

Hold on Tight

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The quiet, polite, and innocent girl. Ballerina and big sister. I portrayed what others thought was good. For years the façade I once believed to be real stayed attached. But in some ways it made me crazy, or so I thought. Really, it was genetics.

I wrote stories and tales when young, then desperate poetry a little later. In my late teens came dark, sad, and angst-ridden notes. It was the age of Nirvana. I was a “Gen Xer” in flannel and Levi’s. I fit the part. Externally quiet, a future nurse, mother, wife. Internally creative, frustrated, loud, with visions of city lights and fame. I was 18, and my life was planned. Two years of college, nursing career, brood of three or four, white picket fence. I look back now and I see how sheltered and clueless I was. I did see life through rose-colored glasses, even with the chest pains, aching head, and swirling thoughts.

I realize now how I was constantly struggling to meet the needs of others, to achieve a unique perfection, to conform and fit in. Ironically, I always felt alone no matter who was there. I found constant flaws. Never content and always looking for more—of what I wasn’t sure. The bubble didn’t fully burst until I turned 19 or 20. And even then it didn’t completely explode. That’s how they say it happens, anyway. I fit the statistic. I was always an emotional child. Constantly searching for attention from those I felt security with. Dancing, singing, and drawing—art was my comfort. The tormented part came later, about two years into college. I slowly crawled out of my padded shell of comfort. I

was socially accepted. I changed my course of study from nursing to journalism and went from wanting to be like mom to wanting to be like the heroine in *Message From Nam*, a Danielle Steele novel. The journalist who searches for her one true love in a war-torn country. How romantic.

I felt I had already let Mom down. I would not fulfill the plans I felt she had envisioned for me. The idealized life I would give her was not to happen. I always felt the need to prove something to her. I always wanted her to be proud. I was always looking for more from her and more to give her. No matter what, I always questioned her love for me. The history of my mind is similar to that of my mother’s—though I wouldn’t know until later on.

So I acquired a view of some independence. A little more thought went into the change of my college major than reading a novel, but it definitely fueled the pondering. And obviously, so did some of the hormones that had started to change lanes in my brain. Next came the introduction to alcohol. Vodka. Oh, the lovely throat-warming, body-numbing liquid, the alcohol (which I had never drunk before) finally entered my life. It showed up far later than it had for many of my friends. I had been the “good one,” the designated driver, always to bed early, and yes, I went to church on Sundays. My halo was getting rusty and morphing into horns.

What happened next is a timeline that if hooked to a cardio monitor would resemble a roller coaster. From the age of 19 until I was 28, I flourished or failed at nearly everything I did—and very dramatically at that. It was fun while it lasted. I don’t ever want to go back.

At 19, I began to end the life I designed to meet others’ expectations.

A relationship that began when I was too young and lasted too long ended. It was time for a short relationship with simply me, for me. It didn’t last long. With a full credit load of classes, weekends at home to waitress, and a craving for change, I stayed on campus one weekend. The former good girl wanted to use her newfound drinking abilities and single status. I also had a new personality that came with it: extremely outgoing, friends with everyone, no limits. No more weekends at home or church on Sundays, although I managed to continue working—working on a 15-credit course load, 15 hours waitressing every weekend, and social obligations—all with very little sleep, except for hangover relief and true exhaustion. I could laugh and play all night. Always the last to bed. Always the last to rise.

I met my future one night. While drunk with mutual friends at a collegiate home on the lake, I found a young man tailgating me for hours. I didn’t want him. Leave me alone. I’m finally single. Go away. These thoughts crossed my mind. He stalked me, and I avoided him for weeks. Then I finally said okay to a date during winter break. The date has lasted nearly a decade, as luck would truly have it. I managed to graduate from college and escaped from parental dependency. We moved away together. He maintained a stable job, was over his youthful habits and immaturity, and had some reasonable fun on occasion.

I was just getting started. I flew over the cuckoo’s nest and landed only when exhausted. Every minute was a scene, every day a dance.

