

# Millionaire Junkie

My Journey Down to Heroin - and Back

Jason Peter with Tony  
O'Neill



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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**T**O MY FAMILY, THANK YOU for never turning your back on me, I never lost your support and I could not have gotten through this nightmare without you. Mom, I'm sorry for keeping you up all night waiting for that dreaded phone call; the last thing I would ever want to do is to hurt you. Ashley, words can't express the regret I feel for the years I stole from our relationship. To my incredibly beautiful wife Sarah, you brought my world into focus and truly taught me how to live life. As a son, a brother and a husband, I know it's not possible for anyone to have been surrounded by people who have more forgiveness, compassion and love than all of you. I love you all!

-Jason

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- Tony

If winning is the only thing, then the only other thing is nothing - emptiness, the nothing of a life without ultimate meaning.

- TOM LANDRY, HALL OF FAME COACH OF THE DALLAS  
COWBOYS

Myths & legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes & mould-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of 'the rat race' is not yet final.

- HUNTER S. THOMPSON, HALL OF FAME WORTHY  
JOURNALIST, AUTHOR AND FREE SPIRIT

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## ARE YOU THE GUY?

### WASN'T AFRAID OF DEATH.

How could I be? I lived under death's shadow every day. When you swallow 60 Vicodin, 20 sleeping pills, drink a bottle of vodka and still survive, a certain sense of invulnerability stays with you. When you continually use drugs with the kind of reckless determination that I did, the limit to how much heroin or crack you can ingest is not defined by dollar amounts but by the amounts your body can withstand without experiencing a seizure or respiratory failure. Yet at the end of every binge, every night of lining up six, seven, eight crack pipes and hitting them one after the other *bam! bam! bam!* every night of smoking and snorting bag after bag of heroin . . . after all of that, when you still *wake up* to see the same dirty sky over you as the night before, you start to think that instead of dying, maybe your punishment is to live - to be stuck in this purgatory of self-abuse and misery for an eternity. Sometimes you start to think that death would come as a blessed relief.

I found myself contemplating death again. Only this time I wasn't going to leave it to chance. I was going to buy a gun, load the thing, place the barrel in my mouth and blow my fucking brains out.

I sat on my parents' sofa as I pondered this. All I needed was a gun.

And all -

Of my problems -

Would be -



Solved.

This had all started the night before. It started in the way that life-shattering events, like suicides or murders, usually begin, with something so small, so meaningless, that it is almost comical.

It started with an argument over a television programme.

Diane had been on my last goddamned nerve ever since we had driven from my apartment building in New York to my folks' house in New Jersey. They were out of town and had asked me stay there to watch the house and look after the dogs. Our heroin habits were again out of control, so we talked it over and decided that we would take the opportunity to kick dope. The plan was this: we would take a small amount of heroin with us. Week one, I would start to kick. Diane would use enough dope not to get sick so that she would be able to look after me and get me through the worst of the physical symptoms. Then, when I was feeling better, Diane would kick and I would nurse her back to health. It seemed like a simple, obvious plan.

What could possibly go wrong?

Doctors will tell you that kicking heroin is like having severe flu. They will reel off a list of symptoms: runny nose, runny eyes, muscle aches, stomach cramps, fever, the chills, insomnia, diarrhoea, nausea . . . I mean, it doesn't sound like a walk in the park, but it's hardly as bad as having your vertebrae crushed under a 300-lb offensive lineman, right?

Well, as any addict can tell you, doctors - for all of their good intentions - really don't know shit. Comparing heroin withdrawal to the flu is like comparing getting hit by a truck to falling off a tricycle. I don't care how severe your flu is, it's unlikely that you've seriously considered throwing yourself out of a window just to make the screaming in your head go away and the agony in your body stop. Heroin withdrawal is the nearest thing to hell that the living ever get to experience.

We barricaded ourselves in my parents' house. I had gotten a prescription for a new drug called Subutex from one of my doctors, a little white tablet that dissolves under the tongue. Supposedly, it would help with the withdrawal. I also had Xanax to help me sleep. Diane carried the heroin and cocaine, and I resigned myself to a very unpleasant seven days.

By the time I reached day three, the huge flaw in my plan became apparent. Withdrawal sickness tends to come to a peak around the third or fourth day. You are vomiting, shitting yourself, your body is twitching and spasming so hard you can involuntarily throw yourself out of bed. You feel like you have white-hot sulphur in your veins instead of blood and your brain is literally screaming out for some heroin to take the pain away.

