

Recovery

By Jonathan Holland

I sucked the time release coating off the little bluish green pill and broke it down with a flattened hose clamp. I figured, hey at least I'm not shooting heroin anymore, and I snorted the long line; its burn was mild to , but it was sweet and tart compared to the dog food and china white to which I was accustomed. I proceeded to pack a bowl out of the quarter of chronic I had stuffed in my pocket. I exhaled and sat back as the opiates began to warm my body and smoke exploded my head into a daze. Earlier my dealer, I'm very wary of calling this person my friend, dropped two pounds of weed off at my house. I talked my roommate into staying with it, so I could go to a movie. I did this instead; it was such an obvious choice.

I'd been clean of opiates for about two weeks now, mostly because I was out, so this was me treating myself for once again getting through the painful withdrawals. As I passed the bowl, my phone rang. It was Ashley, and she'd always seemed to be a loyal customer. I answered the phone and my heart dropped as she began to talk.

"I just went to your house and the door was wide open with a bunch of cops walking in and out... They had your roommate in handcuffs outside."

I didn't respond. I just hung up, and my hands shook violently as I tried to flick the lighter and take another hit from the bowl. But the weed seemed to stop working, and the love and comfort of the Oxycontin vanished as reality sat in. I just sat in awe while flashes of *Locked Up* flashed through my mind... How the fuck did this happen to me? I was supposed to graduate college, get a good job, start a family—prison doesn't fit anywhere into that. How'd I go from honor student and captain of the football team to college dropout and soon to be felon?

Early February is cold, especially in a concrete room. I had everything I needed: a shiny metal toilet connected to a sink, a light, a place to sleep and read, and three oblong meals. All the things I missed were luxuries—a toilet seat, TV, Mp3 player, a partition to separate me from my shitting roommate. When lying on a three inch, cotton stuffed pad with no pillow and one blanket, one is confronted with a decision: to rest his head or warm his body.

The psychological withdrawal from drugs made this experience even worse. At least I wasn't sick, that was one blessing I could see in this hell—the silver lining that people talk about—but the physical withdrawal was always easier than the emotional part. I'd rather lay my head on the cold rim of a toilet any day than to deal with every failed relationship, burned bridge, and bad decision I've ever made. Hindsight is like staring at a clock while running on a treadmill; it truly slows time. The miniature gang carvings on the wall could only distract me for seconds at a time; the other 86,390 seconds of the day were spent recollecting and dissecting my life. I yearned for sleep. If I could just sleep, I could be free through my dreams. Sure there was the occasional dream that ended in kicking, crying, and cold sweats, but the majority of my dreams were better than anything I'd ever experienced. Sleep equaled escape from this musty, bowel clouded air.

Unfortunately, escape is what put me there in the first place. For a decade it's all I did; Drugs, sports, drugs, girls, drugs, movies, drugs, writing, drugs, drugs, drugs, anything I could do to divert attention away from what was really going on. I could get high and dream of a better tomorrow. Substances were synonymous with my confidence; without the dopamine rush, I was just a wanna-be jock, college dropout, drug dealer, junkie, wanna-be writer, fast food working, emotional wreck. I'd found a way to transcend every failed goal and shattered self—one hit at a time. But it all ended here, in my broken reality. All I could do was sit there alone and sober. Now all I had was dead time to sort through problems and to figure out whose fault it was that I was here and what I was escaping.

I'd been through a lot though less than most people. Those days of restlessness forced me to see the self-inflicted hell I'd put myself through. I'd always desired so much: money, love, success, Glory. The grass is always greener they say though I sometimes wonder who they are because my grass was ripped out by its roots. I'd always enjoyed drugs, but I pinpointed the day I'd first leaned on them for emotional support. Clumps of red earth shattered against a tiny black box, each crumbling cluster of dirt

echoing in my brain. They said my grandma was in there, but I never checked. From what I could remember, she'd raised me. Up to that point, the drugs and parties were fun. I'd always had circumstantial, emotional, and financial problems, but she was my safety net. Now that security blanket I'd clung to was ashes confined in a little black box, banished into earth for the rest of eternity. That day, at twenty years old, I became an adult because I had nothing to save me from my own bad decisions; that day made it possible for me to be homeless and poor. I left that cemetery with only myself and my expectations to live up to, which wasn't a good thing because I didn't give a shit.

The first thing I did after the funeral was snort a Xanax and smoke a blunt. I chose to run away instead of cope with the emotions that losing an authority figure evoked. That pretty much described the next four years of my life. Tragedy: snort this, smoke this. Fuck up: no problem, eat this and you'll feel better. Pain was nothing I couldn't numb out. Everything I did was to divert feelings, avoid reality, and escape the pain of yesterday and problems of tomorrow. I kept getting fucked up and chasing some romanticized me I'd never reach. Eventually the money ran out, and school, the only hope my grandma had for me, was crushed and put up my nose with a rolled dollar bill. I saw college as the first step in the American dream, and I broke it down into a spoon.

Jail brought all this shit at me full force. Those first two weeks were hell. I just wallowed in depression and self-pity; I engrossed myself in the 'poor me' culture prevalent in any institution. I dreamt that, with a little bit of freedom, I could get out and fix everything—that I could mend every broken relationship, finish college, meet the perfect girl, get a good job, have 2.2 kids, buy a house with a white picket fence, and become the epitome of the American Dream; I dreamt that, with freedom, I could make myself the perfect person. Reading became my new escape, then writing, then working out. I poured hours into new passions trying to escape old habits. The whole time I floundered in the depths of my self, all I wanted to do was cry, but there were no tears. At some point I'd realized all this pain was self-inflicted by inconceivable goals and trying to mold my sense of self into some culturally accepted, ready-made bake at 350 for 20 minutes identity. I'd lost the ability to feel sympathy for myself, but it made me suffer that much more from guilt and retrospection.

