

ONE OF THESE BOYS WAS NOT LIKE THE OTHERS

FOR AS LONG AS I COULD REMEMBER, I FELT LIKE I WAS from another planet. In Texas in the '60s, boys were supposed to play football, collect guns and be tough in general. That wasn't me. While the other boys were outside on the gridiron or hunting, I was inside reading astronomy books and watching science-fiction movies. History and the arts also interested me, but I learned early on that it was best to keep this to myself. To make a long story very short, I was picked on mercilessly and limped through childhood while doing the best I could to keep my head low and fit in.

When I was 8 or 9 years old, I had a friend whose mother was a nurse (and, we would learn later, a drug addict). I'd often spend the night at his house on weekends. My friend made a sport of raiding his mother's medicine cabinet. He had also gotten his hands on a *Physicians' Desk Reference*. Whenever we found a type of pill that listed "euphoria" as a side effect, we took it. We usually had great fun.

When I reached puberty, I had a growing awareness that somehow my sexuality didn't seem to be quite the same as the other boys. I had finally become interested in football but only because I had become interested in the football players, and apparently for all the wrong reasons. Homosexuality was taboo in those days. I had never even heard the word gay and had no idea that anyone else in the world like me existed.

At 13, I was already experiencing bouts of extreme depression. The fear and loneliness finally became too much, and I attempted suicide three times. These were not half-hearted attempts or thinly veiled cries for help: I wanted to die. I had lost the will to live. There was no joy. I didn't understand how the people around me behaved or related to each other. After my third attempt, my folks decided I needed medical attention. I was placed in a locked psychiatric ward for troubled children. Ironically, this was the first time I felt like I was among people with whom I could relate. It was also here that I met street drugs, which would quickly become a working solution for my problems and be my solace for the next 25 years.

It was just before a group meeting with all the other patients and staff. An older boy asked if I wanted to smoke pot with him. I desperately wanted his approval and to fit in any way I could, so I tried it. I remember looking across the room toward my friend and him looking back at me with a knowing grin. That moment changed my life. It was the first time I had ever felt like I really belonged. We were connected by our shared secret. I was no longer on the outside looking in—I was on the inside—and believed that I had finally arrived.

After another month and several more experiments with alcohol and other drugs, I was released back into the world. But now, I felt different. I had found a solution to my problems.

At 16, I got my first driver's license and quickly discovered a world I never imagined. This was the early '80s, the pinnacle of gay liberation. There was no HIV and no AIDS. The bars were overflowing. At the time, that was all there was to gay life. There were no young peoples' clubs or community centers. I felt at home as soon as I walked into my first dance club. I was working the graveyard shift, so as far as my parents were concerned, it was normal for me to be out all night. As I made my way from bar to bar, I made even more friends and had wonderful adventures. It was a special time in my life, and I would be lying if I said it wasn't great. My grades were

good, my job was fine and my family was grateful that I finally seemed like a happy, well-adjusted young man. I was able to manage my drug use and balance it with my responsibilities. Once again, I could look across a room and see the knowing smiles on my friends' faces.

It wasn't long before I met a cute boy who introduced me to drugs we had never heard of in suburbia: MDA, ethyl chloride, and crystal meth. I remember my first bump of crystal as if it were yesterday. My friends were already at the disco, where I arrived late after work. They were snorting something called "crank." That's what we called crystal back then. Well, it was love at first bump. In an instant, I went from tired and sleepy to energized and excited. Within a couple of hours, I had sniffed all I could get my hands on. Its effects were immediate: happiness, confidence, energy, strength, sexiness and boldness. I could talk to anyone, dance on top of the speakers with my shirt off, and knock back cocktails like they were water. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had found my drug of choice, beginning a love affair that would last for the next twenty-three years.

