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Disappearing Act

The Invisible Adjunct shuts down her popular Weblog and says goodbye to academe

By SCOTT SMALLWOOD

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Through the blurry glass of the classroom door, a professor can be seen at the front of the room. It is a woman, but the thick window obscures any clues about how old she is or how tall or what color hair she might have. Maybe brown.

She's the Invisible Adjunct. Or at least, she used to be. After five years of being an adjunct and a year after starting one of the most popular academic Weblogs, she is giving up and getting out. More than a decade after entering graduate school with great promise, she hasn't landed that full-time, tenure-track spot she dreamed of. So although she's unsure what comes next, she is quitting the academy and shutting the blog down.

"What I need to do, I think, is to revise and rewrite my own script," she wrote months ago when she began to consider this jump. "Get me rewrite! I'm done with this story and I want a new script."

Her departure from the classroom at the end of this semester will cause barely a ripple on her campus. No farewell parties. No mentions in the department newsletter. Remember, no one can really see her. But on the Internet, her goodbye spurred an emotional cascade. Scores of other blogs mentioned her departure. Some even mourned it. Nearly 200 comments were posted to her final blog entry in late March. They called it essential and "one of the great good places." One fan gushed: "While academia is becoming a poorer and poorer place by the minute, the lucky place you end up will be enriched by your arrival."

While most of those admirers have never met her, we can assure you that she is real. She sat down for an interview with *The Chronicle*, but insists on maintaining her anonymity. She worries that being unmasked on her campus might affect her final semester there or her yet-to-be-determined future career.

Like the Invisible Adjunct blog, which walked a line between the personal and systemic, her departure is not just about her. It's yet another signal, some say, of how broken the academic hiring system is.

About 45 percent of all faculty members are now part-timers. Each year thousands of people with new doctorates in fields like history and English fail to find the tenure-track jobs they are chasing. In English, for instance, fewer than half of the new Ph.D.'s win tenure-track jobs initially, according to the Modern Language Association.

When confronted with those numbers, the apologists, as the Invisible Adjunct calls them, maintain that there will always be jobs for the good ones.

But if someone with a Ph.D. from a top-tier college, publications, and writing skills good enough to get thousands of people to start their day by checking what she has to say -- if she isn't one of the good ones, who is? "She has jumped through all the hoops that the profession set for her," says Ralph Luker, a former

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professor at Morehouse College and a regular participant in the Invisible Adjunct blog. "And we failed to find a place for her."

The Invisible Adjunct grew up in a working-class family in Canada. She put herself through college near home. That's where advisers first gave her the counsel she now tries not to hate them for: "You're too smart for law school," they told her. "You're one of us." And with that, she was off to an elite graduate school in the United States.

Five or so years later, she had a new doctorate in history and she waded into the job market. She managed to score a campus interview at an elite research university, but came in second. Given how small the world of academe is, she doesn't want to tell everyone where she almost landed. Let's just say you've all heard of it.

But in the five years since, after coming so close at one of the nation's top institutions, she has never been granted another campus interview at an American college, though she has applied all over. To be so close and then to disappear into the fog of adjunctdom makes the system seem all the more unfair.

The Invisible Adjunct lives in New York, but who knows where she teaches? (OK, we know, but we're sworn to secrecy.) Maybe she takes the subway to class. Maybe she drives out to a community college on Long Island. Maybe she makes the long trek over the Hudson River to Rutgers. It doesn't matter. To the academy, she's just an adjunct, filling in at the margins, earning a couple of grand per course.

The mystery surrounding her identity was part of what made her blog work. In a way, she stopped being just herself, transformed instead into Every Adjunct. Knowing who she was might have broken that spell.

A close reader of the blog would have learned these biographical tidbits: She is married to a lawyer. She is the mother of a toddler son who nearly got hit by a taxicab in Manhattan a while back. Her family in Canada doesn't quite understand this academic thing.

But that same reader never knew how few people Ms. Adjunct ever told about her Web fame. Just a few friends know, and, aside from her husband, she's never told her family. In real life, she comes off as a bit shy and less sure of herself than her Internet persona would suggest, although she flashes the same wit and dry sense of humor with which her readers were so familiar.

Now, she senses that the Ph.D. in her pocket has grown stale.

"I have to confront the fact that my shelf life has expired," she says, "and I'm not going to get a job in the academy."

Beyond Personal Angst

The Invisible Adjunct, the Web site, was born in February 2003. It lasted a little more than a year, making it middle-aged by blog standards. (The archives are still up at <http://www.invisibleadjunct.com>.)