After a month, I received a letter from my sister. Inmates opening letters was like a five year old opening presents on Christmas morning because they reminded you that someone on the outside cared. She'd always looked up to me because, to her, I was strong. While reading that letter, I cried. Her words were so confident, but her handwriting was so shaky. She spoke of the positives: "you can go to school in there, you can write, you can better yourself remember that." I tried to write back, but tears soaked the page. I tried to escape again by picking up a book (*Choke* by Chuck Palahniuk), and the section I read described the protagonist watching this man on a porn site. The man was bent over as a monkey shoved acorns into his butt. It was a very weird mental image, but the protagonist could only focus on the man's face because his face was very serene. The man wasn't feeling intense pleasure or pain; he was just there, accepting his situation. The protagonist drew from this scene a conclusion that "pain is pain and humiliation is humiliation, only if you allow yourself to suffer."

That line slapped me in the face, and it stopped the tears and glazed my eyes over with something, though I'm not sure what. It seemed to let me look at my life in a different perspective and kick-started a newer me. I wish I could say a new me, but baggage always seems to push itself to the surface. It changed my outlook on tragedy. From that point on, I told myself I would try to grow from my pain and find serenity in my suffering. Somehow that phrase sparked a drive that I'd never felt.

Dear Broken Ego,

You are stubborn. Stubborn is to ignorance as ignorance is to stupid. You make up your mind and that's that. Instead of seeking advice or heeding warnings you constantly look to yourself for answers; you are scared. Scared of asking because you're scared answers won't come; scared of putting yourself out there and being a naive fool. You're terrified of being burned again. Something wants to answer your questions. Something wants to help you and guide you down a path of completeness; something is there, but you stand in its way.

I stand in its way.

You've obstructed its ability to help me. Answers are right in front of my eyes, but you are too busy looking behind them. You're so wrapped up in yourself; your reasoning; your experience. You're so entrenched in yourself it consumes me. You pray, but you've stopped expecting answers; you seek, but you've ceased believing in miracles; you try, but you don't expect results. Your pessimistically optimistic outlook is stupid; foolish; a scapegoat for a larger problem. THE problem. Your faith is shattered.

My faith is shattered.

You are broken and I can't figure out how to fix you. If you can't fix you, what the fuck am I supposed to do? There's nothing I can do. Your expectations doom me down the same road I've traveled so many times. They destroy me, forcing me toward the same path of mediocrity we fear so much. I'm scared of it. I'm scared of you and the decisions, perceptions, and actions you force upon me.

You're so busy feeling sorry for yourself that I miss opportunities to grow. You pretend you don't pity your situation, but you do. It's pathetic. You make me a sorry, self-centered fool. Your pride is a road block to my progress. It makes help such a foreign idea. Charity is so alien. It surrounds you like the warm blanket heroin used to supplement, but your pride makes me ignore it and go at life alone. Accepting the concept of charity and love forces you to accept that, for the most part, human nature is kind. You are petrified of judgment. You're a vain fool and your vanity will doom you... It will doom me.

You interpret things that aren't meant to be interpreted and analyze the unanalytical. You make me justify the unjustifiable. Not everything has an answer, an underlying meaning, or a malevolent ulterior motive, yet you assume it does. You assume that some things are impossible when in reality everything is possible. My wildest dreams are attainable if I can break free from you and do what needs to be done, not just the things that coddle you. You assume and assumptions will ruin us. Something, even bigger than you, is using me to serve some astronomical purpose. You often forget that our purpose isn't arbitrary. Your life isn't meaningless. My objective isn't obsolete.

At some point I hope you'll realize all this and quit being stubborn. Stop feeling sorry for yourself; the only person whose wronged you is you. At some point you'll hope again—trust again. One day you'll step out of my way and we'll mend together for some great purpose. We'll step aside and save people from the depths of their own destruction. One day you'll restore your faith and save me from my own destruction. We'll become one and finally serve our role in the cosmic scheme of life, instead of tearing away at each other's destiny, destroying each other's faith, and spoiling our future. Right now we are detached, but one day we will become one, fighting for a common objective. We are nothing separate, but everything together.

Sincerely,

Fucked

I began to plan every minute of my days. Seconds blurred into hours, days, and months. At times I would forget I was in jail. It was a vacation from life, in a sense, and what I'd always dreamed for myself as a writer: three meals, a place to sleep, no job; money was rarely an issue in jail—all my base necessities were met.

A stroke of luck landed me freedom, and I walked out of that concrete, must, and dust into the warmest, most loving sun I'd ever been a part of. All I had to my name was a five month old, stale KFC uniform, no job, and no place to stay. I'd spent every dime I had to get out of jail, and I lied and told them I had a friend to stay with when I didn't even have a phone. Even under these circumstances, the sun felt so good. Everything smelled new: fresh cut grass, flowers, the breeze. After stepping out into the real world I just walked for hours, and I would stop, close my eyes, and breathe.

That was the first night I stayed in a homeless shelter. I had to pretend to be Christian, but it was better than sleeping in the woods. I didn't sleep anyway. The pink cloud burst pretty fast when I realized all I had were the clothes on my back and a bunch of useless writings from my vacation. The homeless

shelter gave me some clothes, which helped. I still didn't have a job or phone, but the world outside of that concrete seemed full of opportunity.

