

Baptism

4,643 words

I tried to find the sweet spot on the mattress that was the cleanest, away from the colorful stains that adorned my sheetless comfort. I pulled the dirt-covered duvet cover up to my chin and admired the stars- or satellites, whatever- that shined above me. Thanks to my closest friend, I can fully appreciate the beauty of the sky above me. I felt so relaxed and at peace with the world and space. I used to be one with the night, but now each night, I am even more- I am one with the universe. My whole being felt so rejuvenated and still. It was euphoric; I could feel it touch my very soul. The cascading night breeze was like a whisper from Mother Nature herself- I loved to hear her speak to me.

I turned on my side to examine a pop can tab and a small, jagged piece of brown glass. My memories took me back to the pier in L.A. that my father took me every Sunday when I was a child. The air smelled of salty waves, sunscreen and fresh hot dogs, with the occasional waft of cheap men's cologne, wet dog, sweat and fish. I used to excavate the small, smoothed-out pieces of sea glass out of the sand and collect them in my pocket. My father used to explain how they started off as soda bottles that land in the ocean, and the waves and rocks eventually broke them down and smoothed them enough to be my tiny treasures. I didn't understand that process at the time, but it nonetheless fascinated me. The little, wooden trinket box my grandfather carved for me held hundreds of the miniature wonders...

I woke up that morning to the sound of rubber soles scraping against the concrete. A man's voice said, "Hey girl, you can't sleep out here. A truck is coming by soon to drop off a shipment."

I hesitantly opened my eyes and noticed a black stain across my grey mattress top. Had that always been there? I felt nauseous and stiff, my neck and teeth ached and my big toe on my right foot burned from an infected cut that I had been trying to ignore. I slowly got myself up and dragged my mattress and comforter around the corner to the dumpster area. I laid them close to the green receptacles and prayed that they would still be there tonight.

I needed my companion. My arms were shaking and my stomach was ravenous with hunger. I found my old sign near the yellow dumpster, relieved that no one snatched it in the night. The morning dew made it soggy but it was still legible, which was all that mattered. Three weeks ago I stole a sharpie from the post office and wrote: "Pregnant and out of work, anything helps" across the cardboard. It worked wonders for me, and never failed me to get my two daily doses and a meal.

I walked about four blocks to my favorite corner and was just in time for the morning rush. The air was still chilly but the sun was bright, as always. Louie was already at his post across the street, waving his sign, claiming to be a broke veteran. The grass under our feet was browning and disintegrating from the countless hours of us scuffling back and forth across it.

The first soul with good intentions was a cheery, black woman. She gave me a \$20 and God's blessings. The next was a young man with unkempt black hair in a beat up Subaru. He gave me a dollar...

Around noon I had made enough, so I walked over to Joe under the bridge and paid him for my afternoon dose. The crevice smelled like urine and feces, and I was grateful that he always did his business quickly.

I strolled over to the nearby McDonalds and had enough money left over for a double cheeseburger and an apple pie. Today's morning crowd wasn't quite as generous as it usually is, but Joe did increase his prices last week, too. The teenage cashier looked me up and down and raised an eyebrow at my appearance. I guess I didn't look too hot today, which isn't a surprise. It has probably been a week since I showered or put on makeup. But then again, how often do humans need to really shower, anyways? I asked her for a glass of water and sneaked in Sprite from the soda machine instead.

I ate my food quickly, careful to avoid eating on the right side since I had two or three rotting molars there. My head was pounding with a migraine and I had to get my fix fast. After engulfing the soggy, fried food, I went over to the bathroom, my head throbbing worse with every step. I imagined that there were little men inside my skull hitting my brain with giant, rubber mallets...