For the first time, my trademark cautiousness concerning dosage, a holdover from my days with the *Physicians' Desk Reference*, was nowhere to be found. (This would become a pattern that would repeat many years later, almost killing me and completely destroying my life.) That night it just never occurred to me to stop. It felt too good, and I just didn't care. I was up for the next three days. By the end, I was exhausted and succumbed to a cold that quickly turned into strep throat. I was in bed for a week with a high fever. I resolved to be more careful in the future and went straight to the disco as soon as I was back on my feet. None of my friends seemed to care either about the consequences of using crank. We chalked it all up to experience and went right on partying. In a few months, I was doing crystal every day, including at work and during school.

I eventually landed a boyfriend who was a drug dealer, and my weekends consisted of bars and marathon sex parties at his house. Soon even I had to admit that crystal was interfering with my life and that I needed to give it a rest. With minimal effort, I put the drug down and started spending less time going out. I enrolled in college and got a "serious" job that put me on a career path. I would indulge in hard drugs from time to time but knew where to draw the line. Once in a while, I'd have a difficult time getting to work or finishing an assignment, but

I always dragged myself to the office, despite the punishing hangovers.

Then a student at the University of Texas discovered the formula for ecstasy in an old medical journal somewhere and started making and selling it. It was immensely popular from the moment it was introduced. It had the added advantage of not being on the government's list of controlled substances, making it perfectly legal. Yep—there was a period in the '80s when you could buy ecstasy without so much as a glance over your shoulder for the cops. Illegal drugs fell out of fashion—why bother with all the cloak-and-dagger nonsense when you could just walk up to the bar and put a few hits of ecstasy on your credit card?

About this time, AIDS and HIV appeared. The thriving, vibrant gay neighborhood quickly became a quiet place haunted by fear and sadness. Many of the bars and clubs shut down. Fortunately, though, I met a wonderful man during this period who would become my partner for the next seventeen years. As people around us became sick and died, we grew closer and soon moved in together.

Our relationship, which had started in a bar, would always include drugs and alcohol to a great degree. I took pride in announcing that I was “a high-functioning drug addict.” I knew even then that I had a problem. But as long as I could hold it all together, I saw no reason to do anything about it. If I was happy about something, I would get high to celebrate. If I was sad, I'd get high to make myself feel better. If I was tired, I took some speed. If I was nervous, I had a drink. If I was angry or afraid, I took a tranquilizer. I often took drugs in combinations; I called this “choreographing” my drugs. And I almost always had a little of everything on hand, just in case. I lived like this fairly successfully for many years. The occasional missed day of work and the brutal hangovers were necessary evils; I endured them because I didn't know what else to do. “Better living through chemistry” was my motto. It was the only real solution I had ever known.

I moved to New York with my partner when I was in my mid-20s. Crystal was almost impossible to find on the East Coast, so for more than ten years, I only did it once or twice a year. Then, in my mid-30s, life took a sudden turn for the worse. I was diagnosed with cancer. I endured many months of illness—and become more afraid than ever. I did what I knew how to do: drank heavily and partied hard. The stress this put on my relationship was compounded when we unexpectedly lost our apartment. We were forced

to move while I was still very ill. My partner's reaction to the turn of events was to increase his own drinking. Our business suffered, and we started having financial problems. We began having drunken arguments right out of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff?* Fearing for my sanity and his safety, I finally decided it would be best to end our relationship. I left in a hurry, letting him keep the apartment, the business, and most of our friends. I knew only that I needed to make a change. I wouldn't realize for several more years that the change I really needed was to gain some clarity and serenity.

About this time, I met someone who knew where I could get my old favorite, crystal meth. It was the miracle I needed. I was single for the first time in many years and desperately in need of friends. I was lonely, scared, working at a new job that was going badly. I really thought crystal was coming to my rescue. I felt sexy and happy again. With one little bump, my problems seemed far away. At first, I'd do crystal heavily on Friday nights and spend Saturday night and Sunday recovering. Then I began partying until Saturday night and would have to scurry to pull myself back together by Monday. Then one weekend, I just couldn't stop and kept right on going until Sunday. The hangover that Monday was so dreadful I decided to do a little bump just to get to work. That little bump worked so well, within a few weeks I was bumping every morning. I was doing crystal the way many people drink coffee. Sometimes I *did* put it in my coffee. I didn't think this was a problem because I was doing very small doses and always making it to work, plus I could work longer and harder than any of my coworkers.

