

Getting Sober

June 18, 2018

Editor's Note: *Today's op-ed comes from a woman who describes her experiences with addiction, trauma, coming out, and a supportive same-sex relationship. We thank her for generously sharing her story with our readers. We hope that readers with the same kinds of experiences will feel less alone after reading this piece. This piece includes explicit descriptions of sexual violence, as well as drug use and its psychoactive effects, and readers who might struggle with cravings, especially for opioids or stimulants, should use their best judgement in reading this story.*

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I'm laying next to Lannie. She's sleeping. I'm gleaming off a smallish handful of oxycontin I chewed up after dinner. I can tell I'm too high. Is this what overdosing feels like. I'm smothered with velvet steam rollers. Alone in the dark. We're just back from Morocco. Her dad grew up there. I'd never seen the world so much as I have with her. I'm counting my breaths to see if my breathing is slowing. I lose count every time; sometimes I forget I'm counting.

I'm laying next to Lannie and I'm in good spirits; my mind wanders to the past. Just after my 12th birthday, my brother's friend drugged me and did his unbearable deed. It was mine to carry as a child, in grief and in sadness, and now the pills let me shrug it off for a moment. My father was a beast that walked among us. He owned me like I was an animal. *Shrugs* My half brother forced me in a stairwell at a family wedding. *Shrugs* This is a Tuesday for me.

Lannie wakes up at 5am the next morning and is out by 5:35. I rouse by 7:30 and take a smallish handful of adderall. I am out the door and at my desk at 8:58. I stay a few minutes after 5:00 and make sure everyone sees me. This is unnecessary; I'm doing it purely out of guilt for who I've become. Then I go home and do it again.

I'm laying next to Lannie and things are looking up. Except my breathing; don't let yourself fall asleep just yet, friend. Once I came out, all those years of secrecy and using almost disappeared for a moment. People felt for me because I had kept this super gay secret. Everyone thought I was finally in a good place. Lannie was good for me, it seemed.

I'd never so much as held hands with another woman in public until Lannie. She supported me in coming out. I'd had relationships with women before, but always in secret. There was a moment after I came out that I thought, this is where you turn yourself around. Live life in the open. But I couldn't jeopardize my relationship with drugs. The longest, most committed relationship of my life.

I used for 16 years. For the first 15, I did terrible things to get high. Then I met a doctor in Boston. He prescribed me 60 mg of oxycontin and 975 mg of percocet for breakthrough pain per day. I didn't even have a diagnosis. At my peak, I was eating 200 mg of extended release oxycontin and 1,950 mg of percocet on a daily basis. If I took that quantity as sober as I am today, it would kill me. I was also taking 40 mg of extended release adderall daily that a psychiatrist prescribed me. I skipped that on the weekends so I could double up during the work week. I drank excessively to take the edge off the adderall and to "encourage" the painkillers.

One day there were no more painkillers and I writhed on the kitchen floor. I was using way more than my daily allotment but I'd made no plan for the inevitable. Lannie would be home from work in a few hours and I needed to find help without her knowing. The secret was still that important to me. I couldn't stop twitching. My whole body convulsed. I couldn't think. I was more scared than I've ever been. Every local rehab I called had a 2+ week waiting period. 911 never occurred to me.

I did end up finding a rehab facility that day in Malibu, California. I don't remember packing but I did. Got to the airport and got on a plane. I was drinking like crazy the whole way. After what I am told was a noteworthy detox, doctors dosed me with so much medication that I was drooling for three weeks. There was one other gay person in the program, but we were staying in different houses. I exited the program with no tools for success. I relapsed twice after that.

In many ways, my work in therapy did not begin until I was sober because that's when I finally looked at myself for real, without pretense or haste. It has taken

many years to make peace with the once crippling guilt, shame and trauma I carried for using, being abused, and my own queerness that I tried to banish from my person. I led myself down a lethal path trying to manage profound self-loathing, pain and substance abuse on my own. Opening up also unearthed some wonderful things I didn't know about myself. I am spiritual. I love stargazing. I have a generous heart. I am flawed, but I'm not a terrible person. I don't deserve to die.

I don't blame Lannie for leaving. We never even knew each other. I was a master of deception and she was a master of denial. I wish her well. I'm grateful for the wonderful woman I am proud to call my partner today. She knows all the parts of me and still loves me. I never thought that was possible or that I even was worthy of experiencing genuine love. But I'm worthy of that and so much more, and for that I am grateful.

— Anonymous

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