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Tags: [child/parent](#), [disenchantment](#), [drugs](#)
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I started my PhD five years ago. I had five years to do it which is a long time. It didn't seem that writing a hundred thousand words could possibly take that long. After all, I'd done an honours thesis—15,000 words, and two major essays and several seminar papers in the previous year.

A PhD, a doctor of philosophy—does not require you to go to lectures or to seminars or do anything really, except talk to your supervisor and research, think and write. And that felt like a perfect life.

I went into a selective boys' school because I was clever. I hadn't really known that before, but it turned out I was pretty much the cleverest of the clever. And because being clever was so important, I was somewhat amazed when some of the boys did things like body piercing, or dyeing their hair strange colours or graffiti or lusting after girls.

I suffered the pains and pleasures of puberty in private. Acne, a wispy attempt at facial hair and short sight was all nature endowed me with. And being clever. I always did a good job at being clever so that seemed to be the thing to concentrate on.

When I was fourteen, my parents separated. My mother wanted to take me with her, but I didn't want to go. I would have had to move all my books and catch another bus to school. She had a new man in her life. He was a singer. He was a singer round my mother's new house, a singer coming down the stairs, a singer in the bathroom, a singer cooking meals for her. The singing drove me crazy and I stopped seeing my mother.

The first year of the PhD was okay except I began to feel something I'd never felt before, which was lonely. My Dad moved interstate with a new wife and I moved into a flat near the uni. It was with a girl, called Denise, and I heard her tell people, 'He's weird, but he's quiet.' I had an ensuite bathroom and I always ate out. It was embarrassing living with her, being weird and quiet. Maybe that's what made me lonely.

To support myself, I became a cinema checker—you go round and check nothing bad is happening while the movie's showing. If it is, you report it to security. Then afterwards, you go and clean the cinema before the people come in for the next session. The movies were showing for weeks and you saw different parts of each movie, so got to know the people in the movie. But they didn't get to know you, obviously.

The stuff in my thesis was coming on nicely. My supervisor was pleased, but I didn't like him. It was because of something he said about me. Well, I'm not sure now if he said it about me, but at the time, that's

how I took it. To tell you the truth, I'm not even sure of the exact words, but it was something along the lines of—'He's got a good PhD in him, but not much else.' And laughed. But maybe he said 'She's got a good hand bag, but not much else.' I heard him saying it into the phone as I came into his room. He was embarrassed, which made me think it was about me. And you'd think although you could mistake 'he' and 'she', it would be more difficult to mistake 'PhD' and 'handbag'. Memory is actually the field of my PhD, which is why I can tell you it is notoriously unreliable.

That incident with my supervisor is why I took the scholarship to Germany, where I didn't have those difficulties because all my conversation was in German and confined to academic matters. And I still worked as a cinema checker. I lived in a student dorm and I became more aware that I was lonely. And as I became more and more aware of being lonely, I became less and less clever and less able to do research, let alone start writing my PhD.

My Australian supervisor came over to Germany as a guest lecturer, and we had lunch and he asked me how it was going and I said I was lonely and having trouble writing. That's called 'opening up'. I'd taken to reading popular psychology magazines to solve my loneliness problem. When you say something like that, people are supposed to answer, 'That must be hard,' and then you talk, and the problem gets solved. But my supervisor said 'well, you've got a couple of years left,' and paid for our lunch.

And I thought that was the solution. I thought he was telling me the solution. But then, I did make a friend, a girl down the hall. And we did talk, because she taught me how to smoke marihuana. I don't really remember our conversations. But I remember when I was talking about finishing the PhD, she said, 'Well, you've got a few months.'

Now, I'm supposed to be completing in just a few days. All I've written is the first sentence—which is quite short. I look back and I think I should have pierced my ears when I was fifteen and I should have made friends with my mother's singer, but there's no use regretting the past. That's something I've learned from the psychology magazines.

A lot of people might think I'd want to kill myself but I don't. I'm good at learning. I've just learned the wrong thing. I think the whole idea of the PhD was a mistake.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Townsend.