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## The Truant Life

Ian Stansel

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THE TRUANT LIFE

In the very early 1980s, my sister and I would wedge ourselves into the cramped space beneath the sink in our family's upstairs bathroom. We were nine and seven, respectively. We stored books and a flashlight there, even snacks. From our refuge, we could listen to our mother tromp through the house, frustrated and desperate, calling our names with increasingly tremulousness. In the final moments before giving up, she'd call from the bottom of the stairs, "I want your rooms clean!" or "Pick up the dog stuff in the back yard!" Anything to wrest some small bit of control from a situation obviously gone from her grasp. I can't recall or even really imagine how it went the first time we pulled this; all that remains in my memory is a conflated few moments after we'd established this ritual, when our mother knew what was up, but still not where we'd hidden ourselves away.

My sister and I spent our hooky days eating deviled ham sandwiches and playing with our dogs, watching game shows and MTV, recreating videos by Bruce Springsteen, Huey Lewis, the Go-Go's. Those days seemed endless, hours upon hours of childish diversion. In the final half-hour before our folks got home, we would clean up any messes that we'd made and take a quick pass at whatever chore we'd been assigned, and then go to our respective rooms, where we would put on our sorriest faces.

It is hard to say what I dreaded so much about school. Certainly the social pressure was a part of my aversion. I was fairly well accepted by my peers, never an outcast, but still navigating the schoolyard involved a constant low-grade terror—or, more accurately, the fear of terror, which I suppose is a form of terror in itself. Above all else in my life I feared embarrassment, which, of course, could come at any time. That was the thing about embarrassing situations—they didn't announce themselves in advance. And they could materialize in any form: an inept movement during gym class caught by the wrong eyes; an incorrect answer to a question in class; an unexpected challenge for dominance from another boy on the playground.

At home, though, I was relatively safe to be myself without worrying that my defenses were down, safe to ask questions, safe to be clumsy,

confused, dopey, awkward, curious, and occasionally funny. I was safe to own all of my imperfections, of which I was constantly and acutely aware.

Yet for all these negative feelings about the world of education, one of the games my sister and I nearly always played on these hooky days was “school.” She was the teacher and I the student set up in on a pillow atop one of the kitchen chairs. My sister wrote out spelling exercise sheets, math problems. There was always a short horizontal line at the top of each sheet of paper for my name. But it went beyond make-believe. We really were learning. I labored over these worksheets and would pass them to her for checking. I don’t believe the irony of these games ever occurred to me.

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My affinity for days off continued in high school. The stakes were higher then—detentions, suspensions, even expulsions and a snowballing shitty life—but so were the pay-offs. Though I could and did stay home with the television and stereo, my friends and I could also take the train into Chicago and bum around like proper vagrants, going to record shops and punk-rock clothing stores, eating slices of pizza on the curb. We truancy kids formed a kind of subculture, in and out of school.

The way it worked at Niles West High: if you had an unexcused absence for any classes, the next day during homeroom—a pointless fifteen minute “module” at the start of the morning—you’d be summoned to the deans’ office, where you would wait in a crowded lobby area with the other kids until called (“Next!”) in to face your punishment. My brother and sister had both shared my habit of missing days, so Dean Kupferberg, poor man, was thus subject to nine long years of my family’s absenteeism. The story goes that on the occasion of my sister’s first of many visits to Dean Kupferberg’s office her final year of high school—which happened to be my freshman year—the man on the other side of the desk said, “You’re a senior. My last year of having to deal with you Stansels.” To which my sister replied, “So you haven’t met my little brother.”

He would soon enough. I became a fixture in that office. Once or twice a week I would be called down from homeroom to find the usual suspects from my growing circle of friends likewise waiting their turns.

Of course there was a flaw in the system in that most of us far preferred hanging out with our buddies in the lobby of the deans' offices to being in class. After all, that's why we were there: we didn't like going to class. We lounged, slumped low in a train of chairs along the wall, trying our best to charm the secretaries. We made half-hearted efforts at excuses to get out of yet more detentions:

"I was in the nurse's office fifth period."

"So if I check the sign-in sheet for that time yesterday I'll see your name."

"Well, I can't guarantee the woman has her paperwork in order."

Along with us there were always the stray scared kids, ones there because of an attendance-taking mix-up or because they had indeed cut class (probably gym) in some flirtation with rebellion but who now sat pale and trembling as they awaited their punishment. And of course my friends and I would encourage them to go first to further extend our own time there. "Just get it over with, kid," we'd say. Or, "I'm gonna be in there for a *while*." These nice children looked at us with a not-uncommon mix of awe and pity. *I wonder what it's like to be really bad*, they seemed to think, all the while thanking God that they would probably never know.