As all this was going on, I would walk Diane, high as a fucking kite. Her pupils like pin-pricks. Slurring her words. And I knew that in her purse there was enough shit to take all of my pain away. All I had to do was ask.

You see, the relationship with Diane was not exactly an equal partnership. I knew that at the end of the day, if I asked her, she would have to give it to me. Because she knew that if she pissed me off too much and I kicked her out, she would be left with nothing except a drug habit she had no way of being able to support.

Diane had been a dancer when I met her. A truly beautiful girl with a body that could drive a man insane. She was also a very sweet, kind-hearted person. She came into my life like so many of the others - we met at a club, we exchanged messages and one day she turned up at my apartment with two or three other girls to party. Only Diane never left when the party was over. She stayed, and at this point we had been together for just under a year.

She had changed. I had changed her, I suppose. There was no way that someone could live with me, could be around me for such an extended period without changing.

When you live with someone who is high literally 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, you either leave . . . or you adapt. Diane adapted. When I met her, she used drugs - maybe a little crystal meth when she danced, or coke recreationally. Normal-people stuff. The stuff that is happening in homes and clubs all over the country at this very moment. After a year, however, Diane was snorting as much heroin and smoking as much crack as I was, and I was supporting her habit. Without me to continue funding her drug habit, Diane would be completely screwed.

It was during this attempt that I realised that maybe Diane didn't want us to get clean. After all, it's an old story - if you take the drugs away from a relationship like this, often there is nothing left in their place. Maybe a part of her worried that if we weren't high all the time, I wouldn't want her around any more. It would have at least required a huge period of readjustment. Apart from getting high, we didn't have much in common.

At some point during the third day I had managed to hold down enough Xanax that I passed out in a dark, dreamless sleep. I don't know how long I was out. An hour? Two? Maybe only a matter of minutes. Soon something started to bring me around . . .

Then I smelled it.

Something familiar.

Something dragging me out of my cocoon of sleep.

I started to become aware of my surroundings again. The duvet that I was wrapped in, soaked through with my sweat. The aches in every inch of my body. The relentless fucking daylight burning into the back of my eyelids.

And the smell.

That fucking smell.

With a groan of disappointment, I woke up fully. I was curled in a foetal position. I didn't know how long I'd been asleep. I became aware that Diane was sitting on the edge of the bed next to me. I gingerly turned around.

‘What the fuck . . .’ I gasped, ‘are you doing?’

She turned and looked at me. In her hand was a large square piece of aluminium foil. A pipe fashioned from foil hung casually from her lips. Her bleary, stoned eyes looked at me quizzically before she fired up the lighter and carried on smoking heroin, right there, in the same bed where I was trying to get clean.

*‘What the fuck are you doing, Diane?’*

She exhaled plumes of white smoke from her nostrils and took the pipe from her mouth.

‘I’m staying well, Jason! So I can look after you. How are you feeling, baby?’

I was furious with her but too sick and weak to argue. Instead, I told her to give me the fucking dope so I could get well, too. I swear she looked relieved when I finally caved.

This sudden change in our plans necessitated a trip back to New York. Once I was using heroin again, I realised we needed more. More of everything. We drove back to the city that night to have coke and heroin delivered to the apartment.

My connections were always ready to deliver. It’s pure economics. I was everybody’s best customer, and there is no better working model for capitalism than the relationship between a dealer and his customer. If I called at seven in the morning and he was dropping his kid off at school, he made sure I got my drugs first. Late for his mother’s funeral? He made sure I got my drugs first. So within an hour of making the call I had five eight-balls [ $\frac{1}{8}$  ounce] of cocaine and three bundles of heroin sitting on my coffee table.

It was too late to drive back to Jersey. We decided to stay home and we started our usual routine. I cooked up the cocaine with bicarbonate of soda to make freebase. We put the TV on and began to furiously smoke crack and snort heroin, the same thing that we had been doing daily for the past 12 months.

A woman, in tears, was screaming at her boyfriend, about how she was going to keep her baby no matter what. I noticed Diane staring at the screen intently.

'Fuck,' I laughed. 'I tell you, Diane . . . if you ever got pregnant, we wouldn't be keeping that baby.'

It was an innocuous enough comment, I thought. After all, we were heroin addicts with out-of-control crack habits. We weren't exactly the models of stability. Whatever I was expecting from Diane, it wasn't the reaction that I got.

'How do you mean?'

'I mean what I say. If you ever got pregnant, you wouldn't be keeping that baby!'

