

Belly Flopper

Dealing with restless leg syndrome is a lot like a failed attempt at reincarnation.

By that I mean it feels like you might have been a tap dancer in a past life and not until that very moment did those ancestral skills decide to peak into your waking consciousness in an attempt to force you into learning some kind of alien boogie-woogie against your will.

Almost like a dog being scratched in that one perfect spot, only instead of being transported to a state of pure leg-shaking bliss, your legs remain tortured in the perpetual cycle of stomping invisible grapes into ghost wine. Your body's last desperate attempt to find the color in the now static rainbow, never remembering that the gold at the end of the arch is full of dog shit chocolate. Every. Single. Time.

Thus, is the plight of the opiate addict.

Another night, another laundry list of excuses as to why your current sweaty situation "isn't a big deal" and that "you've got it under control". Never mind the voice in the back of your brain basket screaming over the howls of withdrawal, "*Are you serious?? Again?? How many times are you going to do this?? Stop already! Just fucking stop!*"

That voice doesn't know what it's talking about anyway. You *got* this. You can stop any time you want. It's been done. And it will be done again. Right here, right- ...well... not right now, but definitely right then. Whenever then is. Probably later.

It's impressive what the mind of an addict can accomplish. Besides completing the daily mission of satiating the drug bug, skills include the sniffing out and procuring of misplaced dollar bills and forgotten couch coins that elude even the luckiest of leprechauns, convincing

your parents that although you seem, by all outside sources, to be a fully grown and functional adult, you still just need help with rent one more time because your annoying boss, or pig-pen roommate, or lazy landlord, nosey neighbor, maniacal mailman, trashman, gas station cashier, the waiter at dinner, the clingy girlfriend, or baby crying in the movie theater has somehow prevented you from holding on to enough cash needed to fork over at the end of the month, and most importantly, the ever present and finely tuned talent of remaining in denial of all previous excuses. I mean, come on. It's not like you could help your car breaking down, or the utilities being higher than normal. You would have needed the help regardless of all that extra money tumbling down the habit hole.

At that point in time, right in the middle of "this shit just feels good" and "I need good shit just to feel", I was still under the delusion that since I hadn't ever taken the literal "plunge" with intravenous needle play, I was pretty much free and clear to be young and dumb for a while as long as I had lines I wouldn't cross. But, there I was, watching authentic youthful experience flying by me from the inside of a self-made time machine, sailing in between the grey lines of reality in a blue box similar to the Doctor's TARDIS, only instead of a police box, mine looked like a porta potty. Should I even say "FARTIS"? Too much? Either way, no matter how you decide to cut that cheese, it's always going to stink in there.

But alright, let's rewind a bit. By all accounts, I seem now to be more or less stable in thought as well as action. So how, you might ask, does one such as myself find himself in the position I was in. And, more importantly, how does one who was so close to rock bottom that they can smell the sulfur return victorious with a shit-eating grin?

Well, let's get one thing straight. My path was never one to go down as the "Hardest Recovery Story Ever Recorded", and I'm certainly not here to claim that if I can do it, then so

can anyone. There's a lot of perpetually lost soul seekers out there, and I just happen to be one of the lucky few that saw the light at the end of the tunnel fading to black and made a run for it when I saw the opportunity. My heart goes out to those still in the grey matter haze as well as those making an active effort to alleviate the demon monkey on their back.

I may have been born on the west coast, but I was raised in the endless suburban tedium of Northeast Ohio. In a land of the average. Where if the traditional structure of following the Baby Boomers home-owning dream doesn't get you, the temptations of wannabe exotic means of escape just might. I climbed the latter. I also soon found that there's nothing exotic about nodding off with a lit cigarette in your hand just to burn yet another hole in your Grandma's old blanket.

Let's take a detour from these abstract explanations to lay some solid concrete stepping stones. Like I said before, Ohio can be a desert of boredom without the right distractions. So, what better for your average weed-smoking, acid-testing 20-year-old than a new chemical to kill the hours of the day? For my friends and I, it started with a thing we just called "patch". Simply put, a "patch" is exactly what the name entails. It's a pain medication taken through a transdermal patch. The particular medication laced into this sticky square was a chemical called Fentanyl, a drug claimed to be 50 times stronger than heroin. A drug that is currently making its claim to fame by killing more people than heroin ever did. 64,000 last year apparently. Yes, I had to google that.