That week I walked until my feet ached with blisters, and I walked some more. I knew I had to get a job, and I had to blow into a breathalyzer every morning if I wanted to stay free. There were several moments walking in pouring rain or hundred degree weather that I wondered if freedom was really worth it. I couldn't write; I couldn't work out; I didn't know how to talk to people sober—freedom just didn't bring me the sense of purpose that I thought it would, and the goals I set for myself in jail started to feel like a sick joke. Employers scoffed at my application because it had both a pending felony and several lapses from selling drugs and being in jail. Girls wouldn't even look at me because I walked around in sweat soaked, hand-me-down clothes. On top of being broke, unemployed, and alone, I still had this sense of guilt and nostalgia that I faced every second of every day. If only I hadn't pissed that loan money away. If only I hadn't have started using opiates. If only I hadn't started selling opiates. If only I would've saved a little bit of the money I made. If only if only if onlyifonlyifonly. My thoughts blurred with my footsteps, none of which seemed to be getting me anywhere.

And there was still this fear that everything I was doing was in vain because I still had prison time hanging over my head. The homeless shelter I stayed at forced us to go to church several times a week. I grew up attending a very conservative Church of Christ. I'd stopped believing in religions a long time ago, and the whole getting addicted to drugs, busted, jail, homeless, and poor thing had made me question if there was a God, but I hoped there was because I desperately need something good to happen fast.

One night we walked into a rundown church with ruddy blue carpet crawling up the aisle and between every pew. I sat by myself at the back of the building and dropped my head. I didn't know for sure if anything was listening, but I figured I'd talk. As I sat hurling silent wishes to whatever would hear them, cheap perfume slapped me in the face as a woman sprinted to the front speaking in gibberish. Seconds later, two other women followed speaking the same nonsense, and the preacher sat up front swinging a bible and interpreting what they were saying.

"Listen children as the Holy Spirit speaks. He says repent all ye sinners and ye shall be saved by the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Listen as these conduits into the one and only God Almighty speak his will..."

As he talked several people nodded their heads and shouted "mmhmm. Praise Jesus."

Everything about these people made me want to think they were crazy, but everyone was so sure, and they seemed so happy and confident. They were a part of something that I was excluded from. As the women barked the commands of God and the preacher interpreted his will, I bowed my head and pushed them out of my senses.

Screaming silent commands at God, I asked "Please God, if you are there answer me. Please give me some sign, some feeling, something to let me know that things will be alright—that I will be alright. Please..."

Nothing came, and when the preacher moved into his sermon, I felt like he was screaming at me.

"All those who do not accept him will surely perish. All the Muslims, the Jews, the Pagans. Anyone who shall not repent is guaranteed a life of pain and an eternity of fire."

I had to stop listening, and after the service ended, I sprinted out of the doors. A lady followed me and said with a warm smile, "Thank you for coming. I hope you come back."

"Thank you, I appreciate it."

I started on another walk, and one of the guys from the shelter caught up with me.

"Are you okay man? You ran out kind of fast." he said.

"I just can't accept it man. I can't do it. I want what those people have, but if that is God, I'll never have it. How can we conceive what God is? And even if we could, how can we judge the mortality that heaven is based on? Would God really turn away good people because of a triviality? I just can't see it man—I can't do it."

He looked at me with fear exploding from his pupils. "But you have to man, or you'll go to hell." He patted me on the shoulder, and I dropped to the curb.

"You gonna to be alright man?"

“Yeah,” I answered, and he walked away. Within seconds, tears started pouring from my eyes—one tear for every sin I suppose.

I was lucky enough to get out of the shelter after only seven days. My friend had an apartment that was vacant because he went home for the summer. He offered to let me stay there for free, and in that same week, I got a job. It was at Burger King, but it was something. I was so desperate that I would have picked up shit with my bare hands.

I felt lonelier in that apartment than I’ve ever felt in my life. I was happy to be out, but I was not happy to be sober. I hated everything about myself. I was fat, ugly, stupid, poor, worked at Burger King, in debt, but most of all I hated that I was alone. No one seemed to want to be around me. I had a friend come down from South Bend, and he chilled for a little bit and gave me \$160. I had to hold back tears from the gesture. He started getting fidgety. I could tell he wanted to smoke weed, but didn’t want to do it around me. He knew that I was facing prison time, and a dirty drop would ensure that. He said he was about to leave; I asked if he was going to smoke. I talked him into smoking there, and after some talking into, he did. I didn’t even want to hit it. The only time I ever wanted to do drugs was when I was alone. But then he left, and I searched for the roach that he must have flushed down the toilet.

Work was work. It was easy, but I didn’t talk to anybody the first week. What was I supposed to say, “Hi, I’m Jon I just got out of jail... No thanks I don’t want any drugs, I’d rather not go to prison—anyway, what do you like... like what do you like to do?” The thought of talking to strangers terrified me. I would just do my work and try not to get in trouble.

My public defender told me I should try to move into this halfway house that was focused on drug addiction. I went through the interview process and played up my addiction to them though there was no exaggeration necessary. I’d smoked weed almost every day since I was fifteen. I’d drink about four days a week since nineteen. I’d shot heroin for about a year. And I did almost every drug there was available to my generation, and I loved every one. Even more, I loved myself when I was on them. I ended up being accepted.

Writing was how I got through jail. It was the little bit of sanity materialized; every piece of paper filled with hope for the future. I kept setting milestones for myself: I would get out, meet a pretty girl, get back in school, and my life would start, and that was prevalent in the optimism of my writing. I lived through the optimism of a future I couldn’t feel being locked up. Now I couldn’t write, and when I did, it read like suicide notes. I started going to Narcotic Anonymous meetings, as a requirement of my entry into the halfway house, which made the experience that much worse.