'What the fuck do you mean *you wouldn't be keeping that baby*, Jason?'

'You're a fucking junkie, Diane! So am I! What . . . you're saying you'd keep it if you got pregnant?'

'I couldn't get rid of my baby,' Diane told me quietly.

'What, you'd rather have a baby born addicted to fucking crack than get an abortion? Listen to what you're fucking saying!'

*'Fuck you!'*

Then Diane lost it. She started screaming about how I didn't love her. How I was taking away her right to choose. How I was a controlling asshole. She hadn't slept in days, and we were both loaded on dope and crack, and with our psyches so fragile the argument quickly escalated. I screamed at her that she was crazy if she thought that she was ever having my baby. She told me that I was crazy if I thought I could tell her what to do.

'Fine!' I yelled at her. 'Then we aren't having sex again, *period!* Not until the both of us clean up!'

With that, Diane stormed into the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

It was a ridiculous argument. It wasn't as if Diane getting pregnant was at all likely. At the beginning of our relationship, it had been all sex but that soon fizzled out as

drugs became the focus. Sometimes when she got high, Diane would get horny but the last thing I wanted to do was have sex. To keep her happy, once in a while I would cut down on the drugs, pop a Viagra and we would screw, but there were so many chemicals in my bloodstream that even this was an extremely rare occurrence. When you have been doing crack for a while it becomes the least sexual drug you can imagine. The very idea of touching another person, or doing anything that would divert your attention away from the pipe, is unthinkable.

I sat and fumed. Fucking bitch! She was acting crazier and crazier. The crack was making her unstable. All it would take was a wrong word out of me and she would be in tears, screaming, throwing things. In my eyes, I was the stable one. I sucked on the crack pipe angrily and contemplated throwing her ass out on the street.

After an hour, I checked in on her. She sat at the desk by the bed, furiously writing a letter, with the pipe next to her. She was so high and so angry her eyes looked like they could pop right out of her skull. When you're high on crack, you get into manic bouts of activity like this. I decided to leave her to it. I went back to the TV room and carried on getting loaded.

I couldn't concentrate on the screen. I started to cook more crack, using a large dessert spoon to dump the cocaine and the baking soda into. At every step of the process - adding the water, cooking up the coke, draining off the water, drying the base cocaine - I would stop to smoke some more of the previous batch. My hands trembled from the effect of the coke.

*Schhhhtttt!*

I heard the noise maybe half an hour after the crack was cooked. I immediately realised that it was the sliding door leading to the fire escape. *What the fuck was she doing?*

It was four in the morning. My building was one of the more exclusive in New York City. I counted Matt Damon

among my neighbours. The heads of multimillion-dollar corporations lived here. As I stormed into the bedroom I caught a glimpse of Diane, crack pipe and torch in one hand, letter in the other, disappearing up the fire escape.

My blood ran cold. My mind still reeling from the crack I had been smoking, I started to realise just how messy this could get. One of my big-shot neighbours hears Diane stomping about on the fire escape, thinks somebody is trying to break into their apartment and calls the cops. I mean, Jesus, I could see the headlines:

EX-NFL PLAYER JASON PETER ARRESTED IN HIS  
MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR CRACK DEN

‘Diane!’ I hissed. ‘Get the fuck down!’

‘Fuck you!’ she yelled back. ‘Leave me alone! You don’t love me!’

I saw her climbing unsteadily up the fire escape. Oh, Jesus, it got better and better. I could hear her muttering to herself up there about what an asshole I was. The girl was so high and so hysterical that there was no reasoning with her. I tried a different tack.

‘Diane, baby,’ I pleaded, ‘come down. Let’s just talk.’

‘Fuck you, Jason!’

Goddamn it. Any minute now, lights were going to start coming on all over the building. If one person called 911, this whole house of cards was going to come tumbling down around me.

*‘Diane!’ I hissed, louder this time. ‘If you don’t get the fuck down here RIGHT NOW, so help me God, I’m gonna lock you out on this fire escape! Now I’m going inside! If you aren’t in here in TWO FUCKING MINUTES, I am locking the door!’*

Fucking bitch! I was suddenly gripped with the drug-fucked certainty that if I didn’t get away from the apartment right this minute I was going to be spending an extended

period in a prison cell. I opened the door, and as I did so I heard a noise above my head.