The name started out as a joke. On her arrival home from teaching one day, she realized that no one at her college ever saw her. "I'm utterly invisible," she told her husband.

In one of her early blog entries she wrote about feeling like a ghost in the department: "Does it sound too sad/bitter/melodramatic to say that I die a small death every time I feign a brisk cheerfulness as I explain to one of the secretaries in the office that I am So-and-So who needs you to please unlock the door to Office Number XXX so that I can hold the weekly office hours for which I am not paid?"

She had used the Invisible Adjunct moniker a bit on other online forums before she started her blog. The plan when she started the site was to try to write about issues facing adjuncts and higher education at a wider level.

The site "was my attempt to provide a space between a chronicle of my angst and a policy paper," she says.

She hoped for maybe 20 readers. Within a couple of weeks, the comments starting pouring in. Eventually, she was spending hours on it every week, reading hundreds of e-mail messages, and had 18,000 visitors a month. "She became suddenly a place where many people who were having an experience in isolation, thinking it was just them, discovered they suffered from a condition," says Timothy J. Burke, an associate professor of history at Swarthmore College and a popular academic blogger himself.

Mr. Luker, who contributes to a blog at the History News Network, says the Invisible Adjunct was "welcoming, friendly, engaging, charming, and funny." And while she worries now about being labeled as just another bitter adjunct, fans praised her as fair and rational. This wasn't whining.

Her site became a home for people who were dissatisfied with the system, but also a forum for others to participate in the discussion without, as Mr. Burke says, "being subject to a nuclear attack." The site, he says, "became a place for academics in good situations to have reasonable conversations and not get caught up in right-left stuff or the bitterness of people on the outs."

'A Great Teacher'

While Princeton may not be crawling with adjuncts the way other campuses are, Anthony T. Grafton, a history professor there, still found the blog enlightening. When students talk to him about going to graduate school, he is sure to tell them that it is no promise of anything. And in those students he sees people who remind him of the Invisible Adjunct. "This is what worries me," he says. "One would hate to think of them 10 years on becoming disillusioned adjuncts."

A month earlier, Erin O'Connor, an associate professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, had been skewering Mr. Burke's stance on speech codes at Swarthmore in her blog. She too, though, enjoyed the Invisible Adjunct. "Always smart, ever temperate, able to leap tall issues in a single post, I.A. has been the wise and witty keeper of one of the blogosphere's most comfortable and canny corners," she wrote.

But thousands of loyal readers and praise from people who didn't even know Ms. Adjunct did little to make up for the fact that hiring committees were passing her over yet again this year.

"The anonymity just kills me," Mr. Luker says. "Because she so manifests the qualities of being a great teacher that if a search committee knew who she was, they would surely consider it an asset."

He tried to get her to unmask herself. "If I had created what she has," he says. "I would want the world to know it."

The Invisible Adjunct, though, worries that showing her face would allow those she knows in real life to see her as a misfit, a malcontent. She imagines that eventually she will write again about some of the issues she dealt with on the blog -- this time under her own name. For now, she's just trying to get out without making any trouble. "The academy, on the one hand, puts a very high premium on originality," she says. "But in certain areas you're supposed to go with the flow."

Grad School? Think Again

Read through a year's worth of Invisible Adjunct posts and you will get a good glimpse at what's happening in higher education, at least in terms of graduate school, the job market in the humanities, and the adjunct world.

Her advice in a nutshell: Think long and hard before going to grad school in the humanities. Then think some more.

She believes that academe's cheerleaders should stop pretending that the Ph.D. is good preparation for other types of careers. It's not, she says. Being smart and stubborn enough to get through a Ph.D. program may mean you're smart and stubborn enough for lots of other things, but the actual Ph.D. is peculiar to an academic career. (She would, however, support redesigning master's programs to create practical graduate education for nonacademics.)

Speaking of programs, the Invisible Adjunct says there are simply way too many of them. Many graduate programs in many fields -- even beyond the humanities -- should be curtailed, and some should be eliminated entirely. "There's certainly a supply component to the problem," she says. "It's doing incredible damage to the profession. ... An undersupply of English literature Ph.D.'s would be the best thing to give them leverage."

She speaks passionately about the issues facing the academic profession, a profession she believes has allowed itself to fall into decline. Can't professors see that a system producing so many people who can't get jobs is not an indictment of the aspiring faculty members, but of the system itself? Or if you really think that these adjuncts aren't of high enough caliber to hire, then the graduate schools are failures, not the students.

The Invisible Adjunct, while sympathetic to those who demand labor unions for adjuncts, never embraced the role of activist. Sure, she says, anyone at the bottom of the economic system, like adjuncts, would be better off joining in collective action. But using that union to go from \$2,500 per course to \$3,000 is an incremental change that does not tackle the flawed structure.