We managed to make our relationship last in the midst of some very difficult years after college. He had joined a circus without much choice, and I was the star attraction. They

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say your twenties are difficult—growing up, social life balanced with a career, relationship, kids, basically the beginning of the future. They are right. My twenties included a relationship with alcohol, my boyfriend-fiancé, poetry and writing, new independence, dreams, Marlboros, a social life, and complete insanity. I had a full-time job, booze, and eventually an overwhelming urge to sleep all day and avoid reality. I loved midnight TV and sunrises. My clock was backwards. To some, I was funny, and to others, exhausting. I loved a random swig of liquor and chain smoking. My boyfriend-fiancé was frustrated. I was selfish and told him to loosen up. Nothing was simple. Everything was extreme.

In the four years after college, I had four or five jobs, got fired only once, drank a lot of booze, threw it up, supported tobacco companies, and yelled, argued, cried, stressed, and became depressed. It was not good. It didn't feel bad at the time, and somehow we managed to maintain the relationship. Somehow he survived with me. He has said to me, "I knew things would change. I always had hope." My future—the person and the place—was saved because the one I pushed away that night in college stayed holding my hand, even while I swung from chandeliers and barstools.

Back then I didn't want change. "Have fun, loosen up," I would tell him. No matter the pain I put him through, he held on tight. Along with the constants in my life of depression and addiction, he was always there, my guardian angel. Eventually, I found Paxil. The doctor said it would calm my nerves and help me through depressive times. I had my Paxil, cigs, and booze.

Finally, we moved back home. We bought a house. The irony: on the first day in our new house, using a small knife to cut the lime for a celebratory beer, I cut my finger and bled and ended up in the hospital. Several stitches later, I came home. If that wasn't an obvious sign. I thought to myself "Hint: you're a drunk! Have some Kool-Aid instead." But, I still didn't get it.

I guess moving back was the geo-

graphical change in our life. We never moved to the ten other states I told others I dreamed of. Funny how a change in location is the focus of those in denial. This town stinks, blah, blah, blah. Let's move. For several months things seemed to move smoothly. I had a steady job, enjoyed a daily buzz, and bought a home. I was extremely motivated, fast, planned to save the world, meet Madonna (because I was sure we'd be best friends), enter politics, and join the Peace Corps and the Armed Forces. Not to mention the plans I had to completely change the dynamic and purpose of the place I worked to better suit the needs of the community. I had visions and plans beyond belief. None of this happened, and it was as exhausting as it seems.

Before I moved back to Vermont, I had been planning our wedding to be held in a year. I changed my mind. For no apparent reason, it was to happen in two months after our move, but my family persuaded me to wait at least six months. I wanted everything as soon as possible and no later. By the time the wedding planning and event was complete, I spiraled down from the high. I knew I would be sad once it ended, but I didn't realize how truly down I became. At first I thought it was boredom. I needed a new project to work on. The project should have been me.

Instead, I became complacent—depressed and wired at the same time.

The next year, several months after the honeymoon, I was at more than a pack a day, consuming barrels of Mountain Dew, a little coffee with my sugar, booze, booze, booze, a little weed, and at four months of marriage I went to the bookstore and didn't come home. I never made it there and stayed with friends for three days. It was like a version of Lennon's "lost weekend." This happened several more times. I would leave home, sometimes drunk, with the intention to evade boredom and would end up somewhere for a period of time, usually at friends' houses or a cheap hotel. I always had plenty of cigs and drinks available for these occasional reality hiatuses.

When I returned home, I promised change. It always went full circle. And there he would be, our steady hands outstretched every time, always waiting, with my dogs waiting for me to return. The ride would shut down and the intention was always to change, but the urges were stronger. Willpower was not an option. And the changes just didn't happen fast enough. It was supposed to be quick and easy. A couple of AA meetings, an increased dose of Paxil, and then, "Here's to the repeat offender—cheers, chug, chug."