*Crunch!*

Diane had either dropped or thrown the crack pipe down and it shattered into fragments on the escape. Tiny shards of glass tinkled as they fell through the cracks and started to settle. I could see them twinkling like frost on the metal walkway. I pulled the door open and stepped back into the relative safety of my apartment. I thought about locking the door and then decided against it. My concern for Diane's safety was fading now and my survival instinct kicked in. There was no way in hell I was gonna do time because of her tantrum. I was going to split, whether she decided to stay on the fire escape or not. My heart pounding, my adrenaline levels pumped to insane levels, I started to throw my clothes into a bag.

I grabbed all of the drugs in the place. I stashed the cocaine in my pockets. I looked at the heroin. I had three bundles left. Every time I heard a siren outside on the street, I thought that the cops must be showing up at my building already. In a moment of idiot genius, I decided to flush the heroin. After all, if I walked outside and the cops were waiting, I could deal with being busted with coke. There is something acceptable about coke. I mean, shit, 90 per cent of Wall Street does coke. It's a success drug. I think people are more taken aback when they find out that rich people *aren't* doing coke.

Heroin is a different matter. People don't think of good times when they think of heroin. They think of junkies passed out in the gutter, stealing for their next fix, shooting up with dirty needles . . . I figured I could handle a coke bust but not a heroin bust. The smack would have to go.

I stood over the toilet and threw one bundle in the bowl.  
*Plop!*

*Don't worry, man, I told myself. You'll be cool. You can buy some more as soon as this shit blows over.*



I threw the second bundle into the bowl. I'm now looking at what amounted to \$300 floating in my toilet, like the world's most expensive turd. One bundle left.

JASON 'JUNKIE' PETER, EX-NFL PLAYER, BUSTED  
LEAVING APARTMENT WITH HEROIN AND COCAINE.  
FAMILY EXPRESSES SHOCK, DISGUST.

Cursing, I placed the last bundle back in my pocket with the coke and flushed the rest of the dope before I had time to change my mind. I'd just have to take my chances with the cops. I needed the heroin more than I needed the peace of mind. I picked up my bag and headed for the door.

'Where the fuck are you going, Jason?'

I turned and there was Diane. I hadn't even heard her come in. Her eyes looked crazed. In this light, I could see the toll the drugs were taking on her. She looked thinner, hollowed out almost. And her eyes. There was something terribly vacant about her eyes. She was still clutching the torch and the letter like her life depended on it.

'Away, Diane. I'm going away.'

'Where are you going? Answer me!'

'I told you! Away! I'm done! I'm done with all of this bullshit!' I waved my hand around the apartment. 'This shit is making you crazy! You're acting like a fucking lunatic! I'm out, Diane. Do what you need to do, but I'm out of here!'

I saw her mind turning the situation over.

'You can't go,' she said quietly.

'Oh yes I can.'

I knew that she was worried about the drugs. She knew I had them on me. The last thing she wanted was for me to storm out right then and leave her with no drugs. It was a survival mechanism on her part but I was in no mood to negotiate. With a scream, Diane launched herself at me and started trying to punch me and claw my face. Now, I'm 240 lb and 6 ft 5 in. tall. If I was that kind of guy, I could have

knocked her on her ass. But she still tried anyway. She was going for my bag. I let her have it. She ripped it open and started throwing my clothes out on the floor in a vain attempt to find the drugs.

'They ain't there. I flushed the fucking drugs, Diane! They're gone! Here!' I dug around in my wallet and took out a bunch of \$20 bills and threw them at her. They drifted down all around her, like confetti. Diane just stayed on the ground, her breath ragged, with the contents of my bag and the scrunched-up \$20 bills vomited all around her. She looked like she was about to burst into tears.

'The fucking candy store is closed!' I spat. 'I'm going . . . and when I get back you'd better be gone.'

I left her like that. I ran down the stairs, still convinced that the cops must be on their way. It was 4.00 a.m. and I was cracked out, sweating. The whole incident had spun me out completely. I heard my heart pounding in my ears and felt the cold sweat trickling down my back.

Outside my building, taxis were loitering to pick up the stragglers from the nightclub next door. I wrenched a door open and the driver - an older Indian guy - almost jumped out of his skin when he saw a sweating, brawny crackhead with bulging eyes and a shaved head jump into the back of his cab. Like in a bad movie, I looked at him and yelled, 'Drive!'

'W-where you want to go?'

'Anywhere, man! Just fucking drive!'

We headed uptown, cruising the streets of New York at four in the morning. After the initial rush of crack, you are left with a pretty unpleasant sensation. Your adrenaline levels and heart rate are pushed way up. The pleasurable aspects start to fade quickly. Then you find yourself in full-on fight-or-flight mode. You start to get a little tweaked. Everything carries the air of threat. Sudden noises seem loud and malicious. Your mind is reeling and paranoia floods in. My mind started to turn on me.