The reason this happens is that drug dealers cut it into their heroin. They don't tell their customers who just think it's really good dope, user proceeds to shoot up the regular amount, and bam, hot and ready corpse in seconds! I don't mean to make light this disturbing fact, but the body count in Ohio was reaching such staggering highs that hearing about 20 people overdosing

on any given day started to become the horrifying norm and using a dash of humor during terrible times makes them almost bearable.

These heinous statistics have all happened somewhat recently, towards the end of my relationship with that life, so let's go back. A little over seven years ago, Fentanyl was still a foreign name to any of us. To us, we just had a friend who had a friend who happened to be in a wheelchair and happened to be prescribed these weird patches for his back pain. 40 milligram patches that are meant to be stuck to the upper arm and will slowly disperse the pain relief over the course of a few days so extend the effects. I'm sure it's a real wonder for those in actual need of such a thing. But the likes of us? We used scissors to cut small pieces off and chewed our way into gooey oblivion. 40 milligrams for 40 dollars. Cut a 5-10mg piece off and chew. Half hour later you're having the best day you've had all year. That could last you all week, not a bad deal at all. We'd get these patches about once a month. So, for maybe 5 days every month we got our little heaven-sent squares to sail through the week like it was a translucent magic carpet.

The progression of the frequency of use is pretty self-explanatory. One patch a month for a few days turns to two patches, turns to three, turns to taking as many as you can stock up on before your friends have a chance to get their greedy hands on them. By then, of course, you're chewing on that gluey gum every day like you're the spokesperson for Big League Chew. Until, of course, the day your friend's friend moves away. No more. Boom, done. Shit. What do we do now? These withdrawals kind of suck, but a few Vicodin can fix that. Things seem to be going back to normal, but what's that I hear? A knock at the door? Who could it be? The police? My mother? The disembodied specter of Christmas future? Another slow-mo pot zombie, creeping ever closer with an empty sandwich baggie mumbling, "Straaaains, straaaaaains"?

Not surprisingly, none of the above.

In fact, behind door number four was a soon-to-be superpower; a little drug, discontinued in it's cheap, crushable, and addict-birthing form due to degenerates like me abusing the absolute shit out of them, called Opana. A tiny, yellow, stop sign-shaped pill that did anything but make me slow down, let alone stop. Hated to the heavens and hailed by the heathens. At one point actually quoted as being "The Cadillac of Pain Killers" and still to this day I can't help but look back on those days with a reluctant fondness. If ever there was a parallel between video games and reality, then this was indeed synthesized Super Mario star power. Not the kind of Hulk-like invincibility I've heard comes as a bonus feature with your basic Meth-head starter pack, but more a kind of interdimensional Zen, freeing you of the trivialities of the material world and giving you a glimpse into the Buddha's backyard.

All the while, deep down, knowing that this beast cannot be tamed. Knowing that what was once your furry little monster buddy has grown into a rideable snarling battle-hog. As much weapon as it is companion. It will of course, soon enough, evolve again into the muti-headed shadow Hydra it was always destined to be. And at that point, well, ask any addict/amateur knight out there how hard it is to keep track of how many more heads have sprouted after they cut off the manageable ones.

That wasn't yet on my waking brain, though, only the pure joy and exhilaration of cruising on a seemingly endless rainbow road. Like dropping in on a halfpipe, downers always launched me up. Most people take downers to sink into couch cushions and melt into carpet fibers, and I'm definitely not saying I never dissolved into a drug puddle myself, it happened almost every night, but the majority of the high, from first hit to last, was spent feeling like what I assumed actual productive people felt like.

One snort and all of a sudden all those chores and errands and hobbies you've been putting off all sound equally fantastic and totally doable. Most of them actually got done. One line, clean the house, two lines, day driving to all the stores you need to stop at, three lines, finally learned how to play that one song on guitar and even put some words on paper in a clever order. What a miracle! It's almost as if I actually needed to be diagnosed with laziness, prescribed these pills, and let this god-like chemical turn me into a real person. Who knew it could be so easy?

I clearly didn't understand what was happening.

My habit was growing as my life was becoming background noise. There were multiple attempts at quitting, but there was always going to be something in the way, like an endless track of speedbumps all swollen with excuses.