Just when I thought things might be turning around, tragedy struck: Two planes hit the World Trade Center. It's hard to explain what New York was like then—so many people walking around in dazes, the scores of impromptu streetside memorials for the dead, millions of strangers fused as one by grief. It seemed like nothing, not even the city in which I lived, was stable anymore. Shortly after, I lost my best friend of twenty-five years to AIDS. He had been living with the disease for many years, but the end came suddenly. I returned to Texas to see him one last time, and he died the day after I arrived. His mother told me that he'd held on to say good-bye to me. Something inside of me just switched off: My only thought was to get back to New York and do crystal. I took the next plane out, skipping the funeral. I had lost my health, my marriage, my business, my home, and my best friend. My whole world had collapsed.

Despite all of this, I still managed to keep up the party. Drugs were the only reliable thing I had left. I had self-medicated well enough to weather just about anything life threw at me. But I had never faced so much difficulty all at once. I had nothing left to lose; retreating into a drug-fueled orgy would provide my only relief. Crystal turned into a daily habit. Weekends became extreme. Crystal meth was my new best friend, always there when I needed it, not arguing with me or criticizing. It always made me feel better. It always kept me from being tired, lonely and scared. It made me happy, powerful, handsome, and smart. At least that was how it seemed at the time.

What I did not understand was that I was rushing headlong into a situation way over my head. I began making irrational decisions and rationalizing the most insane behaviors. I quit my job with the utmost assurance that I'd find another one in a few weeks. I decided I just needed a little time off to relax and collect myself. A "few weeks" turned into six months of constant drug use and a full retreat from reality. I was just having a little fun and blowing off some steam, I rationalized. Crystal had robbed me of the ability to see the damage I was doing to myself and those around me. I would party until I physically couldn't get up to go get more. I started shooting up and staying up for five or six days at a time. I stopped taking even the most basic care of myself. I lived only to do more crystal.

I couldn't be bothered to spend time with anyone who wasn't using the way I was. I avoided anyone who wasn't high and shunned any activities that didn't include large quantities of drugs. I got high instead of going to the gym, and forgot I liked working out. I got high instead of going to the movies, and forgot I liked movies. I eventually forgot I liked anything in the world other than crystal meth. After several months of this insanity, I came to see that I was getting out of control. I resolved that the time had come to put down crystal and get back to life. I'd done this before with other drugs, even crystal meth. Much to my surprise, however, this time was different. I couldn't get myself to quit for more than a few days at a stretch, and once I started again, I would keep using until I fell down. I promised myself over and over that each time I picked up would be the last. But all it took was the flimsiest of excuses to go back out. I would be having a really good day, or a really bad day. I'd find a stash I had forgotten about. Or it just happened to be Thursday, and I couldn't think of anything else

to do. There was always someone who was willing to give me a bump or two, it seemed. And once I'd done a bump, all bets were off. I would take as much as I could get and keep going until I fell down again.

Eventually I was unable even to bathe or get dressed. I was unable to leave the house to run basic errands. I became a complete emotional disaster. When I got high, I was overwhelmed by the euphoria and the ever-deepening depressions that followed. The crashes became worse and worse, and I wasn't giving myself enough time to recover between binges. I'd run out of money and was sinking into debt. I began experiencing bouts of suicidal depression. I often found myself feeling hopeless, lonely, scared, and confused. It's ironic: Drugs returned me to the exact place from which they had rescued me so many years earlier. Out of sheer desperation, I went back to the job I had left six months earlier, and it went well until I had a three-day weekend and decided I could do just one hit. Before I knew it, I had called in sick for an entire week—a week during which I didn't eat or sleep.