At the meetings, a group of people would sit around and vent or talk about a specific topic that was threatening to sobriety. At my second meeting, I sat listening to people talk about avoiding old people, places, and things that were associated with drugs. Instead of listening to what others had to say, I sat, thinking of what I was going to say that would win me a friend. When it came my turn to speak, all I that came out was, “I am fucking lost. I feel so alone, and it seems like no one gets what I am going through. I just... I don’t really know what to say. Pass”

After the meeting, everyone went out for the ceremonial smoking of the cigarette, and everyone seemed to have someone to talk to. I stood for a while, trying to gather the courage to approach someone. When I final did, I went up to someone and said, “Hey, I’m Jon. How are you?”

The girl looked at me and said, “I’m fine.” And she turned and walked three steps away to talk to someone else.

I checked my nose to see if I had a booger hanging out, but nothing was there. I tried again with another person, this time a guy, but the same thing happened. Finally, I gave up, assuming that I was just that fucked up of a person, I figured I should be happy because I didn’t really know what to say after “how are you?”

My whole life, I’d engulfed myself in the drug culture. After “how are you?” always came “do you smoke?” If someone said “Cigarettes?” with a slight lift in there tone, I would know they smoked weed and we would smoke. That’s when we would get to know one another. Very seldom did I have friends that didn’t do drugs or drink. I didn’t identify with them because when they would ask about my life, I knew they wouldn’t understand and feel sympathy for me after I spoke. Even though sympathy was

the last thing I wanted, it was a start—a connection. I wanted to relate, and we could do that through the present meaning through the drugs. I left these NA meetings feeling like I was not meant for society sober. I had no friends or family in town. I would sit alone in my apartment and constantly wonder what was wrong with me.

Dear Raging Addict,

What happens when the glory of sobriety and freedom fades and everyday life becomes monotonous?? You. Liberty breeds so much opportunity which is unbearably hard. Choice brings pain. Sometimes I miss you, and I envy your reasoning. You live in the moment. You could give two shits about others, the future, and everyone's opinions. Everything you ignore engulfs my sober mind. There's no time for now in my life; everything I do is for the future. You had friends and highs; I have no one and lows. Sometimes I look at the cherry on my cigarette and remember how good it felt to plunge into my arm when I felt depressed. I lack the courage and the reckless abandonment you lived by even though I know physical pain feels so much better than emotional pain. It clears my head. Drugs clear my head. Sobriety makes me focus on everything. My body is clean, but my mind is eternally tainted. I have so much good, but I only focus on bad. Loneliness makes me feel like you before you escaped into a few finite moments of bliss. That seclusion is a trigger. Fear of prison is the only thing that separates me from you. Freedom is the only thing that stops me from reverting back to you.

I felt so happy when I was around friends. I felt so full when I was loved. Right now I feel empty. I sit in a room full of addicts in NA meetings, yet I'm in total isolation. I feel like a stranger; like I'm wearing an Abercrombie sweater vest in a room full of people with ICP shirts and black pants with those horrendous straps connecting the legs. Sometimes it's like I don't fit in anywhere. You fit in everywhere because you don't give a shit...

How do I take the positives of you without becoming you? How do I empty the despair from my brain? All I want is to fit in and be excellent. I just yearn to be normal and to stand out. I want to be like everyone else—but GREAT. I am a walking oxymoron; even my desires are pathetically hopeful, just like you and I.

Sometimes my heart is so heavy I just want to cry, but the tears just aren't there. I wish they were, but I feel no sympathy for myself whatsoever. I'd like to confide in others, but all I can relate to are these blank sheets of paper; full of potential, but nothing left untouched. My ego prevents me from trusting anyone. It seems so easy for others to make friends, and it used to be for me, but since I've been free from drugs and jail it's all but easy. I felt like I'd come out a new person, but I'm even more fucked than when I went in. It's like I don't want people to get to know me. Actually that's all I want, but I don't have the energy to explain myself. I want people to want to get to know me. I wish they'd prod me with questions like they were writing an in depth newspaper article on me and what I've overcome. I'm a self-centered selfish fool with nothing to talk about.

What the fuck am I supposed to talk about? It was so easy for you. I can't figure out who I am around new people, but around those who know me I feel so clearly defined. Everything about me is a glaring contradiction. I sit in groups wanting to say so much, but when it comes my turn to speak, I don't have the balls to say what I'm thinking. My thoughts are trapped in my head, because I'm scared to say the wrong thing at any given moment. Often if I sincerely speak what's on my mind, people will probably feel sorry for me, and I fear sympathy; it's quicksand for new relationships and first impressions.

I'm bored so often now that I attribute that with sobriety, yet I'm busy 17 hours a day. It's not that it's boring, it just didn't fix the underlying problem: Me. I think constantly and sometimes I just want to stop. My brain never stops and it makes me wish I was you again. You had a clear cut purpose every day. You had ambition and got shit done. You had the right means but the wrong end. Now I have the right means and end, but it feels exactly the same. I watch these people bitch about their family and friends on intervention, but I yearn for that love. I scoff at crazy Pentecostals flailing arms and screaming nonsense, yet I crave that God. I have yet to find anything to fill that craving.

*Sincerely,
Fucked*

I tried to focus my efforts on school. If getting sober wouldn't bring me friends and working at Burger King wouldn't bring me success, then school would; it was the first step toward starting my life. I called loan company after loan company pleading my case. "Hi, I've made a lot of mistakes and I'm trying to get back in school so I can get a job and pay you guys back." They didn't seem to care unless I had cash down which I didn't. They wouldn't listen; instead, they would wait silently for me to take a breath, so they ask me for money.

"If you can pay us \$7,800 dollars right now, we can get your loan out of default."

"Okay, hold on a second just let me grab my grab my check book." Click.

