

FAILURE AND SUCCESS

I WAS A COMPLETE FAILURE AS A DRUG ADDICT. WHEN I hear people come into the rooms and share these long drawn-out sagas of addiction to this chemical or that, I'm mystified. I couldn't drink more than four beers before I was desperately searching for someone—anyone—to take me home. Martinis and margaritas were worse: Two or three and I would be collapsed in your lap, pawing at your crotch whether you wanted me there or not. A few tokes of pot and, after a fit of giggling or whoring, I would be passed out, begging off dinner or the guests or my date even, so I could just *lie down*.

Ecstasy was just despondency for me—I had maybe one good trip in my life, otherwise it made me deeply paranoid and depressed. Ketamine sent me into frightening out-of-body nightmares at least every other time I did it. Cocaine was the worst disaster of all. I remember the first night I did it: I prowled the village like a haggard hunter—full of myself but

totally hopeless at the same time—until I ended up at some sleazy club in a subbasement. I went home at dawn still unable to sleep, thinking, *I cannot do this again*, and, *Where can I get some more?* Now that club is a shi-shi restaurant and I'm sober over ten years. Things change.

The first time someone offered me crack I was so clueless I tried to shove the pipe in my nose. There was nothing cool or sophisticated about me in pursuit of a high. The first time I did crystal I found myself flat on my face begging a totally bored, almost robotic stranger to have sex with me. Within a week I'd come down with a bad case of shingles (this was before staph infections, but the shingles was bad enough); by the end of a month I was searching desperately to find some more, to find some guy who would do more with me—shingles be damned.

You hear a lot about orgies. I didn't do too many orgies. I am too self-centered for an orgy. I found guys on the phone lines or god-knows-where whom I could take hostage for a weekend at a time. Guys I could get drugs from, guys who wanted someone for twenty-four hours. There were a few really dysfunctional couples I used. There was a very troubled hustler, P. If he showed up on Friday night without crystal, I'd slyly suggest he go find some—usually by turning a trick or two. When he came in at three or four and woke me from my “nap,” I'd say, “Oh honey, you didn't have to...” But believe me, *he had to*. The drug dealer who would give me crack called it “rock.” He had been in AA and labels were important. Q. wanted someone to listen to his song lyrics and hear about his dreams; I just wanted sex. I didn't care if he couldn't keep it up (he smoked a lot of “rock”).

I didn't need much. Just all of your drugs, all of your attention, and all of your time. And you couldn't ask me to give anything back. That was also part of the deal. I had the same relationship with work. I came to the city to be an actor; I'd been the lead in all the plays in school and I think I assumed it would be easy to step into edgy roles on Broadway. When a few years went by and I still hadn't been discovered, I devoted more and more time to a pursuit I had mastered: sex. I wasn't the hottest thing in the world but I was young and smart and that will always get you far in the city.

So I failed as an actor. Who cares? I temped and tutored and spent my nights at various bars. I was focused on what my friend Charlie called Charm School: learning to be a “professional homosexual.” But soon I failed Charm School, too. I tested positive for HIV when I was 26 years

old. Believe me, this particular failure felt like a catastrophe at the time: There was as yet no AIDS cocktail, and besides, I was of the generation that was supposed to know better.

I kind of got my act together, cutting down on my drinking and getting the first full-time job I could find, as a financial editor on Wall Street. (If you know Melville's story "Bartleby Scrivener," where the clerk eventually vanishes into his desk, that will give you an idea.) Bottom line: I had health insurance and life insurance. I was trying to do the right thing. One problem—the money was good. Soon I was doing a share on Fire Island and drinking again and smoking a lot of "medical" marijuana and experimenting with other stuff. What did I have to lose?

My coke/crack/crystal career was relatively short-lived. Maybe three years. Like I said, I was bad at it. I was a classic weekend binger, dragging angrily through my weekday life, working at a job I hated, barely showing up to the gym, to dinners with friends, to therapy, to clean my room; then shutting myself away in some dark room for the weekend with one or two other lonely, angry people and getting as high as possible with whatever you had.