*What if she dies, my mind said. What if she fucking jumps? That note was obviously a suicide note of some kind. If she throws herself out of a window, or slashes her wrists, and the cops show up to see that you've fled the scene . . . you do the math. Heroin and crack-addicted football player kills his girlfriend and flees the scene . . . tries to make it look like a suicide. It'll be an open-and-shut case. You'll get the fucking chair, asshole, and it will take more than Johnnie Cochran to save you.*

*You need an alibi.*

*You need to cover your ass.*

So, spurred on by crack logic, I started talking to the cab-driver. 'Listen, man, something bad is happening in my apartment. My girlfriend . . . I think she's going to hurt herself . . . I don't know . . . she's fucking crazy. She's all cracked out, up on the fire escape, I think she wrote a fucking suicide note . . .'

I could tell the old guy behind the wheel was getting more and more freaked out. What I was doing was patently insane but I carried on anyway.

'Look. I need a receipt. A receipt with the time on it. And if anything happens, I need your word that you'll tell the cops I was in your cab at - hey, what time is it? Four? Four-fifteen? Look, I need you to tell me that you'll tell the cops that I didn't do anything, OK?'

I carried on in this vein for a while. The driver would look back at me in the mirror for a second before meeting my manic gaze and looking away quickly. He probably thought I was some kind of psychopathic murderer. Every so often he would say, 'Oh, yeah?' or 'Really?', and I started to get the impression that he was being very careful not to antagonise me. We pulled up at a cash machine and I withdrew as much as I could. I didn't want to use my card when I got to a hotel. Maybe the cops could trace it. It seemed as if the whole city was buzzing with a malicious energy. I imagined the cops out there with their computers and their tracking devices

and their hi-tech equipment all trying to nail me for a crime I hadn't committed. I jumped back in the cab and told the driver, 'OK, head to the Hudson Hotel.'

On the way there, the cabbie started gently asking questions. I answered a few of them before I started to get wary that he was probing me for too much information and I clammed up. Twisting around to look out of the rear window, I noticed that the same car had been behind us for a few blocks now. Shit, maybe they were on to me already. I turned back around. After a few seconds, I looked again.

Still behind us. Shit.

When we pulled up outside the Hudson Hotel, I handed the cabbie the money, which he accepted with nervous hands. I took my receipt and his assurances that he would testify on my behalf if Diane showed up dead. Then, with a squeal of tyres, he split, as if the devil himself was getting out of his cab.

I stepped into the deserted lobby. I walked straight for the escalator. I fought the urge to look over my shoulder. At any moment, I expected a strong, steady hand to land on my shoulder. 'Going somewhere, buddy?'

I stood on the escalator and watched the empty lobby for clues as I was carried further and further up. I rode the thing up to the top and then rode another straight down. Back at the lobby, I walked out into the night in an effort to evade anybody who might have been tailing me. I hurried to a yellow cab waiting for a pick-up outside the hotel and got in. As we drove to our next destination, I made sure I kept my mouth shut.

I started hitting hotels in an effort to find a place for the night. What I needed to do was get a room, bolt the door and get high. Get so high that I could just turn off the screaming voices in my head for a moment. In the back of my mind, I knew that the wreckage of my life would still be there when the drugs wore off but at this point I didn't care. Whether Diane was alive, dead or something in-between,

my overwhelming need was for the temporary oblivion of drugs. I needed to be high as a motherfucker.

I started making the rounds. All of the fancy hotels. I started to find that I had a problem. No one had a room. The first time it's bad luck. The second time, too. But after hitting four hotels and asking for a room and being told that there were no rooms, on a Monday night, I started to get worried. I was shoving handfuls of cash in people's faces, begging for a single room, a double, a fucking penthouse suite, *anything!*

Nothing.

Zip.

Something was up.

Someone was calling all of these hotels ahead of time and warning them that I was bad news! That I was a drug-crazed woman killer on the run from the law! I started ducking into hotel bathrooms and taking little snorts of coke to try to delay the crash but with all of the stern-faced desk clerks repeating, 'Sorry, sir, we have no vacancies,' my paranoia could no longer be reined in.

*They're on to you, asshole. Your money is no help to you now.*

*They know what you did. The cab driver probably called ahead to tell them you were some kind of lunatic as soon as you stepped out of his cab.*

*You've been red-flagged.*

*You're screwed!*

I practically ran from the last place into a waiting cab. As I opened the door and jumped in, panting and trembling from the effects of the coke, I swear the cabbie asked: 'Are you the guy? The guy with the girlfriend in the apartment?'