Door after door kept shutting in my face. Luckily, my once every three week roommate was around to offer me this fake weed to smoke, so I could feel better; I didn't want to—I mean I did, but fear stopped me. One slip up and I would be back in jail with and go to prison. I kept saying no, but no one likes to get fucked up alone. I finally had to tell him, "If you offer me that bowl one more fuckin time, I'm gonna shove it down your fuckin throat." He must have believed me because he didn't talk to me much after that.

I was alone again.

I kept going to meetings, but they didn't seem to help. Dreary sunny days passed one after another. I'd be busy constantly, but I was so bored. I wanted a relationship more than anything in the world because I knew it would fix me. My problem wasn't that I'd blown thirty thousand dollars of school loans on everything but school; it wasn't the ten years of smoking, snorting, shooting, and ingesting drugs; it certainly wasn't the bright idea that selling drugs was the answer to my financial struggles and that it had blown up in my face. The problem was that I wasn't in a relationship. A girl would solve everything. She was the attainable milestone on my list, and she was one of the two things that could help me escape these feelings of inadequacy. It was either drugs or a girl. For some reason I really didn't want to go to prison.

Dear Broken Ego,

You've never been comfortable with yourself so you've always surrounded me with people to be happy. I've never made an identity for myself because of this; you've always made me take on my friends'. If I'm around successful people, I'm successful; if I'm around crack heads, I'm a crack head. All of this is some crazy attempt to fit in. I'm sad when I'm alone because I don't know who you are or who you want to be. You're selfish. You don't hang out with people for who they are, you hang out with them for who they make you. Every night, I sleep by myself with a stranger.

*Sincerely,
Fucked.*

At the halfway house interview, they'd asked me what I wanted to get out of their program. I told them I wanted to find myself and be comfortable alone. It was bull shit. I thought if I could find that identity or social role that I could meet people and they would like me. They concentrated their efforts on

my drug addiction and required me to attend 12 step recovery meetings, Intensive Outpatient treatment, work full time, and get a sponsor. They kept saying, “Your recovery has to come first, you need to focus on your recovery!” I just smiled and nodded my head. I needed this program for court, not to mention the lease on my friend’s apartment was about to end, and I was about to be homeless again. What the fuck was recovery? I’d been sober for almost six months, granted five was in jail, but it was an accomplishment. I’d started doing drugs when I was 13, and up until I’d gotten locked up at 24, I’d never strung together a week without using anything. Fuckin *Recovery*...

The last night at my friend’s apartment I cried. I hated the place because I was completely alone, but I’d started to grow comfortable in my misery. I would sit at home and mope and, at some point, grow tired of feeling sorry for myself. That’s when I could write tidbits and then sleep. I’d lived in that apartment for a few months prior to jail and had a lot of good times there. At least I’d remembered them as good times. I’d blacked out and stood outside of one of my roommate’s rooms screaming with a pizza cutter—I have to assume I was going to saw his limbs with the dull, round blade. I’d tried to have sex with a girl who I’d known pissed herself because I had to give her a pair of shorts. It was the same place I’d stayed awake several days straight smoking some weird artificial drug off aluminum foil, jacking off, and playing NBA 2K10 (It’s a weird series of events for three days of no sleep, but that drug was weird. I was told its effects are very similar to meth). Every one of these times sounds a lot worse than they felt. For brief seconds of every blackout, binge, and high, I got the same feeling I got from cheering fans at football games and wrestling matches and the same feeling I got when I’d ejaculate—I felt like GOD. I think that’s why I cried. I knew that leaving this and entering a six month halfway house rehab program was going to mean that I had a problem. And if I had a problem, I would never feel that again and I’d never see that apartment again and I’d never relate with my friends again. I hated moving. That’s how I rationalized crying because real men don’t cry. I hated moving because it changes everything, except for me. I was sick of change because shit never seemed to get any better.

Dear Delinquent criminal,

There's something comforting about being somewhere you know you're gonna be for a while. In the whole scheme of things 6 months isn't long, but when you bounce around as much as you will in a couple years it feels like eternity. Jail is even comforting when you realize it is your home. It's weird, but I just want to better myself, and I don't really know how to do it. I feel like I'm going in the right direction, but storm clouds gather so fast. Even at my worst you'll always feel like you're doing the right thing for you and maybe you are. Mistakes are made for a purpose because their consequences will better you to the very core. The deeper the hole you dig, the more you'll have to climb out. Your whole life is a choice between lying down in your own grave or climbing out to live. If you become content with your bull shit life, you become content with death. If you're content with artificial happiness, you will doom yourself to all the sadness and despair that come with it. Life is painful, but without that pain happiness becomes monotonous and bland. But when will you find somewhere you can actually call home?

*Sincerely,
Fucked*

It was the end of July and miserably hot outside. I walked from extreme heat into the cool, comfortable house. It was huge, and, ironically, it sat only blocks away from bars where I would black out, spend hundreds of dollars, and either get in a fight or get rejected by some girl. There were several guys sitting in the living room, and I just put my head down and tried to walk past.

“Hey are you new?” one said.

He was a short fat guy with glasses. I think his belly was as wide as his legs were long.

“Yea, I’m Jon.” I reached out my hand. I hoped he’d either shake my hand and walk away or ask me questions. I hated having to lead conversations with strangers, but more than that I hated small talk—mostly because I could never think of anything to say.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

This was the other reason I hated small talk. There was never a simple answer. It was never just ‘Bloomington’ because I didn’t want to be known as a townie. I couldn’t say South Bend because I didn’t really want to be from Indiana, and I couldn’t say Alabama and people believe me because I didn’t have an accent.

“I lived in Alabama ‘til I was about ten, South Bend ‘til about twenty, and Bloomington for about the last five years.”

“What are you here for?”

