

CHAPTER 1

IF YOU WERE TO ask me to pinpoint when I hit rock bottom, I'd tell you to pull up a chair. I hit enough rock bottoms to fill the Grand Canyon, and every time I'd creep toward the top, gravity just kept pulling me back.

My low points have run the gamut. You'd need to multiply them by about a dozen if you wanted to count all the things I've managed to black out. My criminal history, alone, is practically a laundry list. I've fled the police and had a cop hold a loaded gun to my head. I've tried breaking into a house in a desperate search for drugs. I've committed check fraud. I've committed regular fraud. I've stolen from my own parents. I've dealt drugs. I've gotten my kid brother to deal drugs. I've been in jail a handful of times—and should have been there more. The list goes on and on—all with the underlying theme of being drunk and/or high, or trying to get that way.

Oh, I'd thought about quitting—thought about it until the next beer was in front of my face, or the next line was in front of my nose. But there was always something better to do than getting sober.

One day, though, something changed. It was a Sunday, and I'd been up for days freebasing. That's when you take cocaine, mix it with baking soda, and melt it down and smoke it. It's extremely addictive and had

been my drug of choice at the time. That is, until I was coming down from it. I was down so low that day that being dead actually sounded better than being alive.

I'm done, I said to myself. *Done*.

As the fog parted, I looked at my life for what it was, and I realized it wasn't much. I'd been living in Cape Cod, and believe me, my stay hadn't been all lighthouses and lobsters. When I first arrived there, I crashed on a cot at a friend's house until I found a job as a bouncer at a bar. Then I rented a place above the bar and was happy to be within stumbling distance of my job. Eventually, even that stumbling became too much of an inconvenience, and I stopped showing up for work.

I was floating by on unemployment and making a few extra bucks off hustling drugs, using the proceeds so I could get high on cocaine all night then wait for the closest liquor store to open at 8:00 in the morning to buy beer. I drank until I passed out. And then I'd wake up and do it all over again. Somehow, the uselessness of that managed to escape me at the time. A lot escaped me, actually.

But not the fact that I stank—literally. I couldn't even remember the last time I had showered. Between freebasing and drinking enough to take down an elephant, I'd lost the ability to care about things like cleanliness.

I didn't know much, but I knew this: I just couldn't go on like that. I wasn't sure where I was headed, but I knew that the state I was in scared me.

Saying to myself that I was done wasn't enough, though. I'd learned over the years that I was fickle. I'd always been my own best salesman and my own worst enemy. Which is why one moment, on that very same miserable Sunday, I could emphatically tell myself *I'm done*, and the next moment walk into the 19th Hole and belly up to the bar and order a beer. Usually, this was where things started to get better, or at least I would start to feel "normal." But something was wrong.

I took a pull off the cold, hard bottle, and for the first time in my life, I actually meant what I was saying: I was done.

I just can't do this anymore, I said to myself. *I can't*.

I turned and walked out.

I don't know what gave me the strength to quit on that day in May 1991, but I do know I'd gained some footing. It was the first step, the hardest step, admitting that my life was unmanageable and I was powerless over drugs and alcohol. It wouldn't be the last time that I would find opportunity in adversity. For decades to come, I would continue to struggle and find that the discomfort that comes with change and hard work is actually worth savoring. Without it, I wouldn't have my family or the successful business I built.



We always seemed so normal from the outside. If you were to meet my family on the street in Everett, Massachusetts, during the years when I was growing up, you'd think we were a regular, middle-class Jewish family. My dad was a hospital administrator, and my mom stayed home raising my sister, my two brothers, and me—the oldest of their four children.

While our family portraits were all smiles, life within the walls of our home was less rosy. Look closer and you would see me, a rough-and-tumble kid with brown hair and bright blue eyes, overweight by age five, hiding behind the delicious home-cooked meals of my mother to avoid confrontation with my alcoholic father. All of us kids knew not to even try to get near Dad before he had had his first drink after work. That was when he was meanest. My mother would pretty much leave my father to himself while he drank his first few drinks and discuss any pressing subjects afterward. He'd become a little calmer as the night and the drinks wore on—and the drinks *always* wore on. He would drink whiskey and ginger ale until he went to bed, or passed out.