That kind of floored me. As we drove off, I started to imagine how it was going down. The first cab-driver got on his radio and alerted all the other cabbies that a manic, brick-shithouse skinhead got into his cab and started talking about killing his girlfriend. I mean, shit, I'm not hard to pick

out from the crowd. I imagined this radio network chattering with voices all conspiring against me.

I tried to get the guy off topic.

'Me? Nah, you're thinking of someone else! I'm from North Carolina . . .' I started in, 'I'm new in town. You know where the action is? Where can I get some pussy around here?'

'Um . . . well, it's five in the morning, man . . . Everything is closed.'

'Yeah . . . yeah, right!'

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

I tried one more hotel and got turned away. Maybe it was the disconcerting effect that a cracked-out man-mountain can have on the concierge of a nice hotel at five in the morning that led to the lack of a room, but at the time it all became one giant, head-spinning conspiracy between the cab-drivers, the cops and whoever else. I was getting desperate.

I walked past the cabs outside the hotel and started wandering the street. The last cab-driver's comments had really bothered me. Did he really say that? Did he say something else and I heard what I was expecting to hear? No, fuck that, I had heard it as clear as day:

*Are you the guy?*

I needed to stop using the cabs outside the hotels. Maybe those guys were watching me. I needed to find a cab from the street. After a couple of blocks, I hailed one.

'Take me to the Soho Grand.'

We drove in silence.

Pulling up at the Soho Grand, I tried to calm myself. My stomach churned. I got out and made my way to the front desk. I forced an inviting smile to my face but it must have seemed a hideous, terrifying grimace.

*I'm sorry, sir. We have no vacancies.*

I gave up. There was nothing else to be done. The Soho Grand has a huge lobby, imposing and cavernous. The feel is rustic, stone and steel. You can *hear* things in there.

Voices echo and bounce off the walls. Walking down the staircase towards the exit I heard the concierge speaking into a phone or a walkie-talkie. His words echoed down the staircase, following me like a flock of bats.

OK.

He's

Coming

Down

Now.

I staggered out to the street. It was five in the morning. There were cabs waiting outside the hotel. I started to feel nauseous. I could see cars lingering further down the street.

Calm down.

Be cool.

But I couldn't. I could feel eyes on me, burning holes through me from the windows of cars. I was being watched. I was being followed. Maybe they'd found Diane's body already. Maybe she'd splattered herself all over the sidewalk. Oh, Christ.

I didn't want to get back into a cab again. I needed to be outside, away from people. I started walking back to Lafayette and Astor. I needed to see what was happening back at the apartment. I kept my head down and started pounding the sidewalk. *Just keep walking. Don't look. Just keep walking.*

Up on Broadway, I started to notice people on the streets. They were just hanging around. White guys reading papers, drinking coffee. Bums maybe. They were dressed in a perfectly nondescript manner. They had the smoothed-over, anonymous look of cops. I counted them . . . one, two, three . . . Crossing the street, I came up to a Don't Walk sign. Even though the streets were pretty much deserted, I stood on the sidewalk until the light changed. A part of me was convinced that if I stepped onto the street before the Walk sign appeared, they would rush me, screaming, 'Down! Down! Down!' pointing guns at my head.

Shit. I should have dumped the drugs I was carrying with me. I cursed Diane again and my own rookie stupidity. It seemed inconceivable that only two hours ago I was in the safety of my own home, pipe in my hand, without a worry in the world. Now I was walking the streets of New York with what seemed like half of the city's undercover cops trailing me, possibly a dead girlfriend and enough drugs in my pocket to get me hit with intent-to-supply charges.

I noticed the bastards following me somewhere along Broadway. I heard a noise behind me and when I turned to look there were two kids on my tail. Too young to be cops. They looked like punks, snitches maybe. They were keeping pace with me, talking between themselves but looking up every so often. I picked up my speed. So did they. They were trailing me. The cops' very own tracking device. I knew that the game was gonna be up any second now. I took my cell phone and started desperately calling the apartment. I needed to know that she was alive.

No answer.

I tried again.

No fucking answer.

Oh shit. If she's dead, I'm fucked for sure.

On the opposite side of the street, a guy was walking virtually alongside me. I looked back, and the kids had fallen back a block or so. But the guy across the road looked like trouble. Older guy, white, buzz cut. He wasn't even being discreet. Just tailing my ass. I punched in the number again and dialled. I was waiting to cross Houston onto Lafayette.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

'Jason?'

