

HEROIN

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"I realize that I've been hypnotized." — Jimi Hendrix

Where do self-destructive impulses come from? I had romanticized images of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin but they were dead long before I heard of them

The first time I shot heroin was down at St. Mark's place in 1978. I was a 17-year-old aspiring artist looking for a place to sell my Pollok-ish hand-painted T-shirts. I'd seen people leaning against the walls of Cooper Union, selling their junk on the strip between Lafayette and Third Ave.

I have no idea where my self-destructive impulses came from. I was prone to dark thoughts and there's a history of suicidal tendencies in my Russian Jewish bloodline that dates back generations.

One uncle shot himself in the chest and died before he hit the bed. His brother died from a second heart attack; he'd ignored the doc and kept on popping pills and smoking four packs a day. On the paternal side, my aunt was found with a plastic bag around her head. The topic was taboo but what's more enticing to a teen hellion than something you're not supposed to do?

I had romanticized images of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, both long dead before I'd heard of them. Suburbia was traumatic for me and I was sick of arguing with my parents. I ran away at 15 and bee-lined for Greenwich Village where remnants of the sixties were everywhere. Guitars and radios played Bob Dylan, Neil Young; people singing waved me to come over. I liked the cool head shops on Eighth Street and hung around them, eavesdropping to learn about drugs and paraphernalia.

I went back home briefly then graduated high school a year early. At 16, off I went to Boston University. After a year in Boston I was too homesick for the Village. I missed its flowery scarves, used record stores, Italian cafes and long-haired boys in hip-hugger jeans.

Through my waitressing job, I found a fourth floor walk-up apartment in a prime locale: 111 MacDougal Street between Bleecker and West Third. There was a constant montage of music blasting, guys telling me how pretty I was, bars, clubs, and people laughing. The sidewalks and buildings gulped in deep breaths then let 'em out cool and slow. I took a two-year-leave of absence from college to become a rock star.

I'd had jobs since I was 15 and was good at saving money. My parents sent checks for clothes and food, which I saved for drugs. I was a pro at shoplifting the things I needed. It was easy with my big brown eyes, which make me look more innocent than I am.

So there I was standing on that strip where people sold their wares, directly across from the huge cube sculpture at Astor Place, when some scruffy dude asked me if I wanted to smoke a joint.

"Sure." I said.

He asked, "Hey, did you ever shoot heroin, babe?"

"No," I said, "but I want to."

None of my peers shot junk but the Russian roulette of it appealed to me. Since age 13, I'd been slumming. My parents and I fought mostly about the unintelligent losers I hung out with but my self-esteem was so low I guess being around good-for-nothings made me feel superior.

I also had a hunger, a need to shed my dorky, studious persona and live like the dead rock stars I was enamored with. I understood pained lyrics. I had the blues, too, even though my life didn't match the way I felt. I had educated parents who loved me. Mom schlepped my sisters and I to gymnastics meets, piano lessons and art classes. We all went to museums and Broadway shows. Mom was a writer who celebrated my creativity; she hung my paintings on the wall. Dad managed two radio stations — one soul, the other jazz. He brought home records every night: Billie Holiday, Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, The Supremes.

My parents and I were fighting constantly by the time I was 12 and I wondered why it never occurred to them to demand the opposite of what they wanted. If they'd commanded me to smoke cigarettes, I would've abstained just to spite them.

On the sidewalk across from the cube, the guy said, "If you give me \$40 dollars I'll get you high." I had cash from waitressing so I asked him to watch my T-shirts and ran home to MacDougal Street.

I cut across Washington Square Park, comforted by the familiar buzz of conversations, guitar-strumming and harmonicas, mixed with sirens and beeping cars. There was always that soothing rhythm. I got back to Astor Place in half an hour.

This guy I just met took my forty bucks and tied a rubber tube around my arm and told me to make a fist. He pulled out a bent spoon from his front jeans pocket and set it down on the hood of a parked car. He emptied powder out of a wrapper into it, then picked up a bottle of water stuck in his back pocket, unscrewed the lid, stuck his pinky finger in the water and flicked a few droplets onto the spoon. It felt like I was doing research for the memoir I'd write one day.

He grabbed a matchbook out of his boot; like a magic trick he lit a match with one hand and held the flame under the spoon until the powder liquefied into the water. I noticed a sweet phosphorous smell when he shook out the match. My heart was pounding from excitement. This was so over-the-top bad. My main goal in life was to gain acceptance from street thugs.

