

JUNKIE
LOVE



illustrated by Jolana Izbická

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PRAGUE

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CISSY HAD TAKEN TO HER BED. No-one knew what to do with her anymore. Since they'd cut off her hair and blackened her eyes, she rarely left the confines of her narrow room, and when she did it was only to visit the bathroom or, with hurried furtive steps, the Greek delicatessen directly next door. Here, she would buy cigarettes and the few morsels of food her body could still accept — cake, biscuits, chocolate — then, clutching the packages close to her chest, and with hunched shoulders, she would walk quickly back through the darkened hallway and reach the bolt-hole of her room before anyone had a chance to speak to her. If you knocked on her door, the response would be something along the lines of: “Fuck off, I’m not in,” or, “Go away, I’m sleeping,” and only in the middle of the night would you hear her moving about, pacing the worn floorboards in her black, high-heeled slippers, or shifting the furniture around into new configurations. Occasionally, the French girl who lived in the basement would visit her and they’d remain cloistered together for an hour or two, talking about who knows what. But I imagine that even then Cissy would not have left her bed, preferring, as always, to hold court from there. With the dark circles of her eyes and her pale skin, and with her head propped up against the stained, rancid pillows, she could have been the portrait of some nineteenth century consumptive, fading away in a nameless and hellish garret.

The only other visitor, and then only each second or third day, was Henry, a sleazy and down-at-heel Glaswegian street junkie, who would bring Cissy the scrapings and remnants of some wrap he’d hustled; or, failing that, maybe some old cottons he’d filched from someone. Dried-up and yellow, sometimes caked with blood, these were strong enough to give a hit when mixed and cooked up together in the large, soot-blackened spoon that Cissy kept in her bedside table. It was as though she was willing herself into a state of deliberate non-existence, unable as she was to face the world outside now that everything

had gone wrong and her friends had deserted her. Wrapped in her shadowy cloak of invisibility, she had no desire to communicate with anyone: the fizz and life had gone out of her and she wanted only to be left alone with her sickness, wretchedness and paranoia. And Henry, it is true, loved her in his own sweet way, she having (or not, as the case may be) allowed him to fuck her at some point in the immediate or distant past, exercising her woman's right to bestow favours upon even the least worthy of recipients. Or perhaps she was just expressing her gratitude that he alone, out of all her multifarious former acolytes, had remained loyal to the cause, bringing her his humble offerings and ensuring that the pain and depression of withdrawal did not overwhelm her completely.

At any rate, I hardly ever saw Cissy during those days and weeks, even though we were both still living in the same illegal house. And it wasn't the first time, during the course of a long and tortuous relationship, that she had taken herself away like this. In the past, though, it had always been to some other place — either the country, or the house of rich friends in West London, a house whose exact location was a closely-guarded secret. There, she could disappear and lie low for weeks at a time to recuperate when the pressures of existence became too much for her.

It was after one of these disappearances that we began living together, although I'd first met her about two years prior to this during the period of time when I was breaking up with my wife. We'd slept together on that particular occasion, and although she hadn't wanted to fuck, we'd lain next to each other all through the night, talking about the chaos of our lives in the dreamy, disengaged way of people who are still strangers, but who hope to get better acquainted. She told me about her childhood and teenage years, growing up in New York, Tehran and later Switzerland; her difficult relationship with her mother (her father had left when she was thirteen); her problems with

drugs; and her present relationship with a psychotic member of the Windsor chapter of the Hell's Angels. I talked about my broken marriage; my time in New York (we shared several acquaintances); and my failed and inconsistent attempts to straighten out my own life, which at that point in time was threatening to spin out of control completely.

I remember the story she told me about smoking opium for the first time. She was thirteen or fourteen years old, then, living in Tehran with her mother — who, being half-Iranian herself, had returned there to live after she and her wealthy American husband had separated. Having spent the first part of her life growing up in the free and easy atmosphere of Downtown Manhattan, Cissy had not taken easily to the austere restrictions of Muslim society. Although it was during the latter years of the Shah's regime, and the rigours of Fundamentalism were only expressed in infrequent proclamations from Khomeini in distant Paris, Cissy refused to settle down and soon became rebellious. She met an older boy from the American school in Tehran, and it was he who first introduced her to the pleasures of opium (and, inadvertently, sent her reeling down the crazy path to her present state of total dependency). She also told me about the "beautiful" nights they spent together on the flat, sun-baked roof of his parents' house, gazing up at the myriad stars of the orient sky; about how they lay naked on rugs of mystical design, fucking slow and lazy, while smoking the sticky black pellets from an intricately carved hookah; about how wonderful it made her feel to escape the clutches of an over-protective mother, to experience the sense of freedom and immunity that the drug gave her. And all of this with a tone of wistfulness and regret, as if these were the days of innocence before The Fall, a paradise never to be regained — all the more haunting and powerful for being so utterly beyond her reach now.

And it was true, there had been a fall in Cissy's life, something which shook her so deeply that she was never to recover

fully: a rupture that was always present, no matter how well she concealed it behind the gaudy masks and chameleon's skin she insisted upon wearing.

By the time her mother finally went back to New York, Cissy had been sent to some kind of finishing school in Switzerland. She'd not become the perfect little Persian princess that her mother had dreamed of, and there had also been some kind of sexual trouble with the grandfather. (She was always a bit vague about this — depending on her mood, the interference consisted of a little light petting at bedtime; a clumsy grab from behind; or a full-blown attempt at anal intercourse, which was repulsed only after shouts, screams and the appearance on the scene of the mother and grandmother. At any rate, it seems clear that the old man couldn't keep his hands off her and that she, in turn, was the guilty one because of her rebellious ways, pretty face, budding breasts and generally provocative nature; all of which was, of course, akin to waving a pair of scarlet knickers in the face of a particularly horny and patriarchal old bull.)