Naturally, the third and final step would obviously be dipping my finger into the proverbial pot of Honey with a capital "H". After everything I had previously succumbed to, trying another powdered line of some foreign substance didn't seem like that big a deal, regardless of the fact that this particular line consisted of that famous synthesized opiate that has groupies from here to the gates of Hell, our good friend: Heroin.

Nasally consumed with as much ease as everything else, along with freebasing it directly off of foil sheets, turning our lungs as black as the tar we were smoking. I honestly wasn't impressed at first. It wasn't even as good as half of the other prescriptions I had tried. Oh boy, big whoop this boring shit was. And because that first time had been relatively disappointing, I didn't see a reason I should stop doing something that wasn't even as detrimental as my previous indulgences. So, I wouldn't think about the fact that I had always "known" I would never try

heroin. I wouldn't think about my starving bank account or the black soot smudges on my skin and bedroom walls from constantly handling torched pieces of Reynolds Wrap. It wasn't even that great, so it's no surprise I didn't notice the baby dragon that was once in my pocket asking for morsels had grown into an untamable behemoth. I had a leash on it and it would never hurt me. At least that's what any pet owner tells themselves.

With that being said, there's no point in reviewing the years after this first encounter that brought me to where I ended up, because it's all full of the same "We don't have drugs, let's go find drugs." mentality. It was heroin, and we wanted more heroin. Always. It's only natural for that record to break, so I'll spare you the next few years of repetitive bullshit and skip to the consolidation and cashing out of my last remaining personality poker chips.

I find myself years later atop an overused and misshapen mattress inside a local detox clinic. In my mind I decided to go there voluntarily, but if it hadn't been for my mother finding a small bottle of fake urine I had hidden in case she decided to drug test me and kick me out of the house, and her forcing me to reserve a bed at said clinic, I most likely would have just kept the charade going for as long as my delusions let me.

Laying on the sweat-stained mattress, some kind of snot-ridden mountain beast is snoring in the corner of my room. My stomach lurches from the onslaught of free clinic bologna sandwiches and cartons of "Orange Drink" as I endure the monologue of snores from one of my group members at three in the morning. My five other roommates compete with me in a Magic Eye competition as we all quietly stare at the patterns on the ceiling, waiting for the spackling to take shape into something that resembles a better life. All unable to sleep as we each try to kick our individual addictions. At clinics such as this, the point is to get clean, so they force you to

attend meeting after meeting, listening to various drug and alcohol abusers tell their recovery stories like it's the sermon to their lives. Honestly, in most cases, it is.

I have the upmost respect for those in programs and those who lead them, but it just never really resonated with me. The sound of the dying rhino in my room, the smell of junkie detox sweat, and the creaking of old metal bedframes, rickety from years of bearing countless shaking nights of withdrawals was enough for me. It put into perspective the kind of life I was heading for and I knew I would never go back to a place like that.

I haven't since and I don't plan to.

Now, I know that this story doesn't follow the same formula as a lot of addict's stories do. I'm not celebrating a specific number of days since my last line and I'm not actively in a recovery program. I'm not here to preach or to advocate the war on a person's freedom to do what they please. I only talk of a life that has gone from fucked to relatively fantastic since I made the decision to keep that venom out of my life. I know that I've been as lucky as a privileged addict can be and I'm fully aware of that. I've never looked for pity or sympathy or to compare my story to with someone who had it worse. I'm just a guy recapping the shitty decisions of younger self.

All these years later and I'm still crawling out of the cocoon, stitching up wings that should have fully developed a long time ago. Still dealing with the age-old disappointment of screaming into the void only to hear the harsh reality of silence projected back. This isn't a tale of recovery from the depths of a hellish addiction. It's a colorful example of someone who's been through the amateur's version of a personal drug war and fortunately made it out with only a few scratches.

But, it was also that mentality kept me in the cycle for so long. I felt that since I hadn't done any of the things you would normally see a desperate addict doing on, say, the show *Intervention*, I was still a "responsible" drug user. It was a scripture I had memorized from the religion of a false God.

In my mind I was junkie-justified by the fact that I had never taken that final fateful step into the communion hall to make the unholy union of suckling the divine teat of Mother Needle. But still, the nosedive into exploiting the outsourced workers at the ol'factory was a beautiful dive indeed, one could say swan-like.

Although, one wouldn't, because as any active participant could tell you, the belly flop is the only inevitable outcome of risking such a jump off that tar pool high dive.