I started to panic. I didn't mind that I couldn't stop injecting crystal, and I didn't mind that my mental and physical health was failing. I didn't even mind that all of my "friends" scattered the moment I ran out of money. The only thing that bothered me was the thought of losing my job, running out of money again and being unable to get more drugs. That is how skewed my values and priorities had become. Luckily while all of this was happening, my ex was sobering up in a Twelve Step fellowship. I saw him one day, and he looked so good. He seemed happy and healthy. His cheeks were rosy, his eyes bright. He was clearly in a great mood, and it looked like something new and powerful was working in his life. I asked him about it, and he suggested I check out Crystal Meth Anonymous. I was desperate. I was in so much pain, so scared and so confused, that I was willing to try anything. Even the prospect of a dismal life of boring sobriety seemed better than the nightmare my life had become. So several days later, I wandered into my first meeting.

NOW, THIS IS THE PLACE WHERE I WOULD LIKE TO TELL you my life turned around. That from that day forward, my life was a shining example of the power of recovery and that I never used drugs again. That peace and serenity fell from the sky and landed on me at that moment. That is not my story. I came into the program with a great deal of willingness,

and I did almost everything that was suggested. But somehow, I couldn't seem to gain traction in sobriety. I am not sure if it was just the residual inertia of my downward spiral or an inability to comprehend the gravity of my situation, but I continued to slide downhill. I was still in party mode, even though I wasn't using drugs anymore; it all seemed like a big joke. I relapsed at sixty days and again forty-five days after that. The second relapse would prove to be the worst binge of my life, and I hope it will remain my bottom. I had allowed a resentment to get out of control. I hadn't done my personal inventory yet, and I just didn't have the strength that only conscious contact with a Higher Power can provide. Before I picked up, I told myself that this time would be different. I just needed to blow off some steam... As usual, once I got started, I couldn't stop. I was up for 10 days straight. I didn't eat, I didn't go to work.

By now my family understood what was going on and had rightly assumed I was out using somewhere. I cannot imagine how difficult those days must have been for them. When I finally came to, after sleeping for three days, an intervention had been arranged. Rehabs had been researched, and my employer had been informed I would not be returning to work. I was destitute. I couldn't pay my rent. My phone had been turned off, my health insurance canceled. My credit cards were maxed. I had nothing left in the bank. I was completely empty on the inside—and now also on the outside again. There was no more happiness; the only prospects were bleak. The party was over, and I'd hit bottom with a resounding *thud!* I finally accepted that I was done. I was at a turning point: I could continue to use only if I was willing to become a dealer or an escort—I couldn't manage a regular job. Or I could surrender and devote myself to recovery. I decided on the latter because that was the only option that held any hope. I knew exactly where using was taking me. And it would only get worse.

I abandoned myself to the care of a Higher Power and to Crystal Meth Anonymous and decided to pursue sobriety with the same vigor and determination I'd shown drugs. I was shaky, and my mind was foggy. I stopped trying to figure things out or make major decisions. I took every suggestion that was offered. I got a sponsor and went to a good rehab. I went to a meeting every day. I went to fellowship every day. I did Step work every day. I made phone calls every day. I showed up early and stayed late. I did service whenever I could. I tried to help other people in recovery

in any way possible. In short, I shut up and followed the advice I was given to the very best of my ability. Someone once told me that you can't begin rebuilding until the fighting stops. That really resonated with me, and I stopped fighting. I was tired of constantly struggling to have it all my way and creating nothing more than a bigger and bigger mess. Instead, I looked for people who had what I wanted in recovery, people who seemed happy, joyous and free. I looked for people who were having fun, helping others and being responsible. As I sought out these people, I told them my problems, asked them questions and listened to their answers. At first, every day was a struggle. Getting dressed and out of the house still seemed overwhelming. Sharing my feelings and practicing rigorous honesty made me want to scream. And of course, there were the horrible cravings. Sometimes I thought that if I didn't get high I was going to explode. I would become so angry and afraid that I would feel like I couldn't go on.