So Cissy was packed off to Switzerland, to some boring, provincial girls' school from where she made regular and extended excursions — first to Zurich and Geneva, then further afield to Paris and Berlin. Several times they threatened to kick her out: for truancy and unruly behaviour, for bringing drugs onto the premises, for sneaking boys into her dormitory — the usual kind of spirited, teenage fun. Then, her mother would have to intervene, usually via the telephone from New York, or on one or two of the more serious occasions with personal visits. These involved meetings with the principal and a mixture of threats and bribes for Cissy, more often than not ending with an increased allowance in return for promises of good behaviour — the increase in funds, of course, only giving Cissy the wherewithal to create even more mayhem.

Finally, she jumped ship altogether and arrived in London

with little more than the clothes she was standing up in. All communication with her mother ceased (and with it, the money), but Cissy hit the party and club scene with all the exuberance that years of repression had engendered: meeting people, getting drunk, taking drugs and generally having a wild and wonderful time on next to no money — something that is still just about possible in London if you have youth and wit, cunning, a personal sense of style, and don't mind living on the margins of society. Cissy definitely had her own style and fashioned her clothes from the remnants boxes of second-hand and thrift shops, picking up on British modes of the sixties and seventies, and making them her own. She would turn up at clubs wearing a garish mixture of Hippy, Punk and Glam styles: silver space boots; dog collar and spiked S&M bracelets; orange, blond, or purple hair; long velvet dresses with stars and moons stitched on; black and white "OP-ART" plastic raincoats; thigh-length leather boots with buckles and spurs. Somehow, the force of her personality, her desperate need to make an impression and wipe out all traces of her own past life, held the whole thing together, and what might have looked a hopeless mishmash on someone else always looked great on her.

Of course, she was beautiful, and resourceful too. Soon, she was selling her own hand-made jewellery from a stall in Portobello Market, widening her ever-increasing circle of acquaintances who ranged from unwashed and ragged dole-queue kids (some of whom she shared a squat with), up to the wealthy musicians and big-time drug dealers of Kensington and Chelsea. But it wasn't enough. Something of the Persian princess was maybe inside her after all, and the charms of living in a cold-water flat, with no heat or electricity, were beginning to wear thin, especially now that winter was approaching. She saw the riches and comforts that her West London friends enjoyed, and accustomed as she had been to having these things herself, she began to plot and scheme, to think of ways of raising herself

up to their level, as she saw it. She'd won her freedom — now she wanted to enjoy the material comforts she had known before, but on her own terms, without the annoying interference of her mother and family. Maybe then they would respect her, accept her for who she was instead of what they wanted her to be. At the very least, she would be able to respect herself, to know that everything she had achieved was the result of her own efforts, not because of some handout that was always conditional upon someone else's idea of good behaviour. She had been denied love without conditions; now she would achieve wealth and status without conditions too: she would be beholden to no-one. And so it was that Cissy made the decision to enter the dark and treacherous waters of big-time drug-dealing.

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I don't know where she met Scottish Dougie. He was a Glaswegian hard man of the old school, about thirty years of age when they met (she was then eighteen), and seemingly outside the circle of her usual acquaintances. Maybe she met him in a club, or pub; maybe somebody introduced them; maybe it was divine intervention. Whatever the case, it was a strange, unlikely pairing, but one which seemed to offer her the fast and easy route to money and material comfort that she now craved. Dougie was not cut from the same cloth as the dealers she had known so far — mainly rich kids using their parents' money for a little private investment of their own, one which could produce dividends at least as attractive as any their fathers might hope to make in the City. He had come up the hard way, via the old Gorbals tenement blocks and borstal, and he'd already served time for a variety of offences ranging from armed robbery to GBH. A three-inch knife scar disfigured one side of his face, a memento of some long-forgotten gang war, while his

nose had been broken on more than one occasion, giving him a flattened, almost ape-like appearance. This, together with his build (that of the proverbial brick shit-house), made him into the kind of character you most definitely would not wish to pick an argument with, though apparently several people did on account of some masochistic desire to prove a point to themselves, or others. (He had a younger brother, Tony, who was equally as hard, and whom I met years later when he used to buy speed off me in Camden Town. You could never refuse to sell to this guy, no matter what hour of night or day he might happen to call around. If it was three in the morning, he would bellow up from the street below demanding drugs, and if you ignored him, or pretended to be asleep, he was not averse to kicking the front door in, bawling you out for being a cunt and not letting him in in the first place. Basically, he didn't give a fuck.)

So for Dougie, dealing smack was easy meat — there was comparatively little risk involved, and the middle-class kids he sold to were a far cry from the battle-hardened thugs he had grown up with in Glasgow. Undoubtedly, he held a powerful attraction for Cissy, adrift as she was in a cold and potentially dangerous city, and she knew that with him there would be no trouble from difficult or uncooperative customers: no-one would dare to mess with her if they knew that she was together with such a desperate character, and besides, he had the contacts and the knowledge that she needed to get started in this lucrative but lethal business.

Things started to go wrong almost from the start. Dougie had recently lost a weight of gear, worth several thousand pounds, on a deal that had turned sour when some rival from the past had informed on him to the police. The package had been discovered in a parked van at some point midway between London and Glasgow, and it was only by a mixture of luck and foresight that Dougie had avoided being caught himself. The

van had been hired under a fictitious name, and with no other concrete leads available the police were powerless to act. However, they knew who was behind the deal and as far as they were concerned they could wait — it was just a matter of time before the net of their investigations closed around him.