As bad as it sounds, the passing out was always a blessing for the whole family because that meant he'd leave us alone. As if it wasn't enough that the kids at school made fun of me for being fat, I'd have to come home and take it from my own father too.

As his oldest child, I always felt like I was his biggest disappointment. As far as he was concerned, I couldn't do anything—even dress myself—right.

“Where's your belt? You look like a slob,” was his almost daily refrain. Dad seemed to despise everything about me, from the way I talked, to my weight, to the way I carried myself.

My mom was the opposite. A typical Jewish mother, she doted on her four children and gave us all that she could, wanting us to be the best we could be. She pretty much let my father keep to himself, although I do recall her intervening occasionally on behalf of her children. It's like she was trying to make up for everything old Dad was lacking.

Always the loving and nurturing one, Mom was the one who encouraged me to eat, eat, eat! I know her heart was in the right place. The problem was, while her homemade crown roast always seemed to make me feel better, it didn't exactly help my waistline or my reputation.

Not that it ever stopped me. I was a kid—a fat kid—and I acted like one. Food made me happy, so I ate it, whenever and wherever I could, even if I knew it was going to get me in trouble. I remember the time we were on a family vacation in Cape Cod. It still stings to think about it. It wasn't the beaches or the family fun that became the most memorable part of the trip. It was the humiliation.

My parents had invited some family and friends down to visit. One morning I poured myself a big bowl of cereal. I was about eight years old and still not skilled at getting the perfect cereal-to-milk ratio. So, when I had finished eating my breakfast, a pool of milk still sat in the bottom of my cereal bowl. For some reason, my father took it personally. It was more than he could handle, and he got mad—real mad. He scolded me for wasting food.

“Ya gonna just throw that away?” he snarled.

I was stunned into silence, as was everyone else. As friends and family looked on he ordered me to take a large glass from the cupboard, pour the leftover milk into it, and drink it. I did it. I drank that room-temperature milk, and as I swallowed it I also swallowed my anger and what was left of my pride. I felt like a dog that had just had an accident

and his owner was rubbing his face in it while all the other adults looked on, squirming.

My dad also used to spank my brothers and me as part of his discipline. I don't recall him spanking my sister at all, maybe because she was female and a whole lot better behaved. I can't say I always blamed him, but that never took the sting away. The thing about physical abuse is that it's never just about the hitting. That part's not so bad. It's the psychological stuff that really burrows down into you. For me, the biggest thing was repression. My dad could beat the living hell out of me, and I never fought back. Ever. I'd sit there in silence, and I'd take it. I'd shake and I'd wince, but I'd take it. Then my anger would build and build for days and weeks, like a giant buildup of steam searching for an outlet.

Generally speaking, my outlet took the form of my little brothers and sister. Whenever my parents left the house, I'd find some way to pick a fight with them, or they'd start something with me. We were kids, and fighting was what we saw all the time with our dad. So given free rein, our house practically turned into a WWF ring—lamps would get tossed, vases smashed. Even the sturdier things like beds and doors were no match for the four of us. And the instant that something would break, we all knew we were done for. Dad would come home eventually. I think the wait for the inevitable beating was maybe as torturous as the beating itself. The memory of that kind of anxiety still brings a hollow, metallic taste of fear to my mouth.

When he finally got home, we'd all watch, wide-eyed, as he assessed the damage. The outcome was always totally unpredictable. Dad's reaction hardly had anything to do with the seriousness of what we'd done; it had more to do with how much he'd had to drink that night. We were really in for it when we could smell that sweet scent of whiskey before he'd barely made it through the door. That's when the belt would come off. As the oldest, I always seemed to get a few extra licks, just because. And as that belt *fwapped* down, and I fought off the hot, humiliated, angry tears, one thought would go through my mind: *I deserve it*. That's one thing my dad instilled in me, anyway. I deserved it.

When I was about ten years old, we moved from Everett to Newton. My father had come into some money and wanted to invest it in a bigger house and a new life in a better part of town. He figured it was time to upgrade our status.

The money had actually come from my paternal grandfather, who was one of perhaps four top heart specialists in the 1950s and 1960s. I never knew David Littmann, M.D., that well. He was pretty distant and cold as far as the family was concerned, not unlike my father. But when it came to medicine, he was a star. He improved the practice of medicine, especially the diagnosis of heart and lung problems, and served for years as an associate clinical professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, which was where he invented the Littmann stethoscope. The 3M Company eventually bought that stethoscope from my grandfather and hired him as a consultant. Lucky for us, he wanted to share the wealth.

