

I Prefer Not To

written by Guest Contributor | June 11, 2019



Image Credit: Charlie Chaplin. *Modern Times* (1936).

I was running on the promenade that lines Brooklyn along the bay of the New York harbor, which stretches from Gravesend to Bay Ridge, when I stopped to watch a cargo ship heading into port. It sailed beneath the massive arc of the Verrazano Bridge, the ship's wake casting gentle waves against the shore. As I leaned against the railing and watched it pass by, I briefly considered life as a deck-hand.

I'd been working in the same organization for more than four years, and it was by any measure a good job. I'd moved up, travelled the world for business, received good pay and benefits, and if that were all I wanted I could've settled in and spent the rest of my working days there. It was a job that my family—generations of construction workers and welders and the like—were proud to tell people about. My father, who had never graduated high school, could tell his bosses, "My son is a writer—a *successful* one. He writes for a multi-million-dollar non-profit. He lives in New York. He's got a college degree, in English, that *paid off*." No matter how rough our upbringing had been, he could point to me as the fruit of that labor—the one of his five children who had navigated a world that by all means wasn't designed to give working-class people a leg up. Not only had I established myself, I overshot the mark.

I was as proud of that as he was, as my mother was, as my friends were. And for a while it was exactly what I wanted out of life. The job was demanding and fast-paced, but I could spend my days working and focus on my own writing in my spare time. Every once in a while, I would be sent to Abu Dhabi, Cape Town or Guadalajara for a scientific conference. As a person who had never even had a passport before he had been hired, it didn't matter how mundane the conference was, I was excited to be part of that small sub-set of the planet whose careers required world travel.

But it was for those same reasons that it was hard to explain to the people

who were so proud of me that I was deeply unhappy. I knew that it would seem ridiculous to try to tell people who had literally broken their bodies for their work that my job had begun to feel suffocating. I couldn't tell them that I'd come to a point where I walked into the office, stared at the computer, and felt my eyes glaze over. I couldn't explain that the accumulated stresses had reached a point where every buzz of my phone or ping in my inbox elicited a tightening of the chest and an anxiety attack. I knew that complaining about a good job was an insult to many people I knew who just hoped to hold on to *any* job. But the fact remained: I no longer cared, and I began to feel that the life I had been pursuing was threatening to pass me by.

That was on my mind when I saw the cargo ship floating in the New York harbor. Staring at it, contemplating some potential career as a seaman, I thought of *Moby Dick*. I remembered why Ishmael got on the Pequod. He wasn't fleeing a pursuer, nor was he pursuing fame. He just felt the crushing weight of a life that seemed to be bearing down on him in all of its nothingness.

"Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth," he says in the very first paragraph, "whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet . . . then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball."

I understand that it's melodramatic to leap from dissatisfaction at work to a desire to reach for the pistol. It's more about what happens when a person realizes that they're spending the majority of their lives doing something that brings them no joy, that in fact makes them unhappy, that perhaps is causing a deeper depression—a November in the soul. Wasn't the reason I'd put so much effort into getting a college degree, into uprooting my life and moving away from my family and friends, for the sake of a chance to devote my life to something I was truly passionate about? My family had paved roads, pounded steel, served coffee and sold drugs to get by, and I was certainly proud of having found a white-collar way to do that. But deep down inside I still felt no closer to that Homeric ideal of a *vocation*—that higher calling.

I saw that clearly from the banks of the Hudson. I could no longer un-see it. Yeah, I had been on a relatively upward trajectory at work, in spite of my many shortcomings. I'd started as an entry-level "communications assistant" and worked up to a title I had coveted my whole life: "writer." Words that I typed would be delivered at UN side events in Geneva, or issued as press releases or developed into op-eds, but none of that really meant more to me than any other line of work. In my performance evaluations, my boss usually wrote something to the effect of *Stewart is an excellent writer, but he hasn't risen to the potential of his role. Often, his mind seems to be off somewhere else*. She was right. I was almost always half-gone, and the hardest part of my job was remaining half-*there*. But I was coming to understand that I would never, ever, be fully *there* again.

The next time I went into work, I knew that there would be a presence on my shoulder, a little Bartleby, responding *I prefer not to* whenever anyone asked me to do anything.