So when Cissy arrived on the scene, Dougie was desperate to make his money back, and possibly saw her — young, fresh and plausibly innocent as she was — as some kind of decoy, a screen he could use to cover his tracks, or maybe use as a courier. She was different to his usual pulls: tough, loud-mouthed women used to sticking up for themselves and their kids against foul-tempered, drunken, often violent men. Cissy could certainly hold her own in any argument, and had an impressive command of street language that she'd picked up along the way. But she also had a sense of style, the rich kid's assurance of her own place in the world, that held great attraction for someone of Dougie's chequered background, and according to Cissy he always treated her well: beyond the occasional screaming match, their relationship never degenerated into brawls and physical violence.

The first few trips they made up to Scotland together were a success. The deliveries were made and paid for, while Dougie clawed back some of the money he had lost on the previous occasion. His intention was to accompany Cissy on the first couple of drops, to introduce her to his friends and connections in Glasgow, after which she would undertake these trips alone while he took care of the London end of the business. They would each make enough money to finance whatever side-projects they chose to pursue (Cissy dreamed of opening her own club), and it would enable them to adopt the wonderful lifestyle that she so admired in her West London friends. It would be like a fairy tale, a rags-to-riches story, with Cissy as the beautiful princess and Dougie as the ugly toad who would turn into a handsome prince under her magical and beatific

influence. She really did think like this, and in spite of her sassiness and apparent “street-smarts” Cissy was, behind the facade, the original, wide-eyed, little-girl-lost alone in the big, bad world. She had no true idea of the sinister forces she was playing with, and that were about to rain down upon her dreaming, innocent head.

Of course, she knew that what they were doing was against the law and that it carried a stiff penalty too. But Dougie had such a powerful physical presence, and had so many dangerous, well-connected friends, that she found it hard to believe that any harm could come to her while he was there to protect her — he was like a talisman for her, and she had complete faith in him, as if he were the father that she’d never really had. And she saw no evil in any of this. To her, the law really was an ass, merely a concoction dreamed up by grey, old men to benefit others of their own age and social class, and if there were people, like her, who wanted to buy drugs and have a good time with their lives, then why not? She was just providing a service, after all, like a publican, or the owner of a restaurant, so why shouldn’t she make a profit as well? No-one was forcing people to buy, it was all a matter of choice and personal freedom — and besides, she quite enjoyed the notion of “living outside the law”, of being a renegade. It was an attractive image for her, and she adopted it with the same enthusiasm and whole-hearted commitment she displayed for all her masks and successive identities.

It was on their third or fourth trip together that things went badly wrong. I never managed to find out exactly what happened and I don’t think that Cissy was ever really sure either. Maybe it was the fact that she had begun using more of the drugs herself and, to Dougie’s extreme annoyance, had become blasé and over-confident, boasting to friends and acquaintances about how well she was doing, how in love she was and how rich she soon would be. Perhaps it was just bad

luck. More likely it was some person from Dougie's past, either the same, or different, motivated by revenge or rivalry, who dropped the penny on them. Whatever the truth of the matter, when they arrived at the house in Glasgow at the end of this fated trip the cops were there waiting for them; and this, in a most cruel, abrupt and impolite manner, effectively pulled the plug on Cissy's career as social climber and bon vivant. The uncertainties about the bust and who, if anyone, was responsible were to eat away at Cissy's peace of mind for years to come. When I first met her I had the feeling that she was still blaming herself for everything that happened that day, even though she put up a bold and aggressive front.

She told me about the initial shock of her arrest, the unreality of it all, as she and Dougie were led away for interrogation; the feeling that a trapdoor had opened beneath her feet and that she would never stop falling; and the cold numbness, like a spreading paralysis, as the truth of her predicament became an inescapable fact. That first morning after we met, she took me for breakfast at a worker's cafe off the Holloway Road and told me about the two years she'd spent in jail: first in Scotland, later in Holloway Women's Prison, not half a mile away from where we were then sitting and from where she had only recently been released. Her new disguise was that of a cockney street urchin, with large floppy cap pulled down over her short, spiky blond hair and a long black overcoat that was several sizes too big for her, reaching down almost to her feet. She made such a picture, wrapped inside this horse-blanket: just over five feet tall, with enormous brown eyes and a strangely blunted Mediterranean nose that gave the impression of a tiny woodland creature, foraging for food amongst the leaves and undergrowth of the dark forest. She even spoke with a cockney accent, authentic in tone, syntax and rhythm, that she'd acquired in prison and which, I presumed, had been adopted for reasons of camouflage and self-preservation.

“Yeah, fuckin’ Old Bill, sittin’ right there waitin’ for us — bastards! An’ Dougie, with a fuckin’ weight right there in the bag, an’ the place all staked out — I mean what could we do? Talk about the spider an’ the fly . . . But somebody must ’ave grassed us up, right? An’ when Dougie gets out, I wouldn’t wanna be in that fucker’s shoes — I got a few ideas about who done it, an’ I bet Dougie does too, an’ if I was that toss-head, I’d start runnin’ right now — ha ha ha ha . . .”

She cackled wickedly into her steaming mug of tea, and began to roll a cigarette from the packet of Samson that lay on the table in front of her.

“Yeah, but it could have just been from the time before — I mean, the cops probably had you under surveillance the whole time . . .”

“Nah, they didn’t ’ave nearly enough to go on from that — no names, no addresses, just a phone call, not enough to warrant an operation of that size, no fuckin’ way! Nah, it had to be a tip-off, c’mon — names, times, places, I mean they knew exactly who we were, for Chrissake. A regular fuckin’ welcomin’ committee it was, we didn’t stand a chance — an’ some cunt’s gonna pay, you’ll see . . .”