The big homes and Cadillacs of Newton were a change from our former blue-collar neighborhood for all of us. Unfortunately, despite the new setting, some things never changed.

I recall one particular night; dinner seemed to be off to a good start. We were all taking turns telling one another about what happened in our day, the way dinner should be. When it was my turn, I shared that my teacher had told the class that the average household produces four full bags of trash per week. I had found that interesting, so I reiterated the fact. I wasn't making a judgment call, or even comparing our trash-bag count to the average.

Well, it was too much for Dad. I could see the telltale signs of a meltdown right off: his face flushed, his eyebrows rose up like angry caterpillars, and his eyes almost popped out of his head.

Then came the screaming.

“No teacher is going to tell ME how many bags of trash I should have!” he belted out.

The screaming always made me flinch, no matter the warning signs. I remember just sitting there—cowering—wishing, praying for him to calm down. The wrath behind his words was so strong it was like a punch to my gut.

Then, horror of horrors, he threatened to march into that school and tell that teacher exactly how he felt. My face reddened at the thought of it, my fists clenched under the table.

I tried not to act upset—that would only egg him on. So I stared at my plate and quietly continued eating, hoping that somehow my mother’s sweet-and-sour meatballs would deliver me from the pain and self-loathing, would squelch the anger I was feeling toward old Dad. I hated myself for making him that angry, and I hated him for making me feel that way. Now, on top of everything else, I had to worry about him making a scene at a school where the kids already taunted me. I worried about it all night, and for the days that followed.

Maybe it was just the whiskey and ginger ale talking, because he never did show up at school.



By the time I was twelve, the ingredients of my life were coming together to make a toxic combination. I didn’t fit in at school, I didn’t fit in at home, and the less I fit in, the more I hated myself. For pretty much all of those twelve years, food had been my No. 1 escape. But now that I was getting older, other temptations started making themselves available. Turns out there are far more effective ways to indulge yourself than eating a sweet-and-sour meatball.

I ran with a core group of friends: Johnny, Mitch, Buff, and Franx. We were constantly restless, the five of us, and constantly bored. And what do a bunch of kids do when they’ve got a lot of time on their hands and they’re not real happy? Anything they could find that would make them feel different from who they really were. For us, that meant drinking.

It began with weekends. Our parents’ supply became our supply. We’d find out whose folks were out for the night and then steal their liquor and get drunk. From the very first time I tried it—beer, whiskey, all of it, it didn’t matter—I loved the way it made me feel. As a kid who was nearly 75 pounds overweight, I discovered that alcohol was the first thing I’d tasted or experienced that made me forget I was fat. Instead, I

felt like a normal goofy kid, a kid who was a part of something. I mean, with this at my lips, I didn't have to think about the kids at school making fun of me or my father berating me. Drinking made me happy, it made me not think. The only downside was the hangover. But I figured every up had its down, and this up was well worth it.

Drinking soon became our favorite activity. Before long, our parents' liquor cabinets were depleted and it was clear that we were going to have to find some kind of supply outside of our families. We didn't have a lot of options. Our one hope was Franx. He was a heavy kid too, but whereas my heaviness translated into chubby cheeks on a husky boy, his weight made him look much older. So we sent him into the liquor store and kept our fingers crossed. Believe it or not, it worked. He wasn't even a teenager, and he was able to buy beer. And man, were we grateful.

Our main hangout was at the Charles River skating rink, where we'd meet up with other kids from the area. I had never been much of a skater when I was sober, so I didn't even bother trying while I was drinking. I'd just sit around, drink, shoot the shit, look at the girls. The girls never seemed to look back at me, but I guess I couldn't blame them.

It was here that I smoked my first joint. From that first puff it was like I'd found my calling. This—*this*—was what I was meant to do. I loved marijuana. Loved it so much I practically convinced myself that I'd discovered a wonder drug. I loved being high even more than I loved drinking, and that was saying a lot. Pot calmed me down, made me feel better about myself. There was this whole communal aspect to smoking a joint. I'd sit with a group of people and pass it around, sharing the same experience. Sometimes we'd talk, other times we'd just inhale, hold the smoke in until we just had to take a breath, and then exhale, coughing as the gray haze left our mouths. It was a bonding experience like I'd never had.