I stood still and let the relief seep into my body. 'Oh Jesus, Diane! Listen, I'm on my way back -'

'No! Fuck you, Jason. I don't wanna see you.'

'Shut up! Shut up and listen! I'm being followed! There are cops on my tail! Hide anything you can, clean the fucking



apartment! I'm coming up. Something crazy is going on. Get ready to leave the fucking apartment and get rid of anything incriminating.'

I hung up. I stopped and looked around, enjoying the relief for a moment. I was on top of the world, a winner. They couldn't pin shit on me! Triumphant, I raised the phone over my head and yelled over to the cop on the other side of the road and anyone else who wanted to hear: '*She's alive! She's alive! You wanna speak to her? Huh? 'Cos she's all right!*'

Back at the apartment, I stashed the drugs in the bathroom. Diane was confused but still pissed at me. I insisted she come downstairs with me to get coffee so that the cops would see that she was in one piece and leave us alone. We stepped out into the 5.30 a.m. murk and I gave her a big theatrical hug for everybody's benefit. I could see cops everywhere . . . lurking in the shadows, parked in the unmarked van across the street. The bricks and concrete of the city seemed to glow with a malevolent energy. As I hugged Diane, she hissed, 'You are an asshole', and I kept my grin as wide as possible.

After sitting at the 24-hour Starbucks across the street for a while, nursing coffees, we saw the sun slowly appearing over the buildings. As the darkness faded and light crept into the city streets, so the threat and terror of the previous night started to dissipate. My stomach growled. I felt beaten-up and tired. I was starting to crash from the coke and my hand trembled a little as I tried to stir my coffee. I could see no one on the streets except for regular people . . . commuters, bums, kids . . . It was over.

At the apartment, I started to get jittery again. Diane was still stalking around me silently, incandescent with rage. I thought I heard something and started checking the apartment.

*Crunch! Crrrrunch!*

It was coming from the fire escape. Someone was creeping around out there, crunching the glass from the broken crack pipe underfoot. I briefly considered smoking more crack, then gave up. I took some Xanax and fell into bed. I left all the lights burning and the windows open. I wanted whoever was creeping around on the fire escape to see. My last thought before drifting into a dreamless sleep was 'If she kills herself . . . I want them to see I did nothing . . . They won't pin shit on me . . .'

I woke up with the afternoon sun streaming through the window. Something was on top of my chest. I opened my eyes and saw Diane, passed out, snoring softly on top of me. I eased my way out from under her and stood.

The place was in chaos. I felt awful. My lips were dry, cracked and covered with spots of dried blood. My mouth tasted like shit. I still felt the last vestiges of terror from the night before. All I knew was that I had to get away from this place and never come back. This million-dollar apartment had become a cave, a trap, a place of darkness. I knew I had to leave, right now, or things were only going to get worse. I was standing on the precipice of a complete free-fall into insanity.

Driving back to Jersey, I called my younger brother and a few of my friends and left them similar messages.

'It's Jason. Listen, something happened last night. I don't want to get into it but . . . look - just be ready to bail me out if something happens, OK? Please, just be ready to bail me out.

'I'm sorry.'

That's how I found myself contemplating suicide in my parents' house. I knew that there was no other option for me but death. I would never be able to quit, not so long as there was cocaine on this planet. After four futile attempts at rehabilitation, I had come to the conclusion that I was beyond help. The 12-step recovery programme that everybody seemed so determined to push on me was next

to useless. After leaving rehab, I would attend maybe one or two meetings. Sitting in a circle of ex-addicts complaining about their lives, thanking God for sobriety, holding hands and praying . . . it just wasn't me. If anything, I left those places more desperate to get high than before I walked in.

If I carried on living, my years would be spent in this state of abject desperation, sucking on a glass stem, praying for a moment of oblivion before my mind started in on me again. I considered the way I had been acting last night. Wandering the streets with enough drugs in my pocket to send me down for years. Blabbing to anyone who would listen about my crackhead girlfriend and her possible suicide. Seeing undercover cops everywhere. I was losing my fucking mind.

I was a mess. Everyone knew it. It seemed cruel to keep up this charade and put my family through all of this bullshit. If I just put a gun in my mouth and pulled the trigger, maybe it would be better for everyone.