Cissy pulled hard on her cigarette, trying her best to appear like some hardened jailbird, with her foul-mouthed invective and thirst for revenge. But somehow it didn’t ring true — she was far more funny than scary, like some really bad caricature of the Artful Dodger, and I just couldn’t take her seriously, she was trying much too hard. I also had the feeling that she was worried for herself, covering up her own fears with this display of bravado, and that she wasn’t exactly looking forward to the day of Dougie’s release with joy in her heart and a spring in her step. He was in Peterhead Prison, then, one of the toughest jails in Britain, and though it’s true it lay hundreds of miles to the north, up in Scotland, she hadn’t made the slightest effort to visit or even contact him. In fact, she hadn’t set eyes on him

since the day of their sentencing. No-one knew for certain the exact circumstances behind the bust, and she had every reason to believe that Dougie might blame her (and her weakness for slack talk and careless boasting), for their misfortune. The slightly worried note that crept into her voice whenever she mentioned his name made me realise that she was actually living in fear of him — maybe because of the bust; maybe because she'd got another boyfriend now, and hadn't waited for him like the dutiful wife he might have expected.

I realised, years later, that Cissy was always running scared, that there was some kind of unfathomable darkness in her which could never really be plumbed. This state of fear was a constant, and although the outward manifestations of it might change, it really came from inside her. She was always convinced, profoundly, that someone, somewhere, had it in for her, that the worst would always happen — and of course expecting it to made sure that it did: she seemed to draw trouble like a magnet. All the time, you could see the wrong moves she was making, the slightly skewed version of events she held to, the all-too-likely disastrous outcome of this, or that, course of action. But it was futile to point this out to her, she would have none of it — she was always right, and all that would happen was that you would become the new threat, the new demon to be wrestled with.

All of this contrasted strangely with her daylight personality, which was bouncy, energetic and outgoing, full of ideas and crazy schemes; and she could also be open-hearted and generous, regularly giving away treasured possessions as if they meant nothing to her at all. But during the night she would often wake in fear, drenched with sweat and trembling from some dark dream; frequently, with a gut-wrenching, primeval scream of terror — her mouth open, her eyes wide and uncomprehending — that had a horrible note of despair and hopelessness in it. It was as if she knew she was doomed,

as if she had somehow stepped off the rim of the tangible world and was falling down through the void, cast away into the outer darkness and heading, most assuredly, for some stinking, enmired pit from which she would never escape, and which concealed every shade and form of horror that she had ever imagined. It would take minutes to calm her down from one of these attacks, before she began to recognise the solidity of her surroundings once more, and she could never remember (or never would tell), the oppressive and miasmatic content of these dreams. What ghosts lurked inside? Maybe it was prison that had darkened her, or maybe the darkness had been there all along. Heroin, for awhile, had seemed to keep the ghosts at bay, with its ability to make the user feel inviolate and immune. But soon they were back, crowding at the door in ever greater numbers, the drug that had at first seemed to promise relief turning traitor, increasing the dread in a consequent and directly exponential manner.

That morning over breakfast she told me about prison and the people she'd met there, the strategies she'd been forced to develop in order to survive. At their sentencing, she had received three years and Dougie seven, her lawyer having made much of the fact that she was the erstwhile innocent led astray; and, taking into account remission for good conduct, this had meant that she would be released in a little over two years. Despite getting a much lighter sentence than Dougie, though, for her it was a far greater trauma, never having been on the wrong side of the law before beyond a few trifling and cautionary experiences. For Dougie, it was all part of the criminal life: when things were going well you made a lot of money in a short time, enjoyed yourself and invested the money wisely. When things got fucked up — a scenario that was bound to happen sooner or later, if only because of the law of averages — then you accepted your fate: you kept your mouth shut, served your allotted time without complaint and made sure that in all

events, and no matter at what cost, you held onto your self-respect. It was not the first time he had been inside, and though it was a much heavier sentence than any he had received before, he knew how to handle himself and was confident that he would survive.

For Cissy, however, privileged and spoilt as she was, the whole thing was slightly more of an unmitigated disaster. She was about to cross the threshold into a wondrous and unknown world, one which contained all kinds of obstacles and unseen dangers; and, as she was taken from the court and driven away in a police van to begin her sentence, all the loneliness and isolation of her eighteen years on God's earth crashed around her in a cataclysm of self-pity, fear and anguish. Engulfed in these cold and darkening waters, she adopted the only course of action that seemed appropriate in the circumstances: she broke down, wept and blubbered, like the lost and fucked-up child she really was.

The first few months in the Scottish prison were the worst. No-one spoke to her and she suffered several attacks, both verbal and physical, from other women who were angered by her pretty looks, or by the fact that she kept herself apart as if she were somehow better than they were, or at least believed herself to be so. She didn't make one friend during the whole of her time there, and she told me it was the most frightening, bewildering and lonely period of her life. There were strange codes of behaviour and rituals to observe; frequently, in her ignorance, she would step across some invisible line, or would fail to respond in the appropriate manner to some request or insult. Her fellow inmates were tough, older women, in prison for a variety of infringements ranging from drugs and prostitution to crimes of larceny, fraud and violence, and they didn't take kindly to some rich kid, so obviously naïve and out of her depth as Cissy was. She, herself, was terrified the whole time, understanding little of the hard Glaswegian street dialect the



women used, in spite of her time with Dougie. She tried, as much as possible, to make herself invisible and adopted a mouse-like demeanour in her attempts to stay out of trouble at all costs.