At this point I didn’t want to talk anymore. As much as I’d wanted attention before, now I just wanted to take my stuff to my room and hide, but I didn’t want to be rude. Why couldn’t I just have a simple answer like ‘alcohol’ or ‘coke?’

“Well I’ve smoked weed since I was thirteen. I drank a lot, but I’m not really an alcoholic—I guess I can kind of identify as one ‘cuz I blackout a lot. I got hooked on heroin and opiates for a while...”

Had I said too much? Was this one of those greeting things where people ask you how you feel, but they don’t really care? Was he just being nice? I’m not sure if I’m too honest or if I’m just weird, but if someone asks me a simple question, I tend to give them a complex answer.

“Hhmmm. How old are you?”

“24”

“Well this is a good place to get sober.”

“I’ve been sober for like five months.”

“Well, you’ll like it here.”

I was fairly sure that wasn’t true. There seemed to be fifteen people who lived there and knew each other. I could see myself being alone still but with fourteen roommates. It was one thing to be alone by myself. I could think of excuses for that. There was no excuse to isolate when there’s this many people in the same house. Luckily, I met someone who worked out. We would talk, but not really relate. He was a nice guy, but I could always tell he had some shit going on inside. I tried to ask him because if he would say anything to me I’d be able to release the flood of emotions that I had inside. We would just work out and leave (he later got kicked out and for relapsing. He later allegedly broke into someone’s house, hit the resident with a hammer, pointed a gun at them, and stole their car. This was a shame because he was a good guy when he was sober. I’d never known him while he was on drugs, but none of us are pretty when we go back).

The house’s requirements helped kick start some good things for me. I figured out that I could just pay and go to a community college. It was cheap and there was a creative writing class. I figured I’d go teach them some stuff. I’d finally figured out how to get a loan out of default, so I wanted to get a taste before I shoved my face in it.

I started going to AA meetings and got a sponsor. A friend introduced me to him. He was a weird old guy who might be the most bombastic and egotistical person I’d ever met.

The first thing he said to me was, “Are you smart?”

I replied, “You’re only as smart as the decisions you make, so I guess not.”

He just smiled and said he had a doctrine and he was working on a stage play. I thought ‘cool, another writer,’ so I asked him to be my sponsor.

He told me to call him every night, which I did... for the next two days. I would call and he’d say how are you and I’d say fine. That was pretty much our conversation. I started calling later at night hoping he’d be in bed. We would meet and talk over steps, but it always felt like he would just laugh at me and patronize me. He had a much larger vocabulary than me and seemed to want me to know it. Our conversations would piss me off so much because he would make me feel like a dumb ass, and there was nothing I could do about it. I kept talking to him though. It seemed to help just having someone to hold me accountable, but he seemed to try to give me a lot of ‘suggestions’ like “You shouldn’t go to school

this semester,” or, “AA says you’re not supposed to get in a relationship in the first year of sobriety.”

“Don’t write. You need to focus on your sobriety.”

There were just as many rules for the halfway house: be home by 10:30, no sex, sign in and out, do your chore, don’t smoke on the porch, don’t go where alcohol is served (which is everywhere), go to four meetings a week, don’t have people over past visiting hours, and many I can’t even remember.

I wasn’t sober because I wanted to be; I was sober because it was keeping me free. Needless to say I broke every rule and ignored every suggestion those first eight months. I was never one for suggestions or rules. I always enjoyed fucking up. The only thing I didn’t do was drink or do drugs. I didn’t need to because I was starting to make friends.

Someone new would move into the house, and we would get really close. Addicts and alcoholics, sober or active, have this connection with one another. It is so easy to talk and relate with one another. I have more in common with bottom of the gutter criminals and junkies than any normal person I’ve ever met. While we don’t always share a common past, we share those underlying feelings. Between jail and this house I met crack heads, meth heads, heroin addicts, drunks, homeless people, dope dealers, hood rats, burglars, and robbers, and from each individual, I learned something that scared the shit out of me: I am a few bad decisions and irreversible moments away from each one of them. Grouping us fuck ups and delinquents together helped us to see hope.

If nothing else I had to try. I had a plea agreement that was going to put me in prison for four years and on probation for six years after that. I’d refused to sign it, but I really didn’t think it was going to get any better.

I walked into a group treatment session and sat down. It was a shitty upstairs room with fluorescent lights and a dry erase board. I was a pro at these sessions. Just like in high school, I would goof off, and right when the teacher would be at her boiling point, I would become sincere and say the sweetest, most competent thing to show the instructor I’d been listening and the information had changed my life.

I sat by my roommate, and we began muttering jokes to one another and commenting about how beautiful the teacher was. She was of Middle Eastern descent with a tight body and a nose stud that made her face sparkle. She was a former addict herself, so with every beautiful physical feature came a complimenting psychotic personality feature. She seemed to know the game we were playing. We sat by each other for about fifteen minutes before we were separated. I could tell she was getting frustrated by the squint of her eyes and the flush of her face.

“Alright, I want you to write the decision you made that brought you here and what would send you back out? Write out an individual decision.”

I had to figure out how to not be personal but to show that I got the point of the lesson. I wrote this beautiful paragraph about how expectations were the root of my problems. How I would make all these goals for myself, and when I would see myself falling short, I’d panic and make a stupid decision. It was true but general, just like I wanted it.

I was chosen to present my case first and proceeded to write my paragraph on the board. She didn’t buy into my hypothetical.

“What did it? What makes you tick? What is your biggest fear? Why? Why? WhyWhyWhy...”

I wanted to throw the marker at her. I stammered and mumbled a hundred random things. My face was as red as the ink on the board.

“What decision did you make that started all this and why?”

“I thought I could sell drugs and get back in school,” I barked in frustration. The whole class just stared at me in silence.