Plus, I didn't have to worry about smoking too much and being hung over. As far as I was concerned, the only sort of negative side to pot was that it gave me the munchies, which, to me, wasn't such a bad thing. Like I said, I was a big fan of eating.

Between the drinking and the pot I actually started making more friends and feeling like I fit in with my seventh-grade class. All my life I'd felt awkward around my classmates. I didn't know what to say to them or how to act. Now I finally felt like I had something in common with the other kids. It was like we were some kind of secret club that was daring enough to do something our parents may well have killed us for.

It wasn't long before pot became my favorite pastime. I smoked morning, noon, and night. Sometimes the guys would join me, other times I'd hang out with the school potheads. After a while I didn't even care if there were friends to smoke with or not. I loved getting high by myself. I'd just lie there and light up and wait to feel like I was walking on clouds, not giving a damn about anything but feeling good.

In hindsight, it was probably about the worst thing in the world for an already fat kid to do because it just made me lazy. I'd lie around like a baked potato, staring at the television. I loved the uselessness of it all. It took me out of my own head to places that were far more enjoyable. I'd sit and stare for hours at a time. It was actually kind of funny: my dad had accused me of being lazy my whole life, and now it was like a self-fulfilling prophecy—I really was lazy, and I didn't want it any other way.

It was always easy to find more pot. There were kids all over school who sold it; you just had to know who to talk to, and you had to have the money for it. That was the only hard part. I wasn't even old enough to have a job. How was I supposed to make enough money to support a growing drug habit?

The answer was usually Mom and Dad. I would sneak bills of all sizes out of my mom's wallet. Occasionally, she would notice that something was missing. I'd watch her pick up her purse and a mystified look would come over her face. One day I even saw her counting her money. But she never did say anything. Not even when one of her gold bracelets went missing. I'd taken it to a jeweler and used the cash to get more pot.

I don't know how I got it past them. I liked to think I was subtle, but when you're that high you can only be so subtle. I had a constant supply

of Visine to try and keep the red out of my eyes, and I did my best to act normal around them. But the truth is, they were pretty naïve. My mom kept busy in the kitchen, and my dad was detached and unconcerned. So it wasn't hard to go unnoticed in the Littmann household.

Their ignorance didn't last as long as I'd hoped it would, however. I'm still not sure what it was, exactly, that tipped them off. I think it had something to do with a movie they had watched called *The Death of Richie*. It was one of those public-service-announcement style made-for-TV movies about a teenager's spiral into drug addiction. After watching that, their antennas went straight up. They started looking at me differently, watching me when they didn't think I was looking. Then came the uncharacteristic questions and curiosity. It was completely out of character, and it totally weirded me out.

But it didn't prepare me for the day I came home from school and found my stash was gone. I looked behind my dresser drawers (my hiding place), and it was empty. I felt all around my dresser, looked under it, looked behind other drawers, and it was nowhere to be found. Gone.

They found me out, I thought to myself. *Damn.*

I started pacing, breathing heavily, doing all those normal things you do when you're panicking. I circled the house, and that's when I saw it on the kitchen table: two bags of pot, my metal pipe, and my glass pipe. It was all there, right in front of me. There might as well have been a neon sign above it flashing the word "CAUGHT."

I stiffened, waiting for my parents' screams. But they never came. I almost wish they had, because what followed was worse. I watched as the tears ran down my mother's face. Then she just started bawling; bawling because of me, what I had done, who I had become. It made me feel terrible. My dad wasn't much better. He just sat there in stony silence. I could actually feel the weight of their disappointment crushing me.

Even so, I wasn't sorry for using drugs. I was sorry that I'd been caught. At least they hadn't yet noticed that I'd been stealing from them.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN I TURNED THIRTEEN I became a man. That's what they told me, anyway. That's the age, according to Jewish tradition, that signifies the transition from childhood to adulthood and is celebrated with a bar mitzvah (for boys) or a bat mitzvah (for girls). If you were to judge my maturity level by the way I handled the ceremony and the party afterward, you'd be right to question just how manly I was.