She did learn a few useful tricks, though. And when, after six months, she was transferred to Holloway Prison in North London, she knew far more about what to expect, viewing the move as a chance to make a positive new beginning. This period saw the birth of her street-urchin persona, as she determinedly wiped out all traces of her former privileged identity, replacing them with the voluble and chirpy manner of an East-End barrow boy, like I said, straight out of Dickens. She learned how to ingratiate herself with others, how to kowtow to, and flatter, those further up the prison hierarchy; she cut her shoulder-length blond hair and adopted a look that could either be seen as asexual or Punk; she learned how to develop friendships and loyalties, and how to exploit them to her advantage during difficult or dangerous moments. Most of all, she began to regain her confidence as she found her place in the prison system, attracting her own circle of admirers and devotees in what was almost a mirror image of her social aspirations before the bust. If it was not exactly a time of great joy for her then at least it was bearable, and by the end of her sentence she had so thoroughly obliterated all traces of her former self that it could be quite reasonably argued this former self no longer existed. Her mother, at any rate, certainly agreed with this point of view, totally disowning Cissy when she tried to make contact with her.

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After this night of caresses and fond reminiscences, I didn't see Cissy again for a couple of years — at least not beyond the occasional chance meeting in the street, or in a club. I had my own problems to deal with, such as where to find the enormous

amounts of money I needed each day just in order to feel normal, and the heroin simply wasn't working like it used to in the old days. My marriage had broken up, largely because of my endearing inability to think about the future in any terms other than where the next fix was coming from, and I had lost most of my friends, either through neglect or out-and-out sleazy, unreliable, low-life behaviour.

When my wife left, my initial reaction was to go into a tail-spin of self-destructive, almost masochistic proportions, a drugs and sex binge that had the desired effect of largely obliterating all sense and feeling. All, that is, except for the spiral of barely controlled panic I'd experience on waking alone in a stranger's bed, dope-sick and broke, seeing clearly the entire stomach-turning hopelessness of my situation spread out before me in the vivid, garish colours of a nightmare. At such times, the cruel reality of my predicament was almost too much to bear, and I would lie there as if paralysed, breaking out in a cold, clammy sweat as I suffered an anxiety attack of epic proportions. I could see no future, no escape from this cycle of obsession and dependency; while thinking about the past, and what I had lost, only increased the fear, adding a sprinkling of self-pity and disgust to an already potent brew of sickness and black despair. The only thing that could motivate me at such times, and stir me from this malaise of physical and mental paralysis, was the onset of real sickness with the concomitant knowledge that if I didn't get my arse in gear soon, then very quickly I'd be incapacitated and more or less incapable of hustling for the next fix.

Long-term addicts develop an acute sensitivity to minute changes in the body's metabolism: it's a survival mechanism, I suppose, like a clock or a timer ticking away in your veins. As the level of artificially-induced endorphins begins to fall, all the alarm bells in your body go off at once and you begin to plot and scheme, to think of ways of obtaining more of this precious

and elusive drug. If your search is not successful, and real withdrawal begins, you will start to experience a most unpleasant feeling in the pit of your stomach, more accurately the bowels: first, of body-doubling cramps, then a sensation as if your insides are coming apart, as if everything in there has turned to mush and jelly. And this is pretty much the way it is. After days, weeks or, in some unhappy cases, months of constipation (this being a well-noted side effect of regular opiate consumption), nature finally has her way, and you are forced to endure a period of sustained and prolonged diarrhoea that strongly discourages you from straying from the close vicinity of a toilet for more than five minutes at a time. It's as if the wondrous, golden liquid that you injected into one part of your body has corrupted everything within, not just physical but spiritual as well, turning all of it rotten, degenerate — as if the foul-smelling, brown liquid that comes chundering out of the other end is, in some sense, a metaphor for the state of body and mind you have gotten yourself into.

In addition to this indignity, you will also be subject to regular hot and cold flushes of particularly pungent sweat, extremely offensive to the olfactory senses of anyone in the vicinity. The traces of this seem to permeate all clothing and bed-linen (usually soiled and unchanged for weeks at a time, in any case), and to float about your person in a miasmatic, foul-smelling cloud of bodily and spiritual putrescence. You will also ache in every muscle and joint of your body, and will find it impossible to attain comfort in any one position that you happen to arrange your limbs into — a fact that will necessitate constant changes of posture, while inducing involuntary and spasmodic twitching motions of the arms and legs, as you try in vain to escape from an inescapable, all-encompassing sensation of non-localised pain. Almost as unpleasant will be the constant running of the nose and eyes, the over-stimulation of the mucus-producing glands, and the hacking, consumptive

cough that most users develop during withdrawal. For as the cough mechanism of the diaphragm is given free rein — after being suppressed for so long by the daily intake of opiates — the immune system will fall prey to all kinds of bacteria and minor infections that the heroin had previously kept at bay. Of course, symptoms vary slightly from person to person, and one or more of them may be more, or less, pronounced depending on individual metabolism and physical characteristics. But whatever the case, most addicts would find it easy to agree that withdrawal is an extremely unpleasant experience, and one which is to be avoided at all costs, if at all possible.