No one was in the bathroom, thank goodness. I took the last stall- the handicap accessible one- and locked the door behind me. I took off my faded, navy blue hoodie, which revealed my dirty, white tank top. I loosened an old elastic headband from my ankle and my kit dropped to the floor, the metal spoon clinked when it hit the tile. My headband held up so well for so long; it used to keep my bangs out of my face when I ran track in high school and now it helped expose my veins and keep my kit secure. I tied the headband tight just above the left elbow and flexed to find today's vein. I cooked the heroin quickly in the rusty spoon and pulled it up through the syringe. I imagined my friend like a snake. The needle was its sole fang and its venom the juice I craved for sustenance each sunrise. I injected its fang into my blood vessel, the poison instantly awakening my eyes to the life I yearned for and lifted a dirty veil from my view. The bathroom stall morphed into a majestic place- almost palace like. And why shouldn't it be? The tiled floors were still clean with only one crack running through a 4x4 inch white, ceramic square. I liked this McDonalds because it was obvious that this location was renovated in the past few years. They always kept their dining room and bathrooms clean and it was usually quieter and less busy than other locations. I have shot up in this bathroom stall three other times and have never been caught or disturbed. I stared up into the plain, white ceiling as my poison rushed through my blood. As I gazed above into the fluorescent light fixture I imagined my black venom flowing in my veins like an oil spill into an ocean. I loved how my drug made my brain discover so much more than it ever could before. I admired the burgundy and tan tiled border $\frac{3}{4}$ up the wall that broke the pattern of alternating light and dark brown tiles. I marveled at the porcelain curvature of the toilet and the railings, its shapes almost artful, yet continuously ignored by the masses. Life became beauty and beauty became life because of my friend. How could anyone live a fulfilling life without all it has to offer?

The euphoria continued for a few minutes as I closed my eyes and made bright constellations, colorful supernovas and galaxies out of the darkness. I always loved space in all its glamour and mystique, but also in its ability to be both so vacant yet so full at the same time. I treasured how my drug made me create my own universe, if only for a brief time...

I was woken by the sound of pattering footsteps entering into the stall next to mine. I couldn't see her shoes since the wall touched the floor, unlike most bathroom stalls. Nevertheless, I knew it was a child pissing into the toilet next door. Children's feet sound so much differently than adult's feet. They are always lighter, quicker, and seem to scrape briefly across the floor instead of shuffling. I waited until she washed her hands and left the bathroom before crawling out of my stall.

How long was I passed out for? I hoped for not too long. There was still a crowd huddling near the registers so it must have not been too long if the lunch rush was still in full swing. I refused eye contact from the other patrons and quickly scurried out of the establishment.

My euphoria was now over but my serenity was not- that should last for at least a few more hours. I staggered back to my post, plucked up my sign and began working again.

The overall best part about heroin is the peacefulness it brings. It was easy to fly my sign when nothing hurt or bothered me. The hot sun was of no concern, the blisters on my feet and the pain in my toe and teeth were numbed and the car horns and noisy, passing trucks seemed muffled and melodic. The loud, crazy, apathetic planet stood stiller and more peaceful. I noticed birds and small details in the brown grass below me now that I would normally overlook without my friend. The earth was serene and attractive; all was good.

The late September sun sank too early and my buzz was wearing off. I lingered at my post for a little longer, only receiving three more dollars and the insult of “Druggie Bitch,” from a driver whose face I couldn’t remember. I couldn’t last any longer- the cool wind was blowing colder by the second, the pain in my toe and the hunger and dehydration were becoming unbearable. I needed my fix, and I needed it now.

I rushed over to Joe’s old car in the nearby, abandoned parking lot where he did his evening dealings to get my next dose. I pulled out the crumpled bills and small pile of change from my pockets and counted it on the hood of his car.

I was short \$56 from getting my fix.

How could I have been so behind? I was cutting it close these days with the income, especially since Joe kept raising the prices. But I have never been below my need, except for one-day last week when I was under \$28 and begged Joe for a rain check.

I pleaded with Joe to spare me another dose to get me by tonight but he refused. He said that since I didn’t pay him for last week I am now \$84 behind and that was too much, and that he had been generous many times to me before (although I can’t recall.)

I continued to beg with him but he was resilient to my requests. I was so frustrated I could cry. A new headache was developing and everything seemed to hurt- I needed my drug so bad. I knew that there was only one other card I could play, as much as I hated the idea of it. But I had to swallow my pride- my health and sanity depended on it now more than ever.

