical plants from seeds in small waxed paper cups on the windowsill. I'm starting with grapefruit. Next, I am considering mangroves and baobabs. When summer comes, I will transplant all of them outdoors, surrounding the deck.

The night before I left school—before I began my afterlife—I said goodbye to Henry. In the interests of full disclosure, I will admit that I would have married Henry. Even though I had no desire to fuck him and even though he was corrosive to relationships, if he had asked me I would have married him. We would have been a work of art.

The night before I left, we're sitting in his mismatched living-room chairs, doing lines of coke with a rolled-up five off the back cover of Ann Beattie's. We believe Ann would approve. Henry knows I'm leaving the next morning. He doesn't know why. For him, I've reserved the greatest sign of esteem: no explanation at all. And, because he's Henry, he hasn't asked for one. He knows that he will never see me again. As I'm leaving, Henry slips a folded receipt into my hand. As I walk back to my apartment, I unfold it. On the back, he has printed a phrase that, if I know him, he's swiped from some Smiths song. This is Henry's message to me: "The future lasts a long time."

That's what I'm counting on. I need a long time. There is light beneath my skin. I can feel it. I just don't know how to get it out.

But I still have time. For now, I will remain invisible here, behind the alabaster blinds of my text-lined room. I can use this obscurity. I do not fear incomprehension. I am willing to be forgotten. It will only make more extraordinary my return: my shine, my incandescence, my daybreak!

by Brian Malone