I hadn't attended too many other bar and bat mitzvahs prior to my own. Being overweight and unpopular tends to keep a guy off the invite list. Plus, I just wasn't that into religion. I'd been forced to attend Hebrew school four days a week for two hours a day (plus Sunday school) since fourth grade, and frankly, with the discovery of my new extracurricular activities, I had things I would rather be doing.

Which is probably why my bar mitzvah performance was less than stellar. Nearly two hundred people attended, and as is the tradition, I stood at the altar and began reciting a section from the Torah. It was something I'd been practicing for months, but somehow, right in the middle of it, I forgot my lines. I stumbled, searching my brain for what I was supposed to be saying, and came up with nothing. Seconds seemed like hours, and after an uncomfortable silence, the rabbi skipped ahead

to the next part of the ceremony. I felt like a failure for about the millionth time in my life.

But I didn't let it get me down for long. To my friends and me, the real meaning of the bar mitzvah was located at the open bar during the party that followed. While a band that sounded kind of like Captain and Tennille livened up the night and distracted our parents, my friends and I snuck away so we could get drunk and high. By that time, my flubbed lines felt like they were a million miles away.



Soon after my bar mitzvah, Buff and his parents invited Johnny, Franx, and me to go with them on a trip to Peru. I had a bunch of money I'd gotten as gifts for my bar mitzvah, so my parents allowed me to go and pay for it on my own. It was my first trip away from my family, and my first time ever to leave the country. If this was what manhood meant, I was already a fan.

The plane trip to Lima took fifteen hours. I don't remember too much about the flight, or even the hotel. What I do remember is discovering that Peru had no minimum drinking age. We were thirteen years old and we could drink, legally! The guys and I whooped it up, imagining all the drinks we'd order over the next few days. Then we discovered it was as easy as calling up room service. So we ordered a bunch of beer, downed about seven each, and passed out. This was gonna be the best vacation ever.

The next night we decided to check out a club. The three guys and I wandered the streets of Lima looking for a place that wasn't too far from our hotel. We settled on a dark, seedy place downtown. It smelled like old smoke and stale beer, and I didn't know it at the time, but that smell would later become an important backdrop to my life.

Walking in, I half expected that the heads would all turn toward us, like you'd see when the villain walks into a saloon in an old Western. But that didn't happen. The four of us were just about the only ones there.

We grabbed a table and started drinking shots of some kind of Inca liquor that was stronger than anything I had ever tried—before or since. (The closest thing to it is Bacardi 151, at 151 proof.) At first, it tasted like poison, but once I got past the first shot or two, it wasn't so bad. The guys seemed to like it too, and the more we drank, the rowdier we got. We were being pretty loud when a few ladies decided to join us. New as we were to being teenagers, with raging hormones and very little experience, this about made our night.

The women were older, and not exactly the kind of girls you'd take home to meet Mom. Their clothes didn't cover too much, and we were getting all kinds of views of all kinds of body parts as the night went on. They didn't speak English, and we didn't speak any Spanish, but none of us seemed bothered by the language barrier. I imagine that because we were young Americans they assumed we had unlimited funds from our parents, and were looking to party.

They got their wish. The ladies kept ordering drinks and putting them on our tab. And the more they kissed, touched, and flirted with us, the less we cared about our growing bill. Our minds were elsewhere.

After a few hours of this, I think the owner of the bar started to get skeptical about how we were going to pay for it all. We'd been drinking pretty heavily, and we were kids, after all. So he came over and demanded money. By that time, the evening's events were pretty fuzzy. But I clearly remember our tab came to the equivalent of nearly \$600. Six. Hundred. American. Dollars. No wonder the guy was skeptical. What thirteen-year-old brings that kind of money to a Peruvian club? None in our group had. And the women? Well, they'd chosen that opportune moment to disappear.

What could we do? Calling our parents was not an option. But . . . That's when Franx, who'd always been the fast talker and problem solver in the group, piped up. He explained to the club owner that we had the money, but it was back in our hotel room. He offered to go back and get it. The owner agreed, under the condition that we all stayed put until Franx returned with the cash.

Franx darted out of the bar, leaving us sitting there, helpless and drunk. The reality of the situation killed our buzzes, and we were all starting to feel the signs of an early hangover as we waited and waited for him to come back. It felt like forever, but it was actually just an hour until Franx returned, victorious. He'd had enough stashed away for the trip that he was able to cover the bar tab, and he became, once again, our hero. We all stumbled back to the hotel to sleep off the rough night.