My own strategies for avoiding this state were many and varied. They ranged from the pawning or selling of all superfluous and not strictly necessary possessions — most, that is, of what in any normal household would be considered essential: furniture, pots and pans, records, books, clothes, musical instruments, wedding rings, electrical appliances, television and radio sets, stereo systems, works of sculpture and decorative art — through running and small-time dealing, up to street crime and petty theft. I needed about fifty pounds each day to keep high, more if possible, though twenty pounds would get me straight and ward off withdrawal symptoms for ten to twelve hours. Any less, though, and I was in trouble, and three months after the split the stress of finding these amounts of money each day was beginning to tell: I had sold just about everything that my wife and I had bought together, was rapidly running out of friends and acquaintances that I could scrounge off, and my metabolism seemed to be undergoing some kind of miraculous transformation, absorbing the drugs I fed into it like a sponge, demanding yet another shot, first eight, then six, then four, then three hours later. It was a case of diminishing returns, and destitution beckoned.

I was also running out of girlfriends who would help to look after me. According to the accepted wisdom, prolonged use of

heroin is supposed to lower, and eventually kill, the male sex drive, but in my particular case this unfortunately didn't happen: I was still chasing after girls in almost as compulsive a fashion as I was looking for drugs. Cocaine, which is supposed to be something of an aphrodisiac, always failed to do anything at all for me in that department, and I always regarded it as an expensive waste of money, particularly if sniffed via the nose. I used to like the rush it gave when mixed together with heroin and injected as a speedball, but apart from this method of ingestion I always thought it was a big let-down; plus, after the initial euphoria had worn off, I was always left feeling nervous, dissatisfied and paranoid. I much preferred speed as a stimulant, both for everyday use and for extended all-night fucking sessions. I also loved having sex on heroin — it took away the desire to have an orgasm, but not to fuck, and you could keep going for hours in a deliciously sensuous dream state that eventually led to some kind of Nirvana when you did finally come. The endorphins would be coursing through your system by then, not only from the smack, but from the sex too, and the after-effects were akin to floating amongst pink, fluffy clouds high up in a Himalayan sky of purest blue — total euphoria, in other words.

I must say, though, that the search for heroin took precedence over the girl-chasing, as the penalty for failing to connect and score was much more acute, and happened much more rapidly, than if I failed to get lucky with a girl. I could easily go without sex for three or four days, longer if necessary, but thirty six hours without a hit and I'd be throwing up and shitting all over the place. And so, in this distorted economy of pleasure and pain, the search for heroin was always predominant, taking precedence over every other area of existence whether it be food, drink, sex, friendship — even, sadly, love.

Maybe my girlfriends picked up on this; maybe they sensed I was a man without a future; maybe it was the fact that my

clothes stank and my personal habits of hygiene had atrophied to an almost non-existent state. Whatever the case, the impression I got all around was of possibilities receding, avenues of opportunity being closed, future possible means of support being withdrawn, and a general shrinking in the overall sphere of my miserable existence.

I was also heartily sick of the whole rigmarole of copping each day: first the search for money, then the telephone calls, then the tramping around the streets, followed by the endless waiting in some obscure room filled with other chain-smoking, sweating, desperate people, who had nothing at all in common other than their need for a fix. My five years as an addict in New York had at least provided some sense of challenge and excitement. I was always getting knives and guns pulled on me as I entered or left the burned-out tenement buildings in the Lower East Side, South Bronx and Harlem that the dealers used to sell out of, and there was a constant aura of danger around the whole business that was somehow attractive to a fucked-up and perverse romantic such as myself. I enjoyed the hustling and the large, freely-available sums of money that came my way from the rich Uptown addicts I would score for — living, as I did, in the midst of this drug chaos, and being intimately familiar with every street, den and shooting gallery, and the quality of smack being sold there on any particular day. I enjoyed walking the streets, picking up news on the grapevine and trying to get to the good stuff first, running the gauntlet of muggers and psychos who hung around in doorways waiting for people like me. If I was lucky, I'd make it back to the safety of our room, and the friends who were waiting there for me, with a nice bundle of little wax-paper packets filled with the invigorating white dust that everyone was desperate for. It gave a sense of purpose to my life: I knew what I had to do each day, and I was almost as addicted to the adrenaline rush as I was to the heroin and cocaine cocktails that were my speciality. It was

also a good way to meet interesting people from other walks of life that I normally would not have come into contact with: Puerto Rican and Black street-dealers; petty thieves; New York City policemen; pimps and prostitutes; rich Uptown socialites and models; muggers and psychotics; Wall Street businessmen; heirs and heiresses to fabulous fortunes; murderers; musicians; hit-men; and normal everyday junkies, winos and drifters.

Being an addict in London was a far more mundane and depressing business. For a start, there were no real drug-dealing zones as such — maybe the Frontline in Brixton, and some areas of West London, but it just wasn't the same. The street dealers in these places sold marijuana, maybe a little cocaine, but that was about it. If you wanted to score some smack, it was a case of having a personal connection, telephoning first to make an appointment, then going around to the dealer's flat to make the transaction in the safe and pleasant surroundings of the lounge or kitchen. On the face of it, this was all very civilised, and terribly English, but in reality it was a pain in the arse and there was always some hitch or complication to slow things down. Typically, you would phone a dealer to see if anything was happening, and if the answer was in the affirmative, then you and your money would be invited to visit the residence, usually a flat on some crumbling and God-forsaken council estate in Camden Town or King's Cross. On arrival, you would notice with sinking heart that there were several other disgruntled characters sitting around — smoking, reading newspapers, drinking cups of tea — and you would realise that, yes, once again, you were part of some fucking pyramid deal: the owner of the flat was, in reality, fresh out of drugs, and was merely waiting for a sufficient number of cash-bearing customers to arrive. He or she could then go off with a sizeable amount of money to another dealer's house, buy in quantity and cream enough off the top to stay high for a week. Many of these

small-time dealers I knew were single or divorced women with children. As the hunt for drugs usually involved one or more taxi rides across the sprawling expanse of London (quite often, the small pyramid deal would evolve into a larger pyramid deal), and as these women didn't get out very much, I often found myself called upon to act as babysitter for one or more weeping infants, while the mother disappeared for anything up to eight hours at a time. I can think of many things worse, but few more depressing, than being cooped up in some damp, garishly painted council flat along with a couple of screaming kids and five or six other dopesick characters. Breathing air thick with perspiration and cigarette smoke, listening in vain for a returning taxi, you live in hope that every footstep on the stairs heralds the return of the dealer and deliverance from this intolerable sense of time suspended, the endless and futile wait for salvation that is the essence of junkie life.