Things began to fall apart around the millennium. I started to unravel, had a harder and harder time getting through Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. I sobbed my way through therapy sessions, saying at the end, "But I'll be fine, I'm just fine, things will be fine," and running off. My shrink offered to check me in to a top dual-diagnosis ward in the city, but I begged off. I was close to suicidal, unable to make it through a few hours without a crying jag—but I had friends coming in from California for the Big Night, so I was going to muscle through.

In the end, though my two best pals had crossed the continent to hang out with me, I passed the millennium with hustler P., alone in my apartment begging for sexual punishment. Once again, failure. Even my kinkiest fantasies were farces: See, P. had his own baggage—he spent the night (the whole weekend) talking and talking and talking, about his family, about his plans, about his regrets. He was the chatty type of twaker. I was punished that weekend, all right. We made a lovely New Year's Eve tableau.

A few months later, I was at last trying something called harm reduction counseling, both in one-on-one sessions and in a group. And it helped a little bit. I was at least talking at length about how I wanted

to stop. But I didn't stop, just yet. A stylist came in for Fashion Week to stay with my roommate (my roommate back then was a "fabulous" person who worked for a leading cosmetics company), and the three of us stayed up every night for days snorting plate after plate of coke. It wasn't crack, it wasn't crystal, so I guess I thought it was harmless—yet at the end of the week I went to my doctor convinced I was having a heart attack. He had me check in to the ER. They kept me overnight, diagnosing cocaine psychosis. It was maybe two weeks before I was back to hanging out with P. and smoking crystal. *The cocaine was the problem...*

In March of that year, I quit my job. Someone I worked with had started talking to me about possibly joining his Internet startup. No official offer, mind you, just some talk—but I marched into my boss's office and quit in a huff. I wasn't thinking clearly by this time. Without a job, I was basically just home at my computer smoking, smoking, smoking. Hour after hour tugging on the pipe. *Who gives a damn?* The last man I partied with finally introduced me to a dealer of my own, after cautioning me that I "was sounding a little bit like a junkie..." And within a week of at long last having my own dealer I was in a hospital. What more evidence do I need of my total ineptitude as a drug addict?

I'd reached that awful point where nothing I understood—sex, crystal, Klonopin, Rolling Rock—could fix me anymore. I couldn't be with people, couldn't be alone, couldn't stop crying, couldn't imagine how it was going to end. One night toward the very end I was masturbating mechanically, staring into a mirror and thinking, *This wasn't supposed to happen to me.*

So I landed in the ER again, but this time it was just the right moment. I surrendered completely one Monday morning. The second I lay down on the hard little hospital bed, my crying stopped, my shaking stopped, and I slept. Within a few hours I had been transferred upstairs to the psych ward. That day was possibly the first successful day of my adult life.

I spent five days there. A very kind counselor, John, handed me the "Big Book" of Alcoholics Anonymous, and said, "Just read the stories..." I had kind of been knocked clear—it really was a spiritual awakening, though I wouldn't understand it as such for many weeks—so I did everything he and the doctors told me. On the third day or so I went to an AA meeting in the ward. A man who had been sober about nine months came in and talked to four of us for half an hour. He was late, and to be honest, his

life sounded like kind of a mess, but there were two things about him that really moved me: He was helpless before alcohol (before drugs), had realized it, and was accepting it and trying to stay sober. And even more moving, he was there. He had come into the hospital despite having a crazy job and all kinds of family problems and given us his time.

From the hospital I went to a rehab in Pennsylvania. I detoxed for one week at one facility, and then spent another two weeks in a halfway house in another town. I felt extremely unique out there. My ego started to rebel a bit—the facility was full of teenage heroin addicts, rural alcoholics, and inner-city crack addicts. I was a goddamned Ivy Leaguer, a professional Manhattan homosexual, rooming with a middle-aged Army NCO named Willy. I knew I had a problem, but in this context, the meetings (we went every night or one came to us) seemed like a clique for ignorant Jesus freaks. I was just at the point of leaving for some fancier place; I was in touch with my folks, and they had offered to spend all of their savings if they had to. I had some outburst or other in group with a counselor who I was sure was homophobic, and Willy told me, “Mark, you are the judgmental one. You are the most judgmental person I’ve ever met.”