If you'd told me that that was just a glimpse of the danger to come, I probably would have stayed in bed the next day. Instead, I joined the group on a trip to Cuzco to visit Machu Picchu, located high in the Andes Mountains.

A few of us—Buff and his brother Daniel and his friend Greg—decided to climb the mountain to the top. We expected it to be a fairly easy climb because there were these rock formations that wound to the top like a giant stairway. Even so, I think I surprised the gang when I said I was going to go along. To look at me then, you wouldn't have thought I had any interest in any sort of exertion. But when I put my mind to something, my will alone is enough to propel me along.

Out of shape, overweight, and hung over, I soon realized the climb was tougher than it looked. Once I got to the top of the eight-thousand-foot peak, I was out of breath and a little bit dizzy, but nonetheless exhilarated and relieved to have made it to the top. The view across Peru was stunning—so stunning that I somehow managed to stop paying attention to where I was walking and I slipped on one of the stones. The effect was like a landslide—one stone became many, and suddenly I was about to tumble off the mountain. My hands caught hold of something solid on my way down, and thankfully, Daniel heard the commotion.

“Hey, guys, Jay's falling!” he cried out.

They rushed over, and Buff, who was the closest to me, grabbed my arm and dragged me back on to solid ground. I was stunned, silent, gasping for breath. It wasn't until Daniel proclaimed, “*Geez*, that was a close one,” that I realized just how serious the situation could have been. If Buff hadn't been right there, I could have easily fallen to my death.

The rest of the visit was a blur. We'd all been humbled—for the moment, at least—by the first two days and avoided any real risky behavior for the rest of the trip. Before I knew it, we were on our flight back to Boston. I didn't realize it then, but my first near-death experience wouldn't be my last. Not by any stretch.



When I got back home I'd spent nearly all of my bar mitzvah money. I wasn't looking forward to returning to the same routine, where I stole from my parents to fuel my habit. Not that I'd had some sudden development of conscience or anything. It was more like my cravings were exceeding my supply, and the petty larceny just wasn't cutting it. I wanted more, and I knew if I was going to actually get more I'd have to start thinking like an entrepreneur. I would have to make money, somehow. I just wasn't sure how.

The answers all became clear when a friend introduced me to Robert the drug dealer. Robert was older than us, somewhere in his twenties. The guy looked pretty normal, and he seemed nice enough. He had long black hair and was a little rough around the edges; he always looked like he needed to shave. But what I really noticed was the yellow Corvette he drove. I'd always loved cars—the faster the better—and this one was pretty hot. I wanted what he had.

If I were to deal and make the kind of money Robert told me I could, I knew that someday I could afford a car like his too. I would also have all the drugs I ever wanted, right at my fingertips. Plus, it would make me important. It was mind-blowing to think about. I was so blinded by the green that I didn't even consider the fact that this guy still lived with his mom and that most of his life was spent smoking pot in his bedroom.

I left the meeting excited by the possibilities. I wanted this life, this freedom, this cash, and this continual drug access. I knew that most people, or at least people like my parents, considered selling drugs a highly risky business. To that, I said *pshaw*. I had no worries about

getting caught or getting hurt or anything like that. I was a big kid. I'd be fine. I just knew it. As far as I was concerned there was no downside. Except, of course, that I didn't have enough money to buy a quarter-pound right then and open up my doors for business.

I told Johnny all about it, and he wanted in too. He was just as broke as I was, though, so we fell back on our most tried-and-true ways of scoring quick cash: we stole \$120 from our parents. It was our "seed" money, enough to buy four ounces of pot, which we then divided into smaller portions. Only problem was we didn't have a scale. So we waited until it was dark and we broke into our high school and stole scales from the science department. We took them home and measured the pot into quarter-ounce and half-ounce bags, which we sold for \$10 per quarter ounce.

It was an easier business than you might think. Everyone wanted to buy a bag. We sold it at school and at parties; anywhere we went our doors were open for business, and we were never wanting for clients. In the end, we could make a profit of about \$40 if we sold all the stash. If you factored in my smoking about a half-ounce a week, the profits were even less impressive. But I liked the excitement, and for the first time in my life, I felt needed.