But I wasn't a bad kid. By my sophomore year I was pierced and my hair was cut at unorthodox angles and, yes, my attendance record was as spotty as my skin, but I never had any interest in, say, destruction of property or any of the other hobbies of those classmates of mine whom adults feared. I never got into fights, for example. I just hated going to school.

By this point I had shed some, though not all, of my social anxieties. I'd taken after my older siblings and aligned myself with the so-called weirdoes of the school: the punks, skaters, stoners, and junior club kids—few of whom took school all that seriously. In some ways, we were simply drunk with the freedom of knowing that we could step outside the prescribed lines of behavior, that we could jump fences and defy precedent.

School was dull because it rewarded, at best, controlled creativity. But the world outside—the world my friends and I were quickly falling in love with—throbbed with unrestrained and chaotic energy.

By my junior year I had begun to amass a backlog of assigned detentions and sessions of “Saturday school.” Detecting that these were no deterrents to my truancy, Dean Kupferberg was ready to make a deal. “Here’s what I’m offering,” he said to me one morning. “You come to school for two weeks, and I’ll erase all these detentions and Saturdays. That’s two full weeks. No missed classes. No tardies. No going to the nurse during gym. Two weeks of perfect attendance and you don’t owe anything.” Of course I agreed, but it was a long two weeks. The sentence ended on a Friday. Tuesday morning I was back in his office.

“Didn’t we agree you were going to come to class for two weeks?”

“Yeah,” I said, an irresistible smirk cutting across my face. Kupferberg looked at his notes, then at the calendar on his desk, and set his head on his hands.

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My first semester out of high school—after somehow graduating with not-terrible grades—my mother encouraged me to sign up at the local community college. Since I had friends heading there, I figured it wouldn’t be a bad way to spend a few days a week. By this point I had an inkling that I wanted to be a writer and had begun to read fairly seriously. I had a special affinity for “campus novels,” books that delved into the lives of prep school and college students: *The Catcher in the Rye*; *A Separate Peace*; *The Secret History*; *The Rules of Attraction*. These books, along with films like “The Paper Chase” and “Dead Poet’s Society,” examined (to one degree or another) what it meant to be in the business of learning. They did so, though, with discernible and entertaining plots—that thing my life always seemed to lack. They edited out the boring bits, which—let’s face it—is most of school life.

I would learn later, in large part through the process of writing my own stories, that plot is entirely a construction, a thing we impose onto the essentially random and often unrelated events of our lives, a method to keep meaninglessness at arm's length. But these thoughts were still a ways off for me at eighteen. So, sure, okay, college. A life of the mind.

The only problem was that while the environment and schedule had changed, I hadn't yet—not enough, anyway. Most days I showed up to class late, reeking of the pot I'd just smoked in a classmate's car. I read the assigned books and followed most of the writing prompts (including my first ever short story, a maudlin bit of dreck about a depressed young man living at his mother's house), but by the middle of the semester my presence in those classrooms was more and more infrequent. With six weeks left in the term, I stopped attending altogether. A few days after the end of finals week (not even a blip on my radar by then), I received a report showing five failing grades. I spent the next couple years dragging myself to a class or two per semester, slowly erasing those Fs.

It wasn't until I found myself in graduate school that I learned to take school seriously. I'd attended and finished college at a large state school in the cornfields of Illinois, making it to most classes, only occasionally opting out of Astronomy or Introduction to Theatre to spend an afternoon reading Dickens in my apartment or some smoky bar. And after a couple tries, I was accepted to an MFA program in fiction writing.

There were a few people in my graduate program who never attended any seminars or workshops, students who were not students in any traditional definition. These were folks who, yes, signed up for courses each semester and even occasionally made appearances at readings and parties or the bar where we nascent scribes collected most nights, but who never set foot in one of the professors' offices where classes were held. And at the end of their two years of doing, well, whatever they were doing, a degree of Master of Fine Arts was conferred upon them. This was both the genius and essential flaw of this particular studio program: the job of writing, and learning to write, was set squarely on the shoulders of the students. What

the program gave you was time: these two years were yours to do with what you deemed appropriate. If you wanted to come to class and learn from the professors, great. If you wanted to dick around for 24 months, fine. It was as if the program leaders were saying, “We see your potential, but it is yours to cultivate or not.” The scrap of paper announcing our mastery of this art of writing was nothing, a souvenir. What mattered was what we did next, the poems and stories and books we would write.

One might see how this could be a dangerous freedom for a habitual truant such as myself. And it might have been a problem if it were not for a quick, fortuitous conversation one night during my first semester.