From his oversized button-down shirt pocket he pulled out a syringe with a mashed misshapen ball of cotton stuck to the tip. He put the cotton into the spoon, when the liquid was soaked into the cotton, he pointed the needle into it and drew back the plunger, then slid it back till it hit the rubber stopper. I stared with fascination as the needle filled up with yellowish-clear liquid. He flicked his finger against the syringe a couple of times.

"That's to get the air out. If you get an air bubble, you're dead."

I hoped there'd be an air bubble. I'd already decided years before that there was no point to life. My urge for self-destruction is something people always want me to explain. It was just there, like my hayfever and allergy to wool.

He said my vein was hard to find and slapped my arm a couple of times. It was like taking a class: How to Be a Junky. He found the vein and stuck the needle into my arm. I was surprised it barely hurt. He drew back the plunger. I saw blood, my own blood, mixed with the yellowish clear liquid then he plunged all of it into my arm.

There was a total absence of fear. Endorphins danced in my head. My ultimate rebellion gave me a rush of excitement. 'Ha!' I thought. 'I can do whatever I want and nobody can stop me.' I smiled thinking 'I'm such a badass now.'

The high hit quick. I felt exhausted and sick to my stomach. I lit a cigarette, took a drag and watched the smoke swirl against the backdrop of the Astor cube. Then I fell asleep. I woke up with the cigarette burned down to my fingers. I didn't remember smoking it. When I looked at my watch it said two hours had passed. I threw up. I looked at my new "friend" and asked him what was going on. My words were slurred.

He looked at me with an amused smile, "Aw, don't worry. Everybody's first time is like this."

I was not impressed with heroin. What a stupid drug, I thought. Who wants a drug that zaps your energy, puts you to sleep, burns your finger, wastes a cigarette and makes you throw up? This went on for another five or six hours. I can't say that it was any fun at all.

The next night, as usual, I was hanging out in Washington Square Park with a circular crowd around a guitar-player nucleus. I recognized a few neighborhood guys. I walked over, took a hit off their joint and asked them what the deal was.

The guy who sold tie-dyed scarves and leather belts out of Mamoun's falafel joint said, "You've got to do heroin a few times before you stop getting sick from it."

Not ready to let my romanticized notion of heroin go, I decided to try again. I went back down to St. Mark's and found the scruffy fellow. This time I had the \$40 dollars with me. He shot me up and damn it if the same thing didn't happen again. That was the last time for heroin and me.

I moved on to shooting cocaine.

The first time I shot it was later that year. My saxophone-playing dealer from the park didn't have any coke that day and I wanted some to snort. A bartender on Bleecker Street told me about a place you could go where you put money through a slot in a door and a packet of cocaine was

pushed out. It was in the East Village when Alphabet City had no yuppies and you had to watch your back on every block. I went. While there, I met a six-foot, cowboy-looking, square-jawed man with a blonde mustache. He stuck out his hand to shake.

"Colin Earl Fisher. Earl the Pearl."

His sandy blond hair curled as if it were playing—running this way and that. He was so muscular I asked him what he did. He pointed to his parked pickup truck that said Fisher Roofing. He was 27 and I always liked going out with older guys. They'd pay for everything.

We flirted while waiting in line to get our coke. I saw others slide money in, and watched their packets slide out. When I was next in line Earl asked me where I was going to shoot it.

"I don't know how to shoot it myself."

"What do you do with it then?"

I shrugged. Feeling kind of stupid I said, "Snort it?"

"What a waste." he said.

"Will you shoot it for me?" I asked.

"Nyahh, I don't want to get you started on that."

"I had a guy shoot me up with heroin twice already," I said earnestly.

He seemed relieved and agreed to take me with him.

We got into Earl's blue pickup truck. Almost immediately he had the packet emptied out, lit and liquefied. I noticed a smell of amonia. Hurriedly he shot himself up. I was surprised by the urgency but riveted. I imagined a movie about me and my exciting street life with junkies.

Earl put on the tape cassette of The Stones "Start Me Up" then leaned back in the truck. He looked ecstatic or dead. Whichever it was, I wanted it. I studied his hairless arms and muscular thighs under his tight, faded Levis. He muttered, "Wait a minute." When the song ended he turned to me and said, "Your turn, Pretty."

I offered him my arm and watching his luminescent swimming pool eyes, I felt safe. With his hands so close I noticed Earl had needle marks all over his palm and inside of his elbow. This made me trust him; I figured he knew what he was doing.

There should have been fear, or at least apprehension, but there was only intoxicating excitement. I stared as Earl plunged the needle into my arm and sent the coke pounding through my veins. Instantly there was a ringing in my ears that was either a death knell or a gong heralding the rising of the sun.

Either way, I could hardly wait to do it again. ●