Somehow, through it all, I managed to keep my grades up. I knew I wanted to go to college to study business (I guess you could say my childhood sales experience was like getting a crash course in that), and I knew that I had to work hard to make that happen. I was a responsible addict is one way of putting it. I limited my drinking and drugging to the weekends. I still smoked pot every day, but I held off on lighting up until after my homework was completed. As bad kids go, I was still a pretty good kid.

I was also a pretty experimental kid. Now that I was selling pot I had a constant supply. To someone with an addict's mentality, however, that still wasn't enough. I wanted more, always more. I'd heard some friends talking about Quaaludes. They're pills that act like a sedative and muscle relaxant, and they were becoming pretty popular in the 1970s. The

way I understood it, I could basically feel drunk without the hangover, or the calories. What more could you ask for?

I bought some from my pot dealer and loved the sensation immediately. The “lude” was much stronger than pot and alcohol; I felt euphoric. I forgot about my weight problems, my family issues, and my awkwardness with girls. That was saying something.

By the time another year had rolled around, I’d had no luck with the opposite sex. Why would they want to be seen with a fat guy? What could I do for them? Try as I might to lose weight, it always came back. I’d managed to diet successfully a few times, shed a few pounds here, a couple sizes there, but I could never keep it off. The more weight I gained, the more I hated myself. Whether I was eating for emotional reasons or binging after getting high, overindulging was the real constant in my life.



My sophomore year in high school my father quit drinking. He never gave us a concrete reason. We all just figured that he got sick of relying on something that was ruining his health. He said he was ready to become an active part of his life and family again. It was pretty insightful for him, considering. I hoped for some kind of miraculous turnaround and a newfound family closeness, but that didn’t happen. He didn’t become Ward Cleaver overnight.

At first, his sobriety was actually harder on my mother and us kids. He’d been a drunk for so long that he didn’t know how to be sober, and we all seemed to get the brunt of it. He’d holler at the littlest thing, go off on us kids for God knows what. Everyone picked up on whatever warning signs we could and began treading more lightly than ever. Personally, I would tread lightly straight to the refrigerator.

Between my father and my weight, all of the problems of my youth were escalating the older I got. And the only thing that would make them go away was chemical in nature. Once I’d started downing Quaaludes it

was like I'd opened a new door, and by the end of the school year, I was open to trying pretty much anything.

Hallucinogens came first. Something called purple microdot had been circulating in Newton. I wasn't sure if it was LSD, PCP, or a combination of both, and I didn't really care. If it was available, I was trying it.

To my surprise, I didn't like it that much. It made me see things that weren't there. I saw traces of the outlines of objects, and blurry images on the wallpaper seemed to move. It also made me feel paranoid. I could hear voices inside my head, and they freaked me out. I wanted to jump out of my own skin. Plus, every time I took it I felt stuck: the effects lasted for up to twenty-four hours, and I couldn't come down no matter how badly I wanted to. I would drink and drink and drink to try and make myself feel better, but the alcohol just didn't work when I was on that drug.

I also discovered something called blotter, which looked like a water spot on a piece of paper. Its effects were similar to the purple microdot, but a little less intense. Even if I didn't enjoy being on either drug, it was better than being straight. Like a true addict, I just kept taking them. I took them more than a dozen times, and the more I did it the worse the trip. I could feel the residual effects, and even when I wasn't tripping, my mind just felt . . . different. I don't know how else to describe it. I knew I was screwing myself up, but I didn't let that stop me. Like I said, my motto was "Even a bad drug is better than no drug." It was, at least, until the next one came along.

The next one was cocaine. As the hippies of the 1970s gave way to the glam rockers of the 1980s, the drug of choice also changed, and coke was everywhere—including up my own nose. Back then, we were told it wasn't addictive. Zoom ahead a few decades and we now know that's simply not the case. Not that any kind of scientific research would have stopped me when I was a teenager.

I didn't fall in love with coke immediately like I had with alcohol, pot, and Quaaludes; I developed more of a gradual appreciation for it. The first two times I snorted it I barely felt anything. But the third time I tried it, I felt as though I'd consumed about five hundred cups of coffee.

Really, really *good* coffee. After years of relying on depressants, I found this stimulant literally eye-opening. When I snorted coke, it gave me an edge and an alertness. Added to that, I could drink even more than usual without getting sick.

