

## My New High

By Patrick Trotti

I used to dream in white lines and syringes, full bags and buy one get one free specials. Now I dream in structure and wordplay, a place where run-on sentences are shunned and semi-colons are used judiciously. The sound coming from a full stem of crack is now replaced by the music of a perfectly worded sentence.

Everything happened so suddenly yet gradually that it's hard to remember when, or how, things changed. The easy part is the drugs. I stopped using on May 8, 2005. It was a Sunday. It was cloudy and cool. The night before I went to the city and managed to inject myself with one hundred dollars' worth of heroin and smoke up the remaining two hundred dollars in a dirty, old crack stem. The details of that particular night are foggy. I do, however, remember sitting on the couch in my dealer's apartment on Kingsbridge Avenue waiting until he either kicked me out or I ran out of money and drugs (these things usually coincided with one another.)

By three in the morning, as the noise from the street below was just starting to let up, I had finished the last of my drugs and was almost instantly asked to leave. My dealer, Big Mike, wasn't one for words but when he spoke you listened. His mere presence guaranteed him that much authority, not to mention the loaded gun that was always tucked into his jeans.

"Get out man. Let's go my girl is gonna be here soon, I need you out."

"What? Oh, ok. What time can I come through later?"

"Give it a couple of hours."

"Fine."

I rubbed my eyes, which were bloodshot and as dry as a barren desert surface, and checked my pockets to make sure I didn't leave anything behind. It was an act in futility; both of us knew the only thing I had of importance were my car keys. At the time I didn't have a wallet because I had no identification, it was easier that way when you were doing the things I was doing, or cell phone because my world had been squeezed down to my immediate family and my drug dealer's.

The last clear memory I had of that night was on the drive home. I was in the left lane of the Saw Mill Parkway and I was beginning to doze off. Despite smoking enough crack to stay up for another few days the last thing I did before leaving was a full bag of dope. I was woken by a grinding noise. Sparks were

flying in every direction. I had been riding up against the concrete partition. I swerved to the right and almost clipped a car passing me in the other lane. It was almost four; I had lost track of an hour.

When I opened my eyes next I was in the bed of a hospital. Three pairs of eyes were staring in my direction. A nurse, a doctor with a clipboard in one hand and a large, full folder in the other, and my father whose hands were trembling and eyes were watery.

“Son, do you know where you are?”

“I’m assuming the hospital.”

Nobody laughed, not even a chuckle.

“You’re at Phelps Memorial. What can you tell me about last night?”

“Not much, it’s all kind of foggy.”

This was a blatant lie. I didn’t think my father needed to hear the details of my debauchery.

“Well you’re lucky to be alive. You had a serious seizure at your home early this morning.”

I smiled to myself, proud that I had made it home without killing myself or someone else. The doctor continued.

“You almost bit right through your tongue and swallowed it. You’re lucky that your grandfather was home or else you would’ve died. Your heart rate was hovering around 200 beats per minute and your blood pressure was 210 over 140.”

“Is that bad?”

“It’s lethal. Is this the first time you have used drugs?”

I looked to my father who had finally broken down and was openly weeping. He looked away and stared out the window towards the Hudson.

“No.”

“Very well then. That’s what I thought. You had extremely high levels of cocaine, heroin, Xanax and methamphetamine, as well as smaller amounts of marijuana and alcohol.”

“Ok.”

“Well, what I’m getting at son is we’d like to keep you for observation.”

“For how long?”

“Well, you’ll need to stay for the night. But I’ve been talking with your father and we feel it’s best if you begin to seriously consider detox. I would recommend checking into one right away.”

He shut the folder and patted me reassuringly on the shoulder as if everything would be just fine and he would somehow be doing the time with me.

I had been through this routine before. Actually it had grown old and it was the last thing I needed to hear after just finding out that I almost died, but I knew if I spoke up it would only prolong the whole ordeal.

I didn't have the energy to fight him or my father on this one. Previously I had put up fights, made proclamations of this being my final time using. That day was different. As the grayness from outside descended upon the room I felt an overwhelming sense of tiredness. They say that you'll know when you've had enough of abusing drugs, that when you've reached you're bottom you'll know. I guess they were right, but at the moment I had no idea. I just needed a break from life.

I knew that I needed to take this seriously. I had just turned 21 and already my life was a complete wreck. If they had a Hall of Fame for drug addicts I'd have been a unanimous first ballot vote. My stats were impeccable. One heart attack, two seizures, three arrests, six psychiatric hospital stays, seven detox visits and eight rehab stints. I had racked up enough frequent flyer miles from trotting around to all the prestigious and expensive institutions across the country that I should've earned a free stay for my next rehab. But by this time I was wise enough to realize that nothing about the substance abuse community was for free.

I refused to go to the detox/rehab downstairs. I had already been there a few years back and hated it. After all, I thought it was kind of weird to stay in the same hospital that I had been born, went to detox, and been rushed to the Emergency Room countless times. I didn't want to complete the cycle by staying for rehab but I knew that if I didn't do something I would come full circle and end up dying in this hospital eventually. I needed something new, somewhere far away so that I could just escape for a while and leave the pile of shit that I had created as my life back home. After a nap and more tests of my vital signs my father came back with a pack of brochures. We decided on a place down south. It was in Florida. I was lured in by the glossy cover showing sunny skies and clear blue waters. My father was attracted by its reputation for helping addicts for more than thirty years.