“Was that a good decision?”

“No it was fuckin stupid.”

“So you’re stupid?”

“No I’m not stupid... I just... It made sense”

“So what made you stupid then but not stupid now?”

I heard someone suck in air through their nostrils, and I desperately wanted to sit down.

“So what would make you use again, right now. What would make you leave here and want to stick a needle in your arm?”

“I guarantee you if I have to go to prison, I’ll use again.”

I just sat down. I couldn’t be gawked at by the other ten people in the room anymore. They were college kids who got a ticket for public intoxication or some other minor misdemeanor while I was a real criminal.

“So that’s your biggest fear, not flunking out of school, or not getting a good job, or all that other bull shit you said.”

I sat in my chair, arms crossed just ready to stop being bitched at.

“Well what can you do right now to change your life? What can you do to stop yourself from going to prison?”

“I can’t do anything. That’s what is so fucking frustrating; I have absolutely no control over this.”

“Then who cares? Just let it go and live now. Why worry about the future if it makes now unbearable?”

I didn’t have an answer for that. I just sat in my head for the rest of the session. I had the insane idea that thinking would change my situation, but the more I thought, the more I worried. And the more I worried the more I sat idle. I was doing everything I could: treatment, volunteer work, school, work, paying fees. What else could I do?

Something changed. I think I stopped caring about the future. The next two months flew by. I just went to meetings, school, work, and went home and went to bed. I still had this feeling of loneliness that ached deep in the pit of my stomach. I tried to ignore it. I would pray for God to bless me with a soul mate, and I thought it did.

There was a guy at work whose girlfriend starting working with us. He would be very cool to my face and, according to her, would go home and talk shit about me. It didn’t surprise me because I saw her once at school and texted her (they shared a phone) saying hi. I got a text from him later saying under no circumstances was I to text this number. I told him the next day at work that I was sorry. I said not to worry that I wasn’t trying to steal his girl. He laughed and said, “Oh I’m not worried about that.”

I stood at the main burger boards in Burger King making a Whopper; I was kind of a big shot. This little eighteen year old crossed the window in front of me. Earlier she’d cried over the way this guy was treating her and I told her, “The situation will work itself out. If you guys are meant to be together you will. If not it will end and you will find someone else—life tends to work itself out.”

She had shoulder length brown hair and her bangs would drop over her big brown eyes. She stood about five feet tall and only weighed about ninety pounds. Every time she would talk to me, I would get trapped in her eyes.

Sweat binding her bangs to her forehead, she crossed by the hot fry lamps over the fry holder in the middle of a lunch rush and said, “Hey, what’s your number?”

I just blurted it out, and she smiled and walked away.

I got a text later and inadvertently called her beautiful.

I talked to my sponsor and a few guys in AA about the scenario. I was honest and told them the Springer like plot in which I was thinking of submerging myself. They all told me it wasn’t a good idea. But how are you going to tell a guy who hasn’t been laid in a year and a half that he should ignore this beautiful girl who is throwing herself at him?

Six days later we fucked and I’d saved her from her sad life and broken relationship. She saved me from my fear of loneliness. That was the first time I’d ever had sex sober, and it was awesome. It didn’t seem to matter that it was in the basement bathroom of a halfway house or the back of a car parked on random streets. Two weeks in, we were sitting on a couch in the basement after a romp in the weight room. I held her tight, molding her into my body. Her head lay underneath my chin.

“Listen, I’ve been hurt in the past and I’m at the point in this now where I think we could be starting something real. I just don’t want to get hurt again.”

She lifted her head and kissed me on the lips.

“I love you.”

I was kind of shocked. It had been two weeks and all this girl knew about me was that I was a recovering junkie and an ex-drug dealer who just got out of jail and lived in a halfway house. At the same time, those were words that I'd wanted to hear for so long. I'd like to say I just reacted, but I thought about it before I said it. I'd loved two women in my life: one was my grandma, the other my sister. But those were different kinds of love. Those were the types that didn't have strings attached—the selfless kind. Every hair on my body stood sharp against the fabric of my clothes and my body felt the same way it did when I dropped on a roller coaster. Maybe this was love.

“I love you too.”

“You do—you're not just saying that.”

“No baby I do, I love you.”

She smiled and kissed me. The way we kissed: that was love. It was the first time I'd ever said it to someone other than a family member, and it got me higher than any drug I'd ever done.

She supported my writing and me going to meetings. I did a fourth step (the fourth step is where you list everyone you've ever carried resentment against or fucked over. Then you see what your part is in it). Then I did a fifth step with my sponsor. I sat down and read all the fucked up things I'd done and found out that my reaction was the same every time—no matter what the situation was. I would trust people, but I would always have these underlying expectations. When they wouldn't live up to my standard, I would overreact. I would then get mad about it, and that anger would turn into self-pity and depression.

For once in my life I felt in love, but it was the furthest thing from it. I fell in love with the idea of love and the phrase 'I love you,' and I fantasized the rest. She separated me from fear. Our relationship was two selfish people trying to bleed one another for as much as we could. I can't figure out what we used to talk about. The only time we did get along, she was fucked up on Xanax and I was blinded by sex, but in the moment it didn't feel like that. In the moment it felt so real—so tangible.

Two months later she told me it was over. To make me feel better, she said it wasn't my fault; that she just had to be alone for a while and not to worry because she wasn't getting back with her ex.

I couldn't cry. I kept thinking it would make me feel better, but the tears weren't there. The pain was but the tears weren't.

I stopped going to meetings, working out, talking to people. I broke up with my sponsor because I figured what good is he if he can't make me feel better. I tried to meditate, I tried to pray, I tried to write but all I could write shitty breakup poems, which made it worse.