Cocaine was an expensive habit to develop, though; it sold for about \$100 a gram back then. I actually think that's one of the things I liked most about it: the fact that I was willing to shell out so much cash for it gave me status. I also enjoyed the whole ritual surrounding it. Coke was an involved process that had to be learned. I would pour the chunky white powder out on a mirror and cut it with a razor blade to form a series of sleek, white lines. My preferred snorting tool was a rolled-up hundred-dollar bill. From there, the soft powder gave way to a slightly medicinal flavor that traveled up my nose and down my throat, numbing its path, and beyond.

As my drug habits grew more extravagant, I had to steer my career to be able to afford them. At fifteen years of age, I started dealing cocaine. You might think my job became more complicated, more dangerous at this point, but expanding my sales to include the harder stuff was seamless. I continued selling at parties and to students and still never had to do much marketing.

I myself was bingeing pretty regularly and often stayed up all night, even past sunrise. Because of the drugs, I was in a constant state of paranoia and financial strain. The more I used, the more I needed to use to achieve the same high. To battle the dehydrating effects of the cocaine I drank more beer than ever, and I started using downers, like barbiturates, to counterbalance the intensity of the high. It was like I was on a teeter-totter: I kept piling things on one side to bring me up and then on the other to take me back down, always in search of the proper balance, but never quite satisfied once I got there.



It was during one of my binges that I got the idea of running away. I'm not sure what started the impulse. I think it was a combination of things:

my relationship with my parents, the desire to see my father actually worry, and the need to test whether, by leaving home, I also could find a way to leave myself behind. I was a big shot now, bringing in cash hand over fist. Usually the proceeds went right back into buying more drugs, but not this time. I wanted to do something drastic and spontaneous; heading to Miami just felt like the right move. Because that's the kind of things drug dealers do, right?

At the heart of it, really, I was seeking more of an escape than the drugs were allowing me. I was so emotionally and mentally gone at that point, leaving, physically, seemed like the only answer. I just wanted to stop being me. I thought that maybe if I were someplace else, I would feel better.

I got all dressed up in my suit and took a cab to the airport. I bought a one-way ticket to Miami. Once I got there, I ignored the pristine beaches, the glamorous clubs and restaurants, and the beautiful women. I was after the same thing I was always after.

I looked up someone I knew at the University of Florida. He was a friend of a friend, and I knew he could hook me up with drugs. I was right. I bought a half-ounce of cocaine and about fifty ludes, and after indulging in both, I spent some time wandering around campus. I decided I wanted a drink, but that was easier said than done for a fifteen-year-old.

Suddenly feeling out of my comfort zone—and blitzed out of my gourd—I wasn't sure what to do with myself. So I turned around and got a cab back to the airport. I wanted to go home. I still wasn't entirely sure what had drawn me here in the first place, but I knew it hadn't brought me the deliverance I'd hoped for.

I was so blasted on Quaaludes I almost missed my flight. But I managed to pull myself together and make it back to Boston. I hopped in a cab and convinced the driver to buy me a bottle of Jack Daniel's and a six-pack of Molson beer. By the time I got home, my parents hadn't even noticed I was gone. So much for causing them to worry!

I headed directly to my room, where I proceeded to drink the entire bottle of Jack, snort cocaine, and swallow a handful of Quaaludes. It

was a combination my body was familiar with, but after my having gone at it all day, the volume must have been more than even I could handle. The room started spinning. I doubled over feeling sick, so sick.

I stumbled out of my room and told my father I'd taken too many pills. He gave me this look that was more disgust than concern. Without a word, he called the hospital where he worked and asked what he should do. They told him to bring me in. I think that in his mind that was about the worst thing they could have said. I could hear it in his curt response and the silence that followed.

He didn't say a word the whole drive there. I was still out of it, but I could sense my father's disgust. When we arrived at Beth Israel Hospital in Brookline, they put me on a stretcher. From there, I'm not sure what happened. I can't remember whether they pumped my stomach or if I threw up. They could have done just about anything at that point and I wouldn't have known.

They kept me overnight, and that was fine with me. Though I hadn't planned it out or anything, I think this episode was a subconscious cry for help, and everybody knew it. I figured once I got home, my life was going to change. And probably not for the better.