That moment I had a core realization: Getting sober was not about anyone else but me. The program was not about anyone else but me. My difficulties in the world (what I would soon learn we called resentments) were not about my parents, my classmates, my lovers, my fellows in the rooms, my sponsors—this was about me. My disease is not even about crystal or alcohol or pot. It’s about my need to say no to challenges or opportunities, to close myself to the universe rather than open up, to run away. I have runningaway disease.

I began mouthing a little prayer to myself at meetings: “Please let me be teachable.” I still do. In the halfway house, my attitude was a lot better, and I began to reach out to all these men and women I had “nothing” in common with, who were reaching out to me. I came to believe my solution might just be spiritual, not medical, as I had assumed. When I was overwhelmed by my first intense cravings—it was my last night there; I was terrified of returning to the city—I made another surrender. There was a thunderstorm raging (seriously). I went out on the smoking porch, got down on my knees and said the Lord’s Prayer. It was the only prayer I could remember, and I said it over and over. And when the storm passed,

my heart was beating normally again and I knew I'd be okay. I'd go to a meeting in the city, I'd find a sponsor, I'd get into an outpatient program... As I lay down to sleep I heard a train whistle far off in the valley. It was like the universe was telling me, "See? You are going somewhere. I told you so."

In other words, I got sober and I started to succeed. I started to treat my runningaway disease by standing still. Standing still, things were a lot less complicated. I could actually do things, take instructions, get better. It was like I had been staring at the world rushing by on a highway and now I was really looking at it. Challenges always seemed to be coming at me too fast, and dreams rushing away behind me. But now I was not flying along anywhere—I was in the world. And it wasn't so scary any more. It was beautiful.

Among the many wonderful things that have happened to me over the last ten years: I went back to acting. It's funny—when you actually show up for auditions, mail things to casting directors, and prepare for your callbacks, you work. Soon I had an agent and was working in regional theater and doing little projects off-off-Broadway. Eventually I landed a lead in big musical out of town. While I was there I met a composer who asked me to write lyrics for him; we've since written three shows, one of which was named "Best Musical" at a festival last year. I've never come close to making the money I earned on Wall Street, but I've actually enjoyed artistic success—nothing off-the-charts, but it's sweet as hell considering how embittered I was back in my using days.

Even sweeter has been the success of my life in recovery. I have had the pleasure of working the Steps with several wonderful men. I've gone on to sponsor a lot guys myself. I've done lots of service, particularly in Crystal Meth Anonymous, which has grown from one meeting in NYC with half a dozen fellows to about thirty meetings with hundreds upon hundreds of recovering tweakers. I'm not "stuck" in the rooms by any stretch—my theater friends are hardly abstemious, and I do a share on Fire Island with a group of "civilians"—but I make sure to prioritize my recovery and do what I can to help other people who are seeking sobriety.

I show up for my family and friends today, and I share my whole life with them, not just glimpses of one compartment or another. I'm a conscientious employee and a caring collaborator. When I screw something up, I promptly apologize and do my best to make it right. I take care of a lovely little shade garden and keep the smartest dog in

Manhattan out of trouble. In my forties, I'm finally learning how to be a boyfriend. I am happy.

It's not all roses and streamers. Understanding at long last what success really means has made those areas where life still beats me up seem more frustrating. I struggle mightily with depression; when I am in one of my chasms, I'm prone to wallow in self-pity and procrastination. My finances are disastrous, going from boom to bust regularly. So for all my newfound confidence and comprehension, I've still got many rows to hoe. Being sober has given me tools to tackle all of my problems and the perspective to believe I will eventually succeed in areas where I'm floundering. But it has also taught me acceptance, and if I am never a superwealthy celebrity that will be okay. It's okay now, right?

It's more than okay, because I'm not running from anything. —*Mark L.*