*My pictures of negative are so vivid.
Smooth brunette hair.
Milky mediterannean skin.
Auburn eyes piercing my mood.*

*It's all I can think about.
It's all I want.*

I am alone.

*A dial tone acosts
my hope.
Butterflies stampede my stomach
anticipating an answer.
Ring Ring Ring
"Please answer"
Ring Ring Ring
A voicemail shatters my eardrums.
I can't seem to make a genuine connection.*

*I click my phone shut.
Silence rapes me.*

*Moths flutter.
Nausea replaces them.
My heart aches, or is it my stomach?
I'm not sure where love sits
in my body,
or if it's even there.*

*Breathe in positive energy
Exhale negative thoughts.
I can't seem to inhale happy oxygen.*

Why are my breaths so shallow?

As sorry as I felt for myself, not once did the thought of using drugs or alcohol to feel better cross my mind. It was always my go to for times like these but not this time. Not only would it put me back in jail, but I knew it wouldn't change my situation. I would still be alone in the end, and it would ruin everything I was working for. I actually went and shared my feelings with a few guys in the house. Even though they were meth heads or real criminals, they understood and didn't make fun of me. They just listened and said, "It sucks man but shit gets better. Fuck her."

Every piece of my body wanted to feel alone, to justify this fear and feel sorry for myself. Everything about anger and depression just felt like it would be comfortable. I wanted to feel like I had no one, so I could think God was cursing me. But I wasn't alone.

I wasn't alone.

Life moves in slow motion when you're sad. All I wanted was time to speed by and for me to be successful. School started and I was working full time. I didn't have time for a girl if I wanted one, but that hole was still there—every waking moment; it wasn't from the girl, she'd just peeled off a scab, revealing the vast hole I had inside of me.

In twelve step programs, step two and three deal with the idea of a God or Higher power, and its path. I grew up Christian, but I switched between atheist and agnostic between my youth and adult ages. I wanted so bad to believe, but I always felt like shit. When I got to these steps I just put my agnostic mask on because it was easier than doing any real searching, but I knew everything couldn't just be a coincidence. I tried for weeks to paint this clearly defined mental image of God, but it never came. And I always looked for God's path, but I could never find it. I saw each opportunity that presented itself to me as God's path, but why would there be so much pain and why would life always be so hard?

In February I went to court for a final pretrial. I walked into an empty court room and sat. One by one the clerk, prosecutor, and judge entered, and each sat in silence looking on a laptop. I couldn't stop tapping my foot, and I seemed to be sweating like. Every time I've been to court, the court officials sat smiling until they read my case file, which seemed to piss them off. My lawyer walked in and called me out to the hallway. When I walked out he just smiled.

"Well Jon, I'd like to say I did this for you, but you did everything right."

"What do you mean?"

He held out a thick, red file that had scribbles on it. On sat at the bottom with a circle around it:

'D felony 2 years probation, earned a misdemeanor'

I felt like hugging the guy. I went from having a B felony for dealing Ecstasy and four years in prison to two years of probation.

"You did it man, Congratulations."

We walked back into the courtroom, and all I could do was smile. I stepped in front of the judge and admitted guilt to maintaining a common nuisance. After a five minute monologue from the judge, he asked my lawyer if he'd like to say anything on my behalf.

My lawyer shrugged his shoulders and said, "Tell him what you've done."

I said the list aloud. I told him that I checked myself into treatment and into a halfway house. I told him that I'd paid all my fees; that I worked forty hours a week at a crap job; that I pulled a loan out of default so I could go back to school; I told him that I was in school full time; that I volunteered any free time I had at a nonprofit organization that helped people getting out of jail; that I went to meetings; that I had a sponsor; that I had been sober for a year now; that I was grateful for the courts because they changed the direction that my life was heading.

The weirdest thing happened: he looked me in the eyes and smiled. This was the first time since I'd been in trouble that anyone in the criminal justice system had looked me in the eyes. A sense of calm swept over me, a sense that I'd been doing everything right the whole time—a sense that all this bull shit happened for a reason.

Dear Broken Ego,

You will become frustrated with God. Not with God, but the idea of God—your idea of it and what it's supposed to be. You have this fantasized version of God, the deity in a bottle that you can rub, ask for wishes, and put away for the next rainy day. You only want God for your desires. You disregard it until you're in need. You only call on it when you're broken, lonely, and depressed. You attribute success to your power, determination, and decision making, yet you don't understand why you are where you are and why you feel like getting fucked up to forget. You fuck up and do only things that make you feel good. When you dig your grave, you wonder why God doesn't pull you out. Your perception is fucked—we are fucked. We see God as a fix all, some existential duct tape to be thrown in the tool box between times of need. We see him there to seal up our life's leak until the patch busts and we need her again.

I don't know what God is, but I know your perception is wrong. You grew up with the Christian perception of God, that New Testament Lovie dovie ask and you shall receive God. You ask for love, money, and success, but you don't know what any of these actually mean or are. You see each of these as connected, that you must have money to have love to have success and that each one are milestones to be toppled before the good part of life starts. You think that God owes you this and that it will give it to you because you asked. The blessing is the road, not the result.

As you grow up, if it ever happens, you will grow more and more frustrated—disappointed—forsaken. When you are down you will pray. When you are rock bottom you will ask to be lifted. When you hurt, you will wish to be healed. Then you wake up feeling exactly the same: broken, alone, forgotten. You don't get that you can't be lifted until you are ready to stand. God won't do this for you, but it will lay out the opportunities for you to do it. It won't step on Free will, and it won't give you things without work or sacrifice.

God doesn't answer prayers, He answers situations. It offers choices between what you want and what you need, which are seldom the same.

*Sincerely,
Grateful*