Then, after another year of a rebellious return to the party girl youth I never had, came the crash and burn. December 28, 2003. Day 5 of an alcohol binge. 5 a.m. I knocked on my own front door. I was locked out after I escaped to party with so-called friends who I knew had the fixings for a good drunk and more. I was at the point where if I could have found harder drugs, they would have been the perfect fit. It was five days after Christmas. It was freezing outside, and I was walking around town like a hobo. Alone. The pain was wretched. My mind was wound up so tight, though scattered thoughts somehow moved. Racing heart, wounded soul. I was completely destroyed. I knocked on the door forever; he answered and opened and went back to bed. No hands outstretched. The dogs were happy and confused. I smelled like smoke, alcohol, and sweat. I sat and time stood still.

The quiet, calm early morning was a contradiction to my current existence. I felt like the only person awake in the world. It was the start of a new day—and the start of a new life. Eyeliner and mascara stained my eyes. My hair was matted and gross. I picked up the phone. Emotionless. No tears. No anger. I was blank. "I have been drinking for five days straight. I feel like shit and I am tired of it. And, yes, I would not mind if I died right now."

At 9 a.m., he brought me to the place of change. He dropped me off with a bag and a hug. "I'm doing this for us," I said. "You need to do this for you," he said. "I love you. Good-bye," we said.

In 30 days in the midst of discussions with medical staff and counselors, my already obvious affliction of alcoholism was found to have a partner. "You have a dual diagnosis. Alcohol addiction, bipolar. . . ." I had always wondered, but I never really knew. I had quickly acknowledged that I was an alcoholic, but bipolar disorder, manic depression—it all made sense. Addiction and mental illness. Together as one. For 28 years, I lived with quiet demons that did not seem to be real. I'm a mess. I'm depressed. Well, yeah, and there's a reason for it. It explained so much, and I had answers for the "why's." It did not excuse my behaviors but validated the reality. I wasn't

a mean, heartless person. I was sick, and I had needed help for a very long time.

My padded shell no longer exists. I do not need to escape from reality, hiding behind a deceitful grin or a bottle anymore. My emotions are real and I embrace them now. I embrace life now with the help of meds and avoidance of drugs, alcohol, and bad decisions. Days come and go—one day at a time. They do not swallow me for days and regurgitate me half alive. I feel them, explore, and let them go.

He stands there, still. Since the day I said yes and those in between, his hand has been held out to me. The one true constant, solid exist-

tence in my life. I have given him a view of life, emotion, and reality gone awry. Although I am not proud of many things past, I fully believe things happen for a reason. We are both stronger and our lives richer with awareness. Together, we rode the waves of insanity and recovery. I learned to live for me and now can give to both of us. Good thing I gave in. That single college girl had no idea that the decision to say a stubborn yes to him had likely saved her life. And while we stand steadfast and strong as individuals, safety surrounds us. My hand can reach out now to meet his—strong and grasping. I have survived. We made it through.

Submissions for Datapoints Invited

Submissions to the journal's Datapoints column are invited. The column publishes analyses of data on mental health services of relevance to psychiatric clinical or policy issues. National data are preferred. Areas of interest include diagnosis and practice patterns, treatment modalities, treatment sites, patient characteristics, and payment sources. The analyses should be straightforward, so that the figure or figures tell the story. The text should follow the standard research format to include a brief introduction, description of the methods and data set, description of the results, and comments on the implications or meanings of the findings.

Datapoints columns are typically 350 to 400 words of text with one or two figures. Maximum text length is 500 words, including title, author names, affiliations, references, and acknowledgments. Submissions over the word limit will be returned. Submissions will be reviewed promptly; additional peer review may be warranted.

Inquiries or submissions should be directed to Harold Alan Pincus, M.D., Terri L. Tanielian, M.S., or Amy M. Kilbourne, Ph.D., M.P.H., who are editors of the column. Contact Ms. Tanielian at RAND, 1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202 (e-mail: territ@rand.org).