I was on a plane within 24 hours. For the two-hour flight the other passengers around me were looking at me like I was a terrorist. Sweating through my t-shirt, hands shaking, hair wild from not combing it or cutting it in over two months, a beard of more than two weeks and haven't showered in more than week even caused the stewardesses to hesitate when giving out their complimentary fake smiles to everyone on board while passing by me.

The rest of the trip, and the ensuing next week went by in a fog of heavy doses of strong anti-

psychotics, sleeping pills, and methadone. When I finally stumbled out of my blind stupor and regained some sense of normalcy I was left with the biggest threat to my sobriety: idle time. I was safe for the next eight weeks but once back home I knew that chain smoking two packs of cigarettes a day wasn't going to be enough to replace the void left by drugs.

Throwing up my feelings on a daily basis in front of a roomful of strangers wasn't as tough as the mourning of my one true lover. In a way I was going through the worst breakup imaginable. Unlike any of my other previous girlfriends this one wasn't judgmental, annoying, or fleeting. She stayed with me no matter what. I had her to help to celebrate the good times and slept with her to deal with the depressing times. Crack and heroin never let me down. As long as I had money my relationship remained strong. It actually grew in intensity as each day passed. Sure there were unhealthy aspects to our affair, namely the co-dependency issues, but like any good lover, it took quite a long time to get used to living without her. Everywhere I turned something reminded of her. Everything I did somehow came back to an idle memory of her. That is until the day I did something that made me forget, at least temporarily, about her. For the first time in my life I voluntarily opened a book. It was assigned as homework, it wasn't read to me at night. This was all my doing. It was, in all honesty, an accident. Something to pass the time. By the time I had finished reading I realized that it had been four hours since my last fleeting thought of her. Nothing had quenched my desire quite like this had. No amount of prayers did what reading did for me. No amount of meetings or sessions with my therapist helped me the way the words on those pages did.

That night, while awake in bed, I had another crazy thought. If I got so much pleasure from reading a book how would I feel if I tried writing one of my own? The answers were boundless and the possibilities seemed intriguing. I stayed up the rest of the night writing. There was no rhyme or reason to the words but it felt good putting them on paper. At the time I thought that I was writing the next great American masterpiece. All of my thoughts would surely be thought of as inspiring and beautiful.

By the end of the eight weeks I had filled ten notebooks and came home ready to put it all together and relish in my brilliance. I read on the internet that the best way to critique ones own work was to put it aside for a while and then come back to it with a pair of fresh eyes. That's just what I did. I tried to acclimate myself back into society. Well, that was the plan at least. Instead I spent my days sitting in Barnes and Noble reading books that I had no intention of buying and drinking copious amounts of overpriced Starbucks coffee. At night I sedated myself with my prescription sleeping pills and slept for twelve hours at a time. It wasn't exactly living life to the fullest, but I was clean and out of trouble and relatively happy.

A few months later I came back to my magnum opus. I was anxious to read it. Halfway through I had to put it down out of frustration. It was horrible. An actual waste of good paper. It was as if I took every thought I had ever had and put it down on paper in no thoughtful order. I threw the notebooks into a drawer and promised never to show them to anyone.

As much as I tried to get the image of those notebooks out of my head I couldn't. They stayed with me like an itchy STD from a one-night stand. I used it as fuel in the coming months. I began to learn from it. But most importantly, I stayed clean and out of trouble because of it.

Every waking hour for the next six months I spent writing at home. Anything from short stories to longer works. There was no goal of publishing any of them or even letting my friends or family look at them. I wrote simply because I couldn't not write. I replaced one addiction with a new one. This addiction was far less expensive. It still had one serious drawback though. No matter how much I worked on something or how long I labored on an individual piece of work I could never seem to get it right. Like trying to achieve that elusive perfect high that would somehow last forever, I couldn't seem to create the perfect story. But I continued and found solace in the consistency of it all.

Looking back at it now makes me laugh. I had no clue what I was doing. Hadn't taken any classes, had no formal training. Just hard work and a desire to write.

Over the past few years my hobby has turned into an addiction. One that consumes me and dictates most of my life. Finding the perfect word to complete a sentence is just as fulfilling as the rush I used to get when taking a full vial of rock to the head. Inserting a beautiful sentence to complete a paragraph is equal to finding a dealer that sells the biggest bags of heroin. Actually, more so because now my work is forever. It's not going to go anywhere. I'll always have it. In a world full of change I know that I'll always have writing. It won't deny me if I don't have any money. It won't cause me to steal or lie for it. It won't (hopefully) give me a heart attack. It's funny how my day is still full of routine just like when I was using. I guess I'm a creature of habit. Instead of waking up and figuring out a way to get money and a ride to the city for my next high, now I wake to the worry of not being able to write that day. I still feel as if I'm punching in my time card and doing grunt work.

That elusive perfect story is always within reach, just around the corner, much like my next high used to be, but this time around I feel that the perfect story is actually attainable.

© 2011, Patrick Trotti