"For all practical intents and purposes, the adjunct is a low-wage worker without benefits who can be hired and fired at will," she once wrote. "So in what way can the adjunct be an entrepreneur, except in his or her own mind?"

The trials and despair of the Internet's most famous run-of-the-mill adjunct highlight the vagaries of the two-tiered academic job system. (Whatever you do, don't call it a "market," the Invisible Adjunct would say.)

"We know that there are many, many good people chasing a shrinking pool of great jobs," Mr. Burke says. "There's no way to make room in the contemporary academy for all the people who would make great academics."

Perhaps seeing the failure of people like Ms. Adjunct might prompt the lucky tenured ones to get off their rhetorical high horses, he says.

"One of my consistent feelings is that there shouldn't be anybody in academia that is too quick to regard their own position as a result of a meritocratic system," says Mr. Burke. "Anybody with a modicum of self-awareness knows there's a tremendous amount of luck involved. But that sits ill with our prevailing mythologies."

While dozens of people wrote in to say they were disappointed the blog was shutting down, nearly as many told the Invisible Adjunct she was making the right decision. Mr. Burke, for one, is glad she is making the leap. "I think it's sound to not hold on forever. That's the route to real bitterness," he says. "At some point smart people say, 'Screw this. I can do better things with my life.'"

The Invisible Adjunct doesn't know what's next -- only what's past. "I need to stop thinking of myself as an academic," she says. That was one of the reasons the blog had to be shuttered. "I have to stop being immersed in this world. I have to psychologically extricate myself."

Yet she knows leaving academe isn't as simple as quitting a job. "It's not something like a 9-to-5 job that you did for a while and it didn't work out," she says. "There is a serious identity investment. You *are* an academic. Then you don't get a job, and you think: 'I'm nothing. I'm worthless.'"

All those years ago, her undergraduate advisers suggested she was too bright to be a lawyer. Now a decade later, after getting married, having a son, and creating a blog with more monthly readers than many journals, she's not sure she or those professors were so smart after all.

"Maybe," she says, "I'll go to law school."

THOUGHTS FROM THE INVISIBLE ADJUNCT

On her blog, the Invisible Adjunct identifies her musings as being "from the margins of academe." Here are some of them:

On being invisible:

"One thing I do know: I am not a ghost in the classroom. A ghost in my department? Yes, absolutely. I am invisible to most full-time faculty and also (and in practical terms, more importantly) to the staff who run the office, many of whom can never seem to remember who I am and what is my business and even what is my name. ... And so I remind myself that I am not a ghost in the classroom. My students see me and know me. And when I am teaching I am fully alive and fully visible."

On the use of part-time professors:

"While academics tend to be smart, some of them very smart, people, until very recently many of them failed to grasp a basic point that would have been readily apparent to an illiterate silkspinner in medieval Lyons: if you allow the use of cheap, contingent labor, you will depress the wages (salaries) and degrade the status and working conditions of your guild (profession) members, and you will fail to maintain your labor monopoly. Let me emphasize: There is something deeply, structurally wrong with a profession that allows and even encourages the use of cheap, contingent labor."

On going to graduate school:

"Such a response on the part of the members of a profession to the deprofessionalization of their own profession strengthens the admittedly pessimistic message I have put forth concerning graduate school: Don't go. Okay, if that's too harsh a statement, then let me modify it as follows: Don't go without doing some careful research involving a close scrutiny of the numbers. ... Think twice before attempting to enter a profession that is in the process of deprofessionalization, the members of which are either unable or unwilling to defend and maintain the status of their profession as a profession. Look into law school, medical school, business school, library science; consider moving directly into the workplace with an entry-level position in one of the many fields and sectors that offer possibilities for gainful employment. There *is* a big wide world beyond the academy, and there is no point in taking a 5- to 7-year detour that only delays one's entry into this world."

On the "myth" of academic meritocracy:

"Among the responses by full-time faculty to the problem of adjunctification is a line of argument that I find rather curious. It goes something like this: grant that the abuse of adjuncts is unfortunate (which concession is often accompanied by the disclaimer that there is nothing we can do about the low pay and lack of benefits), the system is a meritocracy and those who are truly worthy do end up on the tenure track. Now, given the growing reliance on adjunct faculty, what this position entails is a belief in an overall decline in the merit of college instructors. ... "

"Can you think of another profession ... that would claim that a significant proportion of their membership were so lacking in merit as to deserve substandard wages and no benefits?"

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