But I kept praying to a God of my understanding, and somehow I did go on. I went on doing what I was told to do. In the first six months, I started to get better. My life was still a shambles—I often didn't know where my next meal was coming from—but somehow I felt better. Then one day, I couldn't take it anymore. I was angry about something that I couldn't let go of, and I picked up one last time. This time was different, though. I wasn't having a good time. All the work I had done had had an effect on me. I could see my drug use for what it really was—an insane attempt to make the world the way I wanted it to be and a futile attempt to hide from reality. But self-knowledge didn't help me put the drugs down. Again, once I had started, I couldn't stop.

I watched my feet as I walked to a party. I knew I should turn back. It was like watching someone else in a movie. I was powerless. My addiction was truly bigger than I was. A week later, I found myself at a party in a high-rise. I didn't want to be there but couldn't bring myself to leave. The host had the drugs I couldn't live without. I felt worthless and powerless. Then something happened that seemed no less than a miracle. I stepped out on the terrace to smoke a cigarette. I guess I just needed to get away for a minute and catch a breath of fresh air. It was early evening, and a storm was moving in. The clouds rolled low over the skyscrapers. The scene was beautiful as the city's lights reflected off the clouds. I felt like the most interesting, exciting city in the world was just waiting for me to come and celebrate all the wonder of being alive.

That's when a crushing series of thoughts set in. *I can't be a part of that city. I am a prisoner to the drug that was once my best friend. There is no way I can leave this party and the drugs I so desperately need. And even if I could leave, I am so tweaked and messy I couldn't navigate the streets.* Then it happened. A sense of calm descended upon me, seemingly out of nowhere.

I heard a quiet voice say, "You don't have to do this anymore." Somehow, I knew it was true. Something set me free in that instant. I don't know where that voice came from, and I really don't care. All I know is that I immediately turned around and went back into the apartment. I told the host I was leaving, put on my clothes, walked straight out, and never looked back.

That was the last time I used crystal. The obsession to get high was lifted that night. Again, I don't know how or why. All I know is that something bigger than me, and something bigger than my addiction to crystal, intervened.

That was almost three years ago, and so much has changed since then. But the changes in my circumstances are not what are most important to me. What matters most is what has changed in me. I now have a source of strength I never knew. I now have a Higher Power I choose to call God. Somewhere in the process of doing the Steps, I made conscious contact with the God of my understanding. This new source of strength is vastly superior to relying on drugs to take care of me. God never runs out. God never spills or gets lost. God never forgets to answer the phone or asks for more money than I have. God never gives me a hangover or makes me so sick and confused that I can't function.

Since I got sober, I have been faced with many challenges in a short period of time. I have dealt with catastrophic illness, surgeries, financial ruin, problems with the IRS and other wreckage from my reckless past. Life has not been easy—but has been vastly better. Now I have the tools and strength to handle, with grace and dignity, whatever life brings my way. The dullness of sobriety—to which I thought I was being sentenced—never materialized. As I have changed and grown so has my life. It keeps getting bigger all the time, and I find that now I am free to pursue all the other things in life that interest me. There are so many more possibilities now. And there is so much happiness and excitement that sometimes

I can hardly believe that this is my life. There are moments I can now describe only as joyful.

I can honestly say I am grateful to be a drug addict. Without this disease, I would never have found the deeply satisfying life I now have, or be a part of one of the most amazing communities in the world. I know a sense of connectedness I never imagined possible. I have a circle of close friends who don't care if I have money or prestige. They care about me and are willing to help in any way they can. I can sit alone and be at ease. I have experienced the kind of happiness that only comes from helping others. I have had the privilege of watching others get better alongside me. These are gifts I never dreamed of when I came into recovery. They are gifts that fill me with gratitude and serenity. I realize these are the only things I ever really wanted in the first place. —*Rich M.*