The people I would meet in these places didn't interest me either. Usually clerks, civil servants and secretaries who hated their jobs and their lives, they were totally different from the hyped-up, vivid characters I'd hung around with in New York. With these people, it was a case of: come home from work each day, cop, then nod out in front of the TV with the wife and kids, the smack being just a way of further numbing an already numbed existence. I hated everything they stood for and everything about them, I wanted nothing of their ghost world and ghost existences, and eventually I decided upon a drastic, but worthy, course of action: I would kick drugs once and for all, clean myself up, get a good and personally rewarding job and (impressed as she would be with this new-born paragon of civic virtue) win back the favours of my wife, who had kicked the habit months previously and was now living with someone else.

Fired with this vision of myself as Regular Guy, I went cold turkey and was over the worst of it in eight days. I stayed

clear of methadone, or any other palliatives, as these just prolong the process and make relapse more likely; and besides, in typical junkie fashion, I was now just as obsessive and extreme about being free of drugs as I had previously been about getting the maximum amount of them into my system. It's a curious thing, this junkie mentality, this ability to become neurotic and extreme about almost anything. Many ex-addicts find religion, or compulsive sex, or become incredibly ruthless and successful businessmen, transferring their single-minded, obsessive energies away from drugs into some new and apparently unrelated area. I have known ex-users who can't walk past a pub without making the sign of the Holy Cross, and who regard cigarette-smokers as social reprobates who need to be made aware of their hopeless addiction. In fact, you tend to see everything afterwards in terms of addiction whether it be food, drink, sex, money, work, material possessions, sport, love — ultimately, life itself.

Most junkies I have known seem to suffer from a very fluid sense of personal identity, too, often verging on the schizophrenic: there is something fractured in them, something not quite solid. Maybe you see and feel too much; maybe not enough; maybe it is born into you, genetic; maybe it is acquired. Whatever the case, you are always acting out roles, or putting on a front, and you are far more acutely aware than most people of the transient, shifting nature of character and personality. The contrast between the snivelling, cowed, frightened, sick junky and the one who has just taken a shot is quite amazing to behold, and it is this psychological aspect of addiction that is most difficult to come to terms with when kicking. The physical effects of withdrawal, unpleasant as they may be, are limited and finite, and in their most extreme manifestations they only last for a period of seven to ten days, even though it may seem an eternity at the time. When the sickness has left your body, though, you still have to cope with the

all-pervasive feeling of low self-respect, even self-loathing, that got you into the mess in the first place. You have to build up a whole new existence, fuse the free-floating atoms of your personality into something tangible and strong, find hope and purpose in a life that is even more overwhelming and alienating now that you have been divested of the security blanket of heroin. Suddenly, you are out of this artificial womb, and up to your neck in ice-cold water, with every cell in your body screaming, “but I don’t want to wake up!” And there are no more little rewards, either: after years of drug-taking, your system will have accustomed itself to expect compensation for every little trouble or difficulty you have experienced during that day, and learning to live without this system of pain and recompense is one of the hardest things about staying clean. You are like a baby whose sweets have been taken, you always feel cheated and empty somehow, that something which was yours has been cruelly snatched away — addiction being, in any case, a puerile state, a kind of regression to infancy.

Gone, too, is the sense of excitement, the anticipation of escaping from the boring world of everyday existence into a totally sensual state — which is, I suppose, the junkie’s compensation for never being satisfied, for the feeling that none of life’s accepted pleasures are ever enough, and that really, there has to be something more. Looking always for some kind of self-transcendence, and unable to control the restless, nervous energy that runs like fire-water through your veins, you soon discover that heroin enables you to ride this energy like a wave — to control and ride it up to heights of self-love, aggrandizement and inner calm that you could never hope to attain in any other way. When all this has gone, somehow you have to trick yourself into believing in life again, into working in mundane ways towards objectives that you are not even sure are worth reaching in the first place. Maybe, after all, you see too far ahead, are too aware of the ultimate utter hopelessness of it all

and of the proximate whirling vortex of black space that presses in from all sides, reducing human concerns and endeavours to an absolute nadir of insignificance.

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I soon discovered that my opportunities for employment were strictly limited, possessing as I did no recent qualifications or training. In truth, I had no real burning desire to become the solid citizen, and in my heart I was as alienated from the system, and all it entailed, as I ever was. I was trying to change my life for all the wrong reasons, for some strange notion of atonement and contrition for past sins, when really I was still drawn to the seedy and exciting side of life, to the fuck-ups, sleaze-bags and outcasts who would never fit in. And although my wife applauded my efforts, it was with the disengaged enthusiasm of a teacher encouraging a backward child, hardly the ecstatic and welcoming return that I had hoped for. She felt that she had moved on in her life, now, and saw me as part of her past with that mixture of rancour, indulgence and pity that women reserve for men who have blown every last chance that was given to them in a relationship, and are now suffering the consequences. I was alone and adrift in the cold, unwelcoming world, but at least — as I repeatedly told myself — I was clean.