Joe was about to step inside his car and leave when I grabbed him by the sleeve and gave him my last, desperate option. Thankfully, he obliged- I thought he would, but only under the condition that he would forgive my debt as well. I climbed in with him in the front seat and sat on him, my shaking fingers running down his jeans, finding the zipper and slowly pulling it down as his fat, sweaty hands grabbed my breasts under my shirt.

After he was satisfied and gave me my dose he kicked me out of his car and left quicker than I could button up my pants. I looked at my friend and sighed. I really hit it low this time. Not only did I carry some shame each day on being a drug addict, I now had to carry the humiliation of what I just did to obtain it. It wasn’t the first time I have done something I wasn’t proud of for heroin; I have shoplifted on multiple occasions to buy toiletries and medicine because all my money went to my drugs. I stripped for a year to not only pay off the steep debt I accrued after two failed years in college but also my habit, which I started while working there. I even stole money at a bar from out of a drunken man’s wallet to pay for a dose. But I never thought that I would go so low as to screw someone for my drug- and with my filthy, prick drug dealer, at that! And it wasn’t even for *money*, just heroin. At least if it was for money I could buy some medicine, clothing, or food. At least money can give me a place to sleep- a place to *live*.

Money can help me go back to school or buy an interview outfit for a job. Or better yet, it could buy me a bus ticket or phone call to my parents, whom I haven't seen or talked to in months. But what did I personally gain from heroin? Numbness. Numbness from not only the pain, but also emotions, guilt, failure and suffering. But it also made me numb to pride, to love, to friends and family, to goals and dreams and self-worth.

I still remember the first time I tried heroin. It was an early Sunday morning after a long night of dancing with my clothes off. One of my fellow dancers finally convinced me to try it, saying it would make me get out of the depressing rut I was in that night. She gave me a whole dose for free, and I remember the euphoria that day was better than anything I felt my whole life. The colors in the sunrise melted together in my imagination like the loveliest, most spectacular painting I have ever perceived. I can still recollect that sunrise's colors: the overflowing ocean of gold light pouring into the lake of rose, scarlet, and rusty colors below, while at the same time piercing into a blanket of light blue and dark grey sky above. I remember a large swarm of birds flying towards the magnificent morning star, their cries sweeter than church bells and wind chimes. My coworker was right: it *did* make everything feel better. The next time was at a late-night party, and it only cost me \$15 for the first dose from a guy named Ray, and \$20 each for the next four. Gosh, was that night fun! Gradually though, Ray stopped coming to those parties. He was replaced with Joe, and every week Joe's prices increased and the euphoria's seemed less invigorating. Steadily I started corresponding less and less with my family and friends, and did less partying but more hits. Singles that used to be stuffed into my thongs were now stuffed into my dirty hands by well-meaning commuters. My credit score, work attendance and savings plummeted while an eviction notice on my apartment door and "Now Hiring: Exotic Dancers," sign went up at work. All I ever wanted was to feel like those free, beautiful birds taking flight into the sunrise again, but instead I became handcuffed to a poison that was like an abusive cell mate I refused to leave.

Something didn't feel so intriguing about my dose anymore. My cravings were still there, but my heart was no longer in it. I stuffed the drug into my pocket and walked across the street.

I didn't know where I was going or where I wanted to go, but somehow my feet did. In just a few minutes I found myself inside a Walgreens, staring stupidly into the fluorescent aisles, not sure what I wanted or what I was doing there.

I finally snapped out of it and counted the money in my pocket: I had \$74 that would have gone to the heroin hadn't my hip thrusts paid for it instead. I felt like a millionaire: I hadn't had that much money to spend on something other than drugs for a long time. It was a bit overwhelming having that much cash on hand and so many options to spend it on. I picked up a blue, plastic basket and started pacing the aisles for new treasures.