I’d skipped workshop that day—I don’t remember why. It could be I’d been feeling ill or that I disliked the stories up for discussion and this was my small, petty protest against them. But most likely I just didn’t feel like going. I did, however, feel like showing up to the bar that night, and I almost made it. A block away, washed in the white and red light of the emergency room sign of the hospital up the road, I crossed paths with a fellow student, a second-year whose reputation was one of a socially goofy, but absolutely committed writer.

We exchanged hellos and enjoyed a laugh about something that had happened recently at a party, and then he said, “Wait, didn’t you miss workshop today?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I wasn’t feeling well.”

“And you’re going to the bar?”

“I’m better now,” I said.

Still smiling, he shook his head slowly. “Workshop is sacred. You don’t get to go to the bar.”

We stood silently for a moment, my own smile slowly thawing there in the warm, Indian summer air as I attempted to gauge his seriousness. My entire life this sort of absenteeism had been something to joke about, a quirk of mine, a habit that supported my generally ironic outlook on life. And now this person was standing in front of me talking of sacredness?

At a loss for words, I finally managed, “You’re probably right.”

“I’ll see you later, man,” he said and turned up the street, leaving me to head back home and contemplate just what the hell I was doing there at all.

My classmate was right. “Workshop is sacred” became my own personal adage, an internal rallying cry to raise me out of my habitual torpor. What I’d been given—what education is in the purest sense—was a chance to develop my understanding of the world and my ability to react to it, to participate in it. It was the opportunity to write and to have my peers and professors read and consider what I’d written. It was the chance to formulate my own thoughts about literature through the process of reading, each week over the course of two years, all these dozens of works in progress. It was a gift, and from that moment on I would have felt like an ingrate to miss even one moment of the experience. There is an implicit vow in any workshop: you read, you think, you show up, you talk. Simple, right? Yet at that time, it was an epiphany. I no longer needed the romance of the fictional academy of books and movies. I had my sometimes chaotic and drunken—but mostly quiet and boring—life right then in that present moment.

I teach now, and in my syllabi I detail a careful attendance policy. At the beginning of each class session, I call my students’ names and mark their presence or absence in a book, but really I can think of few things more tedious than this ritual. In its best form, school would be self-regulating. The act of learning would be thrilling enough to demand attention, would bring students, even lazy, easily-bored ones like me, to class. And there they would happily sit to listen and write and debate with one another and me. But I know this isn’t really possible. That’s just the old romantic bullshit stinking up the joint again. We might come close here and there, we teachers and students together, perhaps stretching a good streak into weeks, a semester, maybe more. But even within those good spans there are lags and silences, days filled with feelings of inadequacy and irritation. There are near constant emails and excuses, the truth or falseness of which I’ll never know.

I have mixed feelings about those students of mine who fail to attend. If I'm honest, I fall into the habit of thinking less about their missing out on the great, transcendent beauty of learning, and more about the day-to-day trivialities of grades and GPAs. In other words, I commit the same crime they do so much of the time: seeing school as a series of checkmarks they must collect in order to receive a slip of paper conferring upon them the adjective *educated*. But every once in a while a student or two will stand out. They will appear tired or bored, will miss class frequently, but will have interesting things to say when they do attend. They will unslouch themselves at this or that notion, or smile coyly at some passage from an essay that turns a small bit of their world on its head. And the combination of apathy and insight, the yearning for something to excite them, will strike a chord within my memory. Often these students will seem to have struggled along the path that brought them to school. For many of them, higher education has not been a foregone conclusion. They might be the first in their families to attend college. The world of their home may not be particularly conducive to study. And I fear that if they fail, they won't make it back again.

We have no parallel lives against which to compare the wisdom of our decisions. Only hindsight and lost time. "We live," Milan Kundera writes, "everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold." Why did I end up going through with school rather than dropping out? Why did I find myself in an MFA writing program and then going beyond that for a PhD, the first in my family? Luck, I suppose, and a lot of support in one fashion or another. At some point my interest in reading and writing was piqued, and my circumstances were such that this interest managed to survive the morass of necessities and distractions and mundanities of everyday life.

After that conversation with my classmate, I missed only one other workshop across those two years of graduate school. It was my final semester, and I was laid up with the flu. But even then I read and responded to the work up for discussion that week, and a few hours before class, I dragged my sweating, shivering body to the converted Victorian house

where we gathered for classes and gave these letters of response to my professor to pass on to my classmates. He looked at me quizzically and received those sheets of paper between thumb and forefinger and held them at arm's length. I cinched up the collar of my coat and coughed into my fist.

“You know you could have emailed them,” he said. But that wasn't the point.

Point was, I showed up.