

The Not-So-Splendid Isolation of Doctoral Study | Vitae

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Here is the second column in a new series, [Don't Look Back in Anger](#), on the graduate-school experience and all the ways in which it is, and is not, an oasis.

It was 7 a.m. on a Sunday in [February of 2006](#) — midway through my second quarter as a Ph.D. student in Irvine, Calif. — and I had just scared the ever-loving bejeezus out of the weekend custodian. When she opened the door to the German department's grad-student offices, I don't think she was expecting to find the legs of a supine 29-year-old woman sticking out from under a desk.

With more seminar work than I believed any Earthling capable of finishing — and roommates and neighbors fresh out of college who loved to party — I had barricaded myself in my office from Friday afternoon to Sunday night, with only Kant, Heidegger, Russian morphology, and a surprisingly dense 400-page German “pop-novel” to keep me company. Well all of that and a half-dozen Trader Joe's single-serve quiches, a full can of strong coffee I'd stuffed into the department freezer, and a fuzzy pink teen girls' sleeping bag (the cheapest one they sold at the Sport Chalet).

At the time, I couldn't have been more pleased with myself. Oh, the stories I would tell my future students someday about camping in my office — for a *whole weekend*. What unparalleled dedication to my research. I was like [Hölderlin in his tower!](#) As it turned out, I was a little too much like [Hölderlin in his tower](#). Thanks to my refusal to take any sort of care of myself beyond shoving as much scholarship (and frozen quiche) into my head as possible, I had dangerously imperiled my mental health and general well-being.

Sure, this is hardly a surprise. For many grad students — singletons with no dependents especially — the journey to the Ph.D. is all too often about the life of the mind subsuming all of our other parts of the body. One of the biggest mistakes many of us make is to forget that our brilliant brains live inside whole, mortal people — and that those

people need taking care of.

Looking back now on my early grad experience, I wonder: Was I *trying* to have a breakdown on purpose? (By the way, I'm not making light of mental illness here, but rather revealing my experiences with it: I was diagnosed with [generalized anxiety disorder](#) around puberty, and have lived with both depression and panic attacks for all of my adulthood.)

I knew, for example, that it would help my health and scholarship to consume alcohol only in moderation. Sure, I had a private fridge in my room stuffed with beer, cider, and [Becherovka](#), but it was a *mini-fridge*, so that totally counts as moderate, right? It was also important to get enough sleep, which I definitely accomplished by reading every night until 1 a.m., and then passing out in front of a nonstop loop of *Girls Gone Wild* ads on late-night Comedy Central. And do I really even need to talk about caffeine? [I'm sure you can guess](#).

Equally crucial, of course, was exercise. And I accomplished that handily by bringing my Hegel printouts to the gym and underlining them shakily on the elliptical trainer — sometimes breaking down into tears at the same time, and thus, adding an excellent third dimension to my multi-tasking.

Good self-care in grad school also means maintaining relationships with people outside the academy, even *if* they don't quite understand what the hell it is you do all day long. (That last bit is particularly crucial, given the high probability that you will not find gainful full-time employment in the academy, and might want to remember that life outside it is not actually [a yawning abyss filled with flames](#).) This I accomplished by sending detailed letters about Hannah Arendt to a dear friend who was serving an unjust prison sentence for a trumped-up marijuana charge (seriously) — letters which *even she* admitted to “skimming,” even though she literally had nothing to do all day long other than light cigarettes with an open electrical socket.

Once my friend got released, I stopped even trying to relate to anyone outside my program. When that proved far easier than I imagined, I stopped trying to relate to anyone altogether. (Less time and effort relating with other humans equaled more time with [Johann Georg Hamann](#)!) If you asked any of my cohort to name one defining characteristic about me in the mid-aughts, they would all answer, without hesitation: *Rebecca refuses to eat with other people*.

When, at the beginning of my second year, I started having [fainting spells](#) and the doctors couldn't find any physical reason for them, it occurred to me that my life might be out of balance.

So I cut down on alcohol — and later, to my astonishment, caffeine. I started hiking, doing yoga, and swimming in the ocean. I learned to manage my time well enough to stop studying shortly after sundown every night. For a brief time, I even allowed the most pernicious of all Southern California contagions to infect me: *veganism*.

But I never did relearn how to socialize like a human being. Today, even though I've been out of academia for almost four years, I have a very difficult time relating to other people — and I still don't enjoy sharing meals. On the rare occasion I attend a party or other social function, I often have a miniature panic attack before walking in the door, and I have never gotten around to buying more than three forks or plates — specifically to avoid having to host anyone at my house.

The fun, vivacious individual I'd been before grad school died in that pink sleeping bag, on that office floor in 2006. I have no idea if she will ever return.

In fact, I'm pretty sure I had my daughter last year so that I'd have someone to hang out with every day who would withstand my neuroses without complaint. It's working out well so far, but now she's learning to talk in complete sentences, and so it won't be long before she says: *Mama, why don't you have any friends?*

Despite the truncated outcome of my academic career, there is little I truly regret about my graduate experience. But at the top of the list is my pitiful attempt at self-care — especially when it came to maintaining personal connections,

and therefore my humanity. So, early career grad-students of the world, I implore you: Climb down from your *Hölderlinturm* and share a kale salad (and, hell, a burger) with someone you like, before it's too late.

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She is the author of the academic book [Kafka and Wittgenstein](#) (Northwestern University Press, 2015) and the memoir *Schadenfreude: A Love Story* (forthcoming, Flatiron Books).

[Don't Look Back in Anger](#) is an honest post-mortem of one person's graduate experiences in the humanities. It is equal parts cautionary tale and blueprint — and also the title of a [killer song](#).

Rebecca's previous series, [Market Crash Course](#), is your existential companion during the the academic hiring cycle, bringing you gallows humor, brutal honesty, and practical advice for keeping your spirit intact regardless of your search outcome.

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