The cashier rung me up for a bar of soap, travel-sized tubes of shampoo and toothpaste, a toothbrush, a large bottle of cold water, a box of assorted Band-Aids, a small pack of antiseptic wipes, a stick of deodorant, a pre-packaged deli sandwich, a small bottle of ibuprofen, a 3-pack of underwear, and a pair of cheap, black flip flops, a beach towel on clearance, and a white dress with blue hibiscus flowers on it, probably intended to be used as a swimsuit cover-up, but it'll do. The grand total with tax was \$59.75. I still had over \$14 to spare, and I was a little proud of my new possessions.

It was probably close to 9 PM when I left the store. The wind was starting to die down, which my frail, skinny body appreciated. I was ravenous and parched. I quickly sat down on the curb and unwrapped my sandwich, which I devoured in lightning speed. I drank most of my water but left a little bit to take ibuprofen and brush my teeth with. Even though my cavities and

gingivitis made for a painful, bloody time of brushing, it felt so nice to have the clean, minty taste in my mouth again!

Afterwards I wanted to shower- an act I haven't done in far too long. The recreation center I normally paid \$3 to shower in was at least a mile's walk and most likely closed for the night. My cravings were coming on stronger than ever, and I debated about what to do first: take my dose or clean up the stench from Joe, my disgusting mattress and the smoggy, Denver air.

The South Platte River wasn't too far from where I was, probably just seven city blocks or so. I began my hike towards it, thinking that although it wasn't the most sanitary option, the water was shallow, the area mostly empty and I could get stoned and sleep under the trees and bushes tonight without anyone noticing. I had to hurry though; the wind was picking up again and the sky started to groan, revealing its labor pains before a storm.

On the way over I noticed a digital church sign with bright, green scrolling words reading: "Verse of the Day: 'It is for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery.' Galatians 5:1."

I recognized that church; I went there once in high school with a fleeting friend. I didn't remember much about the service, but the people seemed nice. I haven't stepped inside a church in years, although it's not like I did much anyways. Our family went only a handful of times a year to a Methodist church near our house. But I was baptized as a baby and I guess I would say I believed- I don't know, I hadn't given it much thought lately. It was enjoyable passing by it though and having the chance to briefly reminisce in an otherwise dark, strange street.

When I arrived to the river I found a large, drooping tree that would be suitable in keeping me hidden both for my bath and my nightly shelter. I set down my plastic shopping bags on top of its large, exposed roots and began undressing just as the rain started to pour. I put on the new swimsuit cover up in case there were cops nearby so I wouldn't get busted for public indecency. I prepared to put my old clothes and kit into one of the plastic bags to keep them dry, but as I did I felt something light fall and hit my foot and continue rolling down towards the river's edge. It was too dark to tell what it was, but I knew instantly when it happened what I lost:

My bag of heroin.

Panicked, I leapt into the frigid river and splashed around the water desperately searching for it. But with the growing darkness and hurrying current my search was in vain. It was gone, gone for good. Frustrated and ill, I began sobbing into the heavens. I felt so pitiful, so angry! I knew I should have taken it before when I had the chance. What was I waiting for, really? Now I was going to have a horrible night going through withdrawals and only a few ibuprofens to help my pain. Having sex with Joe was all for nothing and I never needed my drug more than I did now.

I didn't know what else to do than just stand there in the river, the cold raindrops mixing with my hot tears dripping down my face. What was I going to do? What could I do?

I started thinking about my family, my best friends Megan and Cady and my brother Kyle. I missed them so much, I hoped they missed me, too.

I considered the past few years, how alcohol and men were far more interesting than my college studies. It eventually led to my parents' disappointed faces when I told them I flunked out of school. If only it ended there- if only those fleeting thrills were enough for me. But it continued like a landslide I couldn't escape. I started pursuing a new romance every week; I had rich men take out to elaborate, rooftop restaurants serving expensive wine and the finest cuisine. I enjoyed sucking down a bottle of two of wine and waking up the next morning hung over and

naked in a strange bed, and to do it all over again the following weekend with a different face. But I couldn't even stop there. I loved the big bucks I made taking off my clothes for ogling men, but I even liked their attention- the whistles and paid lap dances, too. It somehow made me feel wanted and alive. But even then I needed more. It was never enough.

