

Excerpt from

IN A TOWN RINGED BY MISSILES

Imagine turning your head and holding your arm out, as if for a blood test. You feel a slight prick, you loosen the tie, and then suddenly this warmth floods up; you feel a rush that begins at the base of your spine and surges up until it explodes in your head, like light. Then, for hours, you float in a bubble of warmth and well-being, dreams as vivid as movies drift before your eyes. This is why people like heroin.

Imagine you no longer feel like an ordinary girl, bland and vulnerable, but like a girl who is daring, an outsider, one of the guys.

This is why I tried it in the first place.

But *why* is a question that heroin addicts never ask. We know why. The question for an addict is *why not?* I had to have a very good reason to give up that rush. After all, I'd come to love the ritual, even the smell of sulfur, the flame beneath the spoon. I loved the liquid lightning that filled my veins and blossomed in my head. I loved the dreams, more brilliant with color than anything I'd seen in life. And then the psychic numbness that enveloped me for hours, where I had no worries, no fears, no anxieties, no guilt, no desires.

So *why* is not the question. We may as well ask why people have sex—which, as we all know, can have as-deadly side effects as heroin.

I was sixteen when I started. Thin, thin, always dressed in jeans and a black tee shirt, hair long and wild, I imagined I was a bohemian. The rules didn't apply to me. I didn't have to *attend* school to get As and Bs. Janis was still alive, I think, maybe even Morrison and Hendrix. The Civil Rights Bill was six years old. Watts had burned, so had Newark. John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy had all been killed. Vietnam was old news. The Cold War was simply a part of the landscape. We wanted out. Sometimes it seemed as if the world were falling apart. We were kids living in the borderlands of Arizona, in a town ringed by missiles. We couldn't imagine a future. Instead, we shot dope. We ran it across the border. We were falling from idealism to despair. I'd fallen, needle to the vein. Planes like dark predators were circling overhead.

By the time I was nineteen—only three years later—I had not only grown up, I felt *old*. I had quit using every toxic substance I'd ever tried. This includes pot, hallucinogens, cocaine, speed, and alcohol, none of which required any effort at all to quit as I didn't especially like them, as well as the two that caused me difficulty, heroin and tobacco. I could claim that this makes me an expert, not only on addiction but on recovery—but I am ambivalent about everything: what constitutes addiction, whether physical addiction leads to psychological or vice versa, and whether or not people can be cured. I even wonder whether addiction is a symptom of an underlying disease or the disease itself.

Recreational use, that's how I thought about heroin when I first tried it. I wasn't going to get strung out. I just liked the high. Besides, I was a lightweight. I could get high on very small amounts, but eventually, after a few years, I did start using more often, several times a week, then every day, then several times a day. This is the point at which we considered ourselves strung out: we no longer got a rush, we didn't get high at all. We were shooting dope to keep from getting sick, to stay normal. And, frankly, it got boring. We were always having to figure out how to get money and then how to get dope. As boring as any other routine. I've heard both war and prison described as long stretches of boredom punctuated by moments of violence. That's a pretty good description of addiction. Nirvana, chemically induced, cannot last.

Out of all of those moments, and there were many, where people driven by desperation stole from us or pulled guns on us, there is one I remember so clearly that, in retrospect, I can call it a turning point. Franklin and Val had come over to cop, she'd just suffered her third miscarriage and, perhaps because of that, he let her get off first. Almost immediately, her eyes rolled up in her head and she hit the floor. She was out. Franklin was sitting on the bed, tying himself off. The whole time we were trying to revive her, Franklin was busy finding a vein. We slapped her, rubbed ice cubes on her, shook her. Nothing. We considered shooting her up with salt water, which we'd heard was the antidote, although we'd never seen it done. Finally, we dragged her to the bathtub and held her head under cold running water. When she came out of it, Franklin was still sitting on the bed, nodding. He rubbed his face. "Huh?" he said, looking at his wife.

That night, Fernando, who was not yet my husband, was lying next to me. We'd saved a tiny bit of dope for the next morning, but we had no money. Fernando said, "It's time to kick. Something bad is going to come down."

At the time, this seemed to me a profound statement and perhaps it was, implying as it did, cause and effect. Consequences. Lying there next to him, I knew what I couldn't articulate. The medicine had become the disease. We had fallen into a kind of despair, where we couldn't remember how we were before, where

the things that happened seemed to happen to other people and we were numb observers, where there was no future, or if there was one, we couldn't imagine it.