The whole next day, I alternated between fits of uncontrollable sobbing and hours of snorting cocaine to stave off the crash. My heart pounded in my chest, my extremities were ice cold. The cocaine made no difference. I wanted to die. I couldn't stand to live this life any more.

I was sitting there, zombified by the cocaine, when I heard a car pull into the driveway. I recognised the vehicle straightaway. It was Aunt Lee. My first reaction was to hide. Pretend I wasn't there. I couldn't deal with her right now. I was coked out of my mind, in tears, semi-psychotic . . . I couldn't let her see me like this.

She could see that my car was here. She'd know I was hiding. It was stupid to think that I could lie to her but a part of my brain was still screaming orders at me even as I reluctantly walked to the back door to let her in.

*Run!*

*Run, you fucking idiot!*

*She'll see what a mess you are! She'll start trying to talk you into cleaning up again! Four times in rehab, Jason, this*

*one isn't going to be any different! You're just gonna let them down again . . .*

*Don't answer the door!*

*Don't -*

I was afraid to open this door, because I knew what was waiting on the other side was more than just my aunt, more than just another family member who would be saddened and disappointed to see poor Jason, who once had all the potential in the world, lost in the midst of his latest, endless, downward spiral.

I pulled the door open and stood facing my Aunt Lee. If she was shocked at my appearance, she was good enough not to let on. She smiled warmly and said, 'It's good to see you, Jason. I've been terribly worried about you.'

Just looking into Aunt Lee's face I felt that I was about to start crying again. I knew that if I started crying, I would not be able to stop. I wished I could be a child again so Aunt Lee could look at me with real pride, or joy, or anything except for the mixture of sadness and worry that she showed now. For a brief, insane moment, I considered barging past her, getting in my car and driving away as fast as I could. Instead, I fought back my tears.

'Come in, Aunt Lee. I missed you.'

## THE FIRST HIT IS FREE

**DON'T BELIEVE IN PREDESTINATION**, fate, or any of that stuff. I believe that we each write our own story. I spent a lot of time talking with therapists, doctors, my family and myself trying to work out what it was inside of me that made me the way I am. I don't believe in predestination because it takes the blame and the control away from me and places it in the hands of unknown forces. The reason that so many of my attempts at recovery ended in catastrophic failure is my total refusal to accept the concept of powerlessness. An admission of powerlessness is a prerequisite in the all-pervading Alcoholics Anonymous concept of recovery. This outlook is embraced with the same zeal and fervour in the United States as the concept of a flat earth once was. The day that I accept I am powerless over anything is the day that I surrender all control over my life and place it in the hands of others.

The word 'surrender' has so many negative connotations; it's hard for someone who played a deeply physical and competitive sport like pro football to even consider anything like surrendering. Maybe surrender was what I had always been afraid of. The concept of surrender was more terrifying than that of dying. But by opening the door, and letting Aunt Lee in, I knew that surrendering was exactly what I was doing.

I suppose I am telling you a love story. This is the story of the two great loves of my life. Maybe 'love' is the wrong word. Maybe I should say the two great *obsessions* of my

life: football and pharmaceutical-grade drugs. The thing is, when you get close enough, it's pretty hard to distinguish the two.

I come from a family of football players. My older brother, Christian, went away to Nebraska to play college football before a National Football League career with the Giants, the Colts and the Bears. I was 15 years old when Christian left the house. By that time, my body had already begun to grow and develop so that I had great speed as well as bone-crunching power. My younger brother, Damian, also possessed a football player's physique and a God-given aptitude for the sport. When we played sports together as kids, it would get seriously competitive. Noses bloodied, legs bruised and egos hurt. Despite being younger than us, Damian seemed to have that extra *something* when it came to football. Call it a gift or whatever, but we all sensed that Damian was going to make his mark on the world playing for the NFL.

I got my first taste of competitive sports when I was six years old. Our family would spend the summer at the Jersey Shore in the Peninsula House Beach Club and I would take part in the interclub swim meets. Mom would wake us up at 6.00 a.m. so we could make practice, and my brothers and I were all strong swimmers. The entire family would spend the summer at Peninsula House: my brothers and I, Mom, Aunt Lee and my cousins. My father - along with my uncle Markus - spent most of his time at his restaurant, the Fromagerie.

The swim meets became important to me because my father was a sports fanatic. On Sundays, we would spend the day with him and he would be especially proud when I pulled out a blue ribbon that designated a first place finish. I understood that my father's restaurant was the reason that we had a nice house and were able to spend our summers at a beach club on the Jersey shore, and I never resented him for the time he put in there. On the occasions that I