What was maybe worse was that I knew what the solution was, and that scared the shit out of me, too.

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For as long as I can remember, I've harbored a streak of suspicion, and maybe even resentment, for those writers who went from English and creative writing undergraduate programs into MFAs, and from MFAs into careers as professors writing about having affairs with their students. I resented the privilege, the insularity, the diminution of the range of voices because so many were conforming to a single literary and cultural style. I feared the bubble, and I believed that there was something more "real" outside of that bubble. That was the main reason that I had largely avoided that life. As an undergraduate, I was a restaurant host, an under-the-table day laborer and a street performer, juggling in New Orleans' French Quarter for tips. After I graduated, I briefly scrubbed toilets at a bed & breakfast in Maui, and worked at a Vitamin Shoppe in Manhattan before I ended up in the non-profit that would propel me from working-class vagrancy to white-collar international communications.

But in every one of those roles, I felt out of place. No matter whether I was scraping drywall, juggling knives or editing speeches, my boss was right—my mind was always off somewhere. And that *somewhere* was that literary world I had harbored such a grudge against. I suppose I'd always known that, but I would never accept the answer: that it was ok to want to be in that world.

I remember not long before that run along the water that I went to see the chair of my MFA—I'd been attending part-time in the evenings—to register for classes. She asked how my work was going, and in less than a minute I broke down crying. She closed the door. "It's scary to think about," she said, "but you're going to be so happy once you step down off of that corporate ladder and start doing what you came here to do."

I wasn't brave enough to take her advice at the time. But it wouldn't take long. It was only a matter of weeks before I went to work and scheduled the soonest appointment I could with my boss. I was scared of what I was going to tell her. I was scared of what I would do without my salary, of whether I would be able to afford health insurance, or rent, of whether I was making the biggest mistake of my life. We walked into a corner meeting room with a view of Trinity Church at the top of Wall Street. She said, "This room has always had my favorite view," and made it half-way into her chair when I said, "So I'm resigning."

In the ensuing days, I would finally tell my father, and he would tell me about how foolish it was to chase dreams. He brought up my sisters. "Callie followed her dream to grow pot. Amy went for that tattoo artist life. I tried and failed with my own business. Look where that got us. Take all of the people with dreams, and all of the ones who set out to start a business or

sell a book or whatever, and I'm just saying that the odds are not in your favor." Dad wasn't phased by my faith in my youth, or the fact that this was the right time in my life to take chances, or that my current line of work left me standing beside the D-Train and vaguely wondering why it wasn't worth it to just hop onto the track.

"Don't be stupid, Son. There's way less painful ways to kill yourself."

I was frustrated with him, though I understood him. He just wanted me to have what he never did: security. But security wasn't enough for me. After four years of security, I needed to know that I was still willing to leap into the unknown in pursuit of a dream.

Sitting across the table from me, my boss asked me why I was leaving. I told her that I agreed with her that I would never be entirely there. That my mind would always be looking half-way into some other place, and she deserved a person who lived and breathed the work that we do, just as I deserved a chance to live and breathe the work that I loved. She smiled. It was the freest conversation we'd had in years.

Two weeks later, the organization threw me a lovely going away party, and then I packed my belongings, handed in my badge, and walked out the door.

That was two days ago as of this writing. I lined up a bit of freelance work and will start teaching as an adjunct in the fall. It won't pay near enough, and I don't know what I'll do about health insurance. But I feel like the November of my soul has passed. Bartleby has wandered out of my mind. I feel like the master of my fate and the captain of my soul—and I know that sometimes that means going down with the ship. But there is something to embracing the fear, to setting out to sea, to know that what follows the words "I prefer not to" should be some sort of hope, some dream, something that shakes off the doldrums and inclines us toward the lives we'd prefer to live.



Stewart Sinclair is a writer whose reportage, personal essays and narrative nonfiction has been featured in *Guernica*, *The New Orleans Review*, *The Morning News* and elsewhere. Recently his essay "Search Party" was selected for *True Story*, a mini-magazine from the editors of *Creative Nonfiction*. He is currently working on his first book about class, identity and motherhood in a fractured America. @stewsinclair