But this is what I remember most about the day Val nearly died. It was a gray day, windy, dusty, bits of dried leaves in the air. After she came out of it, I watched them climb on their motorcycle. Franklin was big, tattoos on his arms, and Val seemed frail. She put her arms around him, leaned into him, and they sped off. I kept seeing her go out, lips blue. What if she nodded out on the highway? She would slip like a rag doll beneath the traffic behind them. He wouldn't notice. He wouldn't care. Could this happen to me? Where nothing nothing nothing would matter? Not Fernando. Not if I was pregnant. Nothing. Except dope?

Not long after that, Fernando and I decided to take a vacation from our addiction. This was something several of our friends had done. The idea was this: you went into a short detox program to bring your habit down, under control, and then you could start using again—recreationally—because you needed so much less. It was winter, 1973. There was an oil embargo, and we had to wait in long lines to fill the tank. It was difficult to drive around looking to score, and even more difficult to make a run to Mexico, and so, it only made sense to limit both our gas and our heroin consumption.

We went to a fourteen-day detox program at the Hope Center, courtesy of money set aside by the Nixon Administration. It was the first time I'd met addicts who were old, in their thirties and forties. They were parents. Some were pregnant. Some had school-aged children waiting in the car. Some juggled wiggling, pajama-clad toddlers as they stood in the morning medication line. I remember this old guy, Buster Glass, who Fernando knew from working construction. The first time Buster met me, he just started laughing. I was standing there, shivering and smoking in the morning medication line, my long hair hanging wet down my back, my bare feet in sandals, a thin sweater wrapped around me. Buster asked Fernando, "Who's this? Little Miss Granola Girl?" But I remember thinking, you mean this could be your life? This wasn't just something you did when you were young?

Tommy, our counselor, was small, quiet with dark skin. He used to say, "I've had my jones for twenty years." He'd been clean for the last two or so but he never gave himself credit for that. He counted all the years, from the first time to the present, as his habit. Any intervening years off dope didn't count either. "Once a junkie," he said, "always a junkie."

Questions Tommy asked us: Are you two a couple? Do you love each other or are you just spoon partners? Who leads and who follows? What's the worst thing you've ever done to get it? Have you ever betrayed each other? How did that feel? How far will you go? What lines will you cross? Of course, we couldn't answer all of these questions, but neither could we forget them.

One day, Tommy told me I was a self-medicating junkie. I didn't understand what he meant. He explained, "Something eats at you, you want to cover it up." But that seemed such a normal impulse, I couldn't believe it had anything to do with my habit. Our last day, Tommy held his hands in front of his face, his fingers pressed together. "Look at you two," he said to us. "What are you doing here? You have a chance to make it. You can fight this sucker. Don't give in."

He sighed, "It's going to be hard. You're used to hundreds of dollars passing through your hands every day, now maybe you'll spend \$20, \$10, that's all, groceries, gas for your car. You're used to excitement: you got to hustle for money." He shrugged at us. "Now you're going to be bored. Watch TV. What can we do, you'll say to each other. How often can a person go to the zoo? What do normal people do? What did we do before we got strung out?"

He looked from Fernando to me, back again, and then laughed, "You can't remember what you used to do, can you? Well, try. Because there's going to be only one thing you want to do and you can't let yourself do it, not even once."

He was right. Straight life was achingly boring, even worse than being strung out. Within three days, we were using again. But it was different. It was no longer unconscious. After that, whenever I got off, or convinced Fernando that we should get off, or was convinced by him, I had to admit I was rationalizing. This sounds very simple, but it seems to me that the ability to stand outside of myself and critique my own behavior and have insights into my own motivations was invaluable. I could no longer lie to myself.

I had been clean, completely clean for over three months when Fernando and I got married. I was almost twenty. We were living in his parents' house, along with his eight brothers and sisters. It was a small tract house on the south side of Tucson. Most everyone in the neighborhood, except for me, was Mexican or Mexican American. Even the Chinese people who owned the neighborhood grocery spoke better Spanish than I did.

In memory, that was a time of light, yellow light in the kitchen in the mornings as I sat with Fernando's mother and his younger brother and sisters at the breakfast table. A time of stories about La Llorona and the Mexican Revolution. This was when his mother began to initiate me into the family, when I began to believe that dreams did mean something, they could tell the future, for instance. Not only that, but two yolks meant twins. A fork dropped on the floor meant company was coming soon. You should make the sign of the cross when you salted the food. This was when I began to see that there was another world beneath this one, a world of spirits, a world where you made sense of the disparate pieces of reality by weaving them together into a story, a world where you paid attention to vague feelings that things "weren't right" and, by doing so, saved yourself untold grief.