Tonight I realized that it would never be enough.

I knew then that what I always wanted more than anything else: to be set free from this cycle of hallow thrills. In my constant quest for excitement I lost everything- most of all, I lost who I really was.

For some reason I suddenly wanted to feel the rain, to feel each drop gently hitting my skin and take every water molecule in. I outstretched my arms, lifted my head to the sky and closed my eyes, feeling the plops of water drumming against my thin arms and face. I meditated on the rain drops caressing my skin as it fell softly and slowly down my body, sliding down my back and then into the river, its birthplace. The rain was like my baptism. It washed away the grime of my sins: the caked-on dirt and dust from a dishonest living on the streets, the pinprick wounds and dried blood droplets from shooting up, the sweat from Joe's body and my selfish tears. I thought I heard God's voice in the thunder but instead felt Him in the wind. I sensed Him giving me a promise without words- the door was opened just before I asked.

I didn't think that this emaciated body and wasted mind could feel so much all at once. And this time, it was *real*. The splashes of raindrops, the moans of the chilled wind, the growls of thunder and the slices of lightning across the black sky were all *real*. It was better than any trip I had on my drugs, any world I created in my own mind while high, and the most authentic experience I have ever felt. All of my senses rose from their wall of numbness. Although I felt so much pain searing through all my intricate nerves, I also felt all the beauty in the night: I felt the heavy breeze tousle my hair, tasted the dampness of the air and the refreshing rain. I smelled the mud, the wet grass and leaves. I saw a magnificent light show of purple, blue, and silver lighting piercing the atmospheres, and heard its accompanying band of the thunder's bass drums, the wind's flutes and the river's chimes. It was all so terrifying yet so incredibly glorious at the same time.

I began crying and yelling to God in both apologies and in pleas for my life. I pushed Him away for such a long time, yet I knew he heard me now, and accepted me. I just needed to come back, and never look back. I remembered the birds again from that morning from the first try of heroin and finally felt as free as one of them.

I slowly ambled out of the water and dried myself off with my new towel. As much as I didn't want to, I put my old clothes back on to protect myself against the dropping temperature. However, I did wear my new flip flops instead and tossed my old sneakers, reeking socks, old headband and heroin kit into the river and watched them all float away.

I walked closer to downtown, the devoted, weekday nightlife beginning in sports bars and clubs attracting crowds with free drinks for the ladies. I flagged down a taxi and asked him if \$14 would be enough to take me to the nearest hospital, and he obliged.

I didn't know where exactly to go when he dropped me off at the large, quiet building, so I just followed the illuminated, red signs for the emergency room thinking it would be a good start. I was dizzy, nauseous and nervous walking through the automatic, glass doors. I crossed my arms in hopes that it would help control their shaking and went to the front desk.

"Hello, what is your emergency?" asked the woman as she gave me a kind, genuine smile.

I stuttered at first, embarrassed by the words that were about to come out of my mouth:

“I need help. I am a heroin addict and I want to quit. I have no home or money, but I hope there is something you can do for me. I am already starting to feel sick from the withdrawals,” I confessed.

“No problem, sweetheart. You just try to fill out this form as best as you can and someone will be with you shortly.”

“Thank you,” I whispered as she handed me a clipboard and I took a seat across the desk in a blue, plastic chair.

I put my name and age in the first boxes but couldn't finish the rest; the words were starting to swim together and it made both my eyes and stomach hurt. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I knew what I was getting myself into, but I wasn't going to back down. My life and soul depended too much on it at this point. No matter how awful the next few months-or years- were going to be with the cravings, withdrawals, illnesses, pain, potential career and legal issues and relationship strains, I wasn't going to go back. I couldn't- and wouldn't- but I also needed a lot of help. After all, this will be the most strenuous, difficult endeavor I will ever do in my life.

“Lord, be with me,” I prayed.

And prayed...

And prayed.