I managed to get a job in a factory, folding T-shirts and doing conveyor belt work, and stayed there for over a year, almost managing to convince myself that I was happy. I would get up at 6:30 a.m. each day, shower, eat breakfast and walk the mile and a half to work, where I would slave until six or seven in the evening, catching the freshly-printed T-shirts as they came out of the drier. This could be dangerous work. Periodically, the mechanism driving the conveyor belt would break down, and the T-shirts stuck inside the drier would burst into flames as they over-heated. This, in turn, would lead to a fireball which would

shoot down the length of the immobilised conveyor belt and explode in your face, if you didn't know the idiosyncrasies of the machine, or weren't paying attention. In fact, some of the old hands at the factory were not averse to switching off the machine in mid-cycle, when some new and inexperienced employee was on the other end, just to see how quickly he would react, and for their own amusement — it was that type of place.

At the end of each day I would be exhausted, my clothes drenched with sweat from the intolerable heat in the place, and I couldn't get the smell of the dyes they used out of my nostrils. But in spite of all this, I felt good: I was paying my own way at last, and I wasn't dependant on someone else's weakness or stupidity to get the money I needed to live. It was also an incredible relief not to wake up sick each day and straight-away have to start thinking about how to get money for that first shot. (I was never able to save anything from the previous day for my wake-up fix, although I have known several disciplined junkies who were able to do this. As long as there was smack anywhere in the house, I just had to do it, compulsively and obsessively, until it was all gone.)

I began to regain a little of my self-respect. Somehow, it felt good to be working at such a boring job, to get up in the morning at roughly the same time as the millions of other lost souls across the grey, concrete expanse of London, and to do the kind of pointless, repetitive work that I had previously tried to avoid at all costs. I even went so far as to take a perverse delight in it, and this being mistakenly interpreted by the boss as enthusiasm on my part, I was soon taken off the infernal drier and promoted to the position of company van driver. This involved delivering boxes of T-shirts to all the far-flung corners of the city, even to environs beyond, and it meant that I got out of the factory for hours at a time. It was a positive pleasure to ride around the city on a warm summer's day, with the windows

down and the tape-deck blaring, ogling the pretty girls on the street and generally acting the part of the happy idiot: three square meals a day, money in my pocket and the possibility of further promotion (Line Manager? Clerk In Charge Of Dispatches?) in the not-too-distant future.

As I said, this happy state of affairs lasted for a little over a year. Yet each night I would return to my lonely attic room where the emptiness of my existence would overwhelm me so completely that I began to entertain morose thoughts of suicide and death. I became introverted and nervous, and soon the only way I could deal with the loneliness was to drink myself into a state of oblivion every night, aided by liberal doses of downers and tranquilisers such as Temazipan and Rohypnol. I listened obsessively to dark, depressive music and read a lot of Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, and gradually these claustrophobic images took over my nights as I wallowed in a maudlin morass of drunken self-pity and endless self-examination. Sure, I had kicked the habit and was off the hard stuff at least, but the emptiness, the weakness, in other words the sickness, was still there at the root of my being, eating away and poisoning my soul until I didn't know if there was any way that I could change this state of affairs. It's the hardest thing in the world to change aspects of yourself that have become distorted and twisted after years of bad living, that in some cases go back to childhood, maybe even the womb. To paraphrase an old Zen proverb, it's like trying to scratch the back of your hand with the fingers of that same hand, and it became obvious to me that, clean of smack as I might be, nothing inside had really changed at all. I was as empty and bereft of direction as ever, still at the mercy of self-destructive urges that I failed to comprehend or control.

(Looking back, though, I don't regret these "lost" years of drug addiction at all. I believe that in my particular case, and for a variety of reasons, they were somehow necessary. My

nature was in such a state of turmoil and inner chaos, dating from my early years, and in such a state of unconscious and unrecognised pain, that my first encounter with the drug was something like a religious experience: all my troubles and self-doubt fell away, as if by magic, and I experienced a sensation of calm, visceral warmth, an inner wholeness that I had never felt before. Of course, this sensation only lasts for a short time, the first couple of months of daily use at the most. After this, addiction with all its attendant woes rapidly closes in, and every problem you thought you had before becomes magnified a hundred times. Being addicted to heroin for so many years, with all the things that this particular vocation involves, is like seeing yourself under a microscope: you are forced to confront the weakest, most unpleasant aspects of yourself (and of others), and you become highly aware of all the mental strategies and self-evasions that most people are either unconscious of, or take for granted as part of so-called Human Nature. After years of heroin abuse, you either die or something changes in you, seemingly of its own accord, and you pull out of this spin, taking with you a level of self-knowledge that in other circumstances might take a lifetime to achieve. It's like a sickness that you inoculate yourself with in order to kill the sickness that was already there, and it is for this reason, and not only out of perversity, that I can say I am grateful to heroin — though of course, I wouldn't recommend it for everyone.)

And yet each day I would wake up, sniff a line of speed and set off to work again, happy as a bird, all the shadows of the previous night's debauch chased away by the morning sun and the thought of another day to be spent cruising the leafy avenues of the capital. I had several girlfriends during this period, who I would see on a more or less regular basis, and with one in particular I could probably have built something more serious and longer-lasting, if that was what I'd really wanted. She was a nice girl, sexy and warm, a stylist whose work appeared regularly

in several well-known fashion magazines; and, for reasons of her own, she was quite devoted to me, taking it upon herself to look after me with regular meals and trips to the theatre, which I hadn't visited in years. But something in me still yearned after the old life: I was restless and dissatisfied all the time, and it soon became obvious that it was not going to work out. Undeniably, I still had an unquenchable desire to fuck up my life, and it was around this time that I ran into Cissy again.