

I fell for a serial killer...

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Lucy Ellman

10 May 1996

I think I'm in love with the Unabomber. It started slowly, last year, a weak thing suffering from a dearth of information. But since the arrest of the alleged culprit it's been revived by a waterfall of data.

If only we had met 20 years ago, I am sure I could have saved him. Now it's all too late.

But maybe not. There's always the chance he'll get off on grounds of insanity, and the evidence against him so far is only circumstantial: he was in the right places at some of the right times, and he liked making very shiny nails by hand. Okay, he had a few typewriters, on which he might have written some pretty weird stuff—but we all do that. He could actually have written his manifesto on behalf of others—the “Freedom Club”?—or as fantasy, therapy or recreation. He might have WANTED to be the Unabomber (that's no crime).

Perhaps he stayed at seedy Sacramento hotels because he was shy and poor, not secretive; and though he was there when bombs were sent, a lot of other people were in Sacramento at the time too.

So what if he had bomb parts and subversive literature (history and philosophy tomes) in his one-room shack, and rode a bicycle? No one minded his interest in explosives when he was a child, experimenting with rockets.

I confess I was taken with his tattered jeans. I like his current prison-issued orange jumpsuit rather less, but you can't have everything. Unfortunate comments have been made regarding his personal hygiene, but that's none of my concern from this distance. In fact, I have some hopes for this romance yet.

He is, after all, the discerning woman's serial killer. Most of them are boring because their motivation cannot be understood. We had no need of explanations from Fred West or the Dunblane man—the only regret about their suicides was that they didn't happen earlier, and that they deprived us of the satisfaction of tearing those men limb from limb.

But, while his violence can't be forgiven, the Unabomber's reasons seem potentially fathomable, if we knew more. His acts are on the edge of meaning something, if only we could figure out what. He has written 35,000 words of supposed explanation but its strangely calm tone is directly in conflict with his scary acts; the manifesto is a well-tempered clavier of a piece.

So what really drives a studious mathematician-turned-hermit to make spasmodic journeys, sometimes in the dead of winter, catching buses, visiting post offices? Why such a deep longing to kill and maim, even while complaining in a letter to the *New York Times* that it was a lonely life, making and sending bombs, and that he was getting sick of it?

He was surely a murderer first, an ideologue second, but what a case he makes for his grand principles (the manifesto has a lot going for it), His choice of targets is still mysterious, but on some level he was convinced there was some purpose to his campaign. If Kaczynski and the Unabomber are one and the same, as I trust they are, he was a bitter, disappointed fellow. According to the *National Enquirer* (which has

actually been sadly remiss in collecting juicy details on this case), he was undone by the birth of his brother when he was seven years old. Elsewhere, there are signs of an enduring gripe against his mother, who he once called a “dog” (though presumably you can have an unwanted sibling and a gripe against your mother without becoming a Unabomber or we’d all be making little screws).

Either the manifesto is a well-constructed facade, heartfelt perhaps but essentially irrelevant to the Unabomber’s urge to kill, or the murders themselves are the facade, committed to promote the manifesto, which would indeed be pretty boring without them. Maybe he is just a frustrated writer (he once wrote offensive limericks to a woman he had dated; and the manifesto was quite an undertaking), wanting to be heard—BOOM!

My interest in him stems not just from the fact that I was bom and brought up in Evanston, Illinois, the Chicago suburb which received the dubious honour of the first two mail-bombs. And it’s not just because I too harbour ill-will towards the Industrial Revolution, and humanity in general. But, as a recluse of six years’ standing, it worries me a little that, by Unabomber chronology, I should now be just about ready to start dispatching bombs of my own.

Hermitism is a tricky business. You start by retreating from an evil world which has disappointed you. People have let you down, you have let them down, everybody is let down. You go. But the further away you get, the more disappointed you feel. Your social skills, already awry, dissolve further. The good hermit somehow turns all of this into tranquillity; otherwise you feel like murdering people.

But I do not consider the Unabomber fully committed to hermitism, despite his 25 years in the Montana woods. A true hermit does not court notoriety, nor does he/she try to communicate—SPLAT!—with the outside world. A true hermit does not attempt to change the world. Most of all, a true hermit does not risk getting arrested; being in jail can adversely affect the true hermit’s non-social life.

Kaczynski has a cell to himself at least, and he is probably eating better than he has for years. Spam used to feature prevalently in his diet. In jail at Easter, he ate ham, scalloped potatoes, peas, carrots, lemon coconut pie and coffee. This explains his smile after being arrested. He was lonely. He wanted to be saved. (He wrote his Mexican pen-pal that he wanted a wife and children!)

He wanted to be part of a group: “We have a long article...” The guy wanted to be grabbed, taken care of, and fed. He had had it with trees and wind and snow. He wanted a response. If only we had met sooner. We could have been semi-hermits together. I’m sure I could have mastered lemon coconut pie...

The Ted K Archive

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