

A Slice Of Life

BY ANITA GADHIA – SMITH

From »»» Hell To Sobriety

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I first put my mind to getting drunk when I was just eleven. It was a bang-up job. I raided my mother's liquor cabinet, swilled down bourbon, rum, gin, scotch, straight out of the bottle. It tasted awful. So what? I needed to escape from my personal hell.

BROKEN CHILDHOOD

My parents are Gujarathi and moved to the US in 1961. I came along on the 13th of June 1962 and was sent to a good private school, while my parents worked full time.

But by the time I was six, my wobbly world split wide open. My parents were divorced, my father moved out, my

mother went into a huge depression, and I felt utterly alone.

That's when two conflicting feelings struggled for supremacy. Loneliness, which made me seek company of any shape. And a need for space and solitude. This was to become a recurrent theme in my life.

Pooh! I said in denial. *The divorce does not faze me. I'm fine.* But I wasn't. I had to play mother to my mother, whom I blamed for the split. I longed for my far away father.

My school was my caregiver. Yet I always felt painfully different because I was the only dark-haired, olive skinned

Indian in a bevy of blonde WASPS (this was the late 60s, remember), because my mother draped herself in a sari, because we didn't have enough of money or a car.

To me life was about choices – between two cultures, two parents. Where did I belong? In India I was labeled American. I rejected my heritage, food, clothes, things. How I wanted to escape – from myself, my parents, my mental turmoil.

Was I a weapon used by my parents to wound one another? I yearned for them to get back together. When I was with my father, I was on his side. Ditto with my mother. Small wonder that I became a

people pleaser, ridden with anxiety.

To come back to my first bout with the bottle, I passed out, and came to in a hospital where I was treated for alcohol poisoning and required 12 stitches on my forehead. But what really bothered me, and kept me babbling, was that I had ruined my brand new light blue shirt.

The Demon Drink had hooked me. I couldn't wait to drink again. The high point of my life was the Sunday lunch with my father, who allowed me to down a couple of beers.

I was just eight when I discovered that white wine gave me an incredible feeling of lightness, melted my inner chaos and confusion.

At 13 I proudly bought my very own booze, because I looked older and bolder. And attracted older and bolder guys, to boot.

LIVING DANGEROUSLY

I found a new mate for alcohol — Drugs. Melanie, my rich best pal in school, introduced me to the charms of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll of the seventies. We made a fab pair. She tall 'n' fair, me small 'n' dark, both hot. Until Melanie's poor grades got her chucked out of school. Amazingly my wicked ways, combined with good grades, went unnoticed.

By the time I was in high school, I was smoking pot round the clock. Starting when I opened my eyes, ending before I closed them, with some puffs if I wake up in the middle of the night. Sometimes I'd buy alcohol on the way to school and gulp it down in an alley. I'd show up drunk and stoned, barely able to stagger up 'n' down the stairs. But the authorities remained oblivious – I looked so innocent.

Out of school I hung out with the neighbourhood kids from the wrong side of the tracks, to drink and smoke pot. They made me feel good about myself.

My credo: If I keep everything looking okay on the outside, I am okay.

My goal: Have fun.

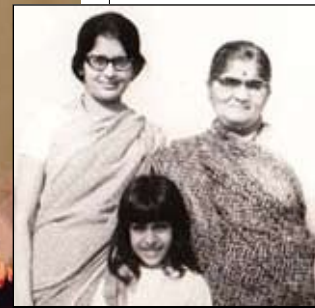
Because of incessant battling with my mother for 10 years, I moved in unannounced with my laidback father. At 18 I met Scott, a 22-year-old juvenile diabetic with a huge appetite for drugs. On our first date we did high-test cocaine – a first for me. My mind and body raced like quicksilver. I could not stop talking. I could not stop wanting more.

When you go up on cocaine, you feel invincible. For just ten minutes. Which gives way to an anxiety and a depression so profound that the only way out is to do more. Or you will crash. You end up hugely wired so that not only do you

lose track of everything, but your mind plays tricks on you: This person wishes you evil, that person has stolen your money, the other person is casting a spell on you. Your mind is your worst enemy. You need a downer -- alcohol. After a few drinks you calm down, then crave cocaine again, get high, have sex, and so on. In the most vicious circle ever.

Scott and I became a couple. His world was buying, selling and doing drugs, shady characters, non-stop excitement. Every day brought a new experience.

One day I popped two *Percodan* pain killers. Wham! A new passion – opiates (a.k.a. narcotics). It was a lovely warm feeling of euphoria. All's right with the world. Better than everything else put



(Clockwise) With father Lalit Gadhia, snapped at 16, with mother & grandmother

“The high point of my life was the Sunday lunch with my father, who allowed me to down a couple of beers”

together. What's more, the tiny pills were easy to stash away.

Strangely enough my first job was in Tandoor, an Indian restaurant, which was the prelude of my connection to my roots. Waitressing, albeit wrapped up in a sari, propelled me out of my shell. For the first time in my life I basked in adulation. But the icing on the cake was that we in a merry mood, all went out drinking after closing time.

And then I got into the prestigious Johns Hopkins University. *Sssh*. I had managed to shroud my addiction. Addicts can be intelligent enough to be top functioning individuals, you know.

HIGH JINKS IN COLLEGE

One of the first persons that I met at Hopkins was Alex, an older student

who had been in Rehab. We gravitated towards one another like two tigers in a herd of elephants.

During my first year of college, I went to classes on the days that I was not too hung over, worked nights, partied madly, got high. My father left me to my own devices.

In 1980, when the student population was predominantly male, flamboyant me hit the Top of the Pops with jet speed. Mark, the Golden Boy of my class, became my college boy friend and I introduced him to *Codeine* cough syrup and *Percodan*. With Scott I did the hard

core stuff. I juggled the two guys expertly as I led two separate lives.

Why did I need my waitressing job? To fund my addiction and my ego. I won admirers and influenced photographers, with my exotic looks.

Once upon a time I believed that heroin users were low life degenerates. Willy nilly Scott got well-bred, intelligent me on heroin, one of the strongest opiates and illegal in the U.S.

It was a mid-blowing high. Yet I was overwhelmed with shame and a sense of self

betrayal. At this point, I did not seek it out again. Pot, booze, pills, cough syrup, mushrooms, LSD, cocaine filled my day. My grades? Good enough.

I took late morning classes and showed up only when there were compulsory tests. But I kept my work obligations faithfully. *Look how responsible I am! I'm working and studying!* I fooled myself. What I was in denial about was my disease of addiction which progressed in flying leaps and bounds.

Three things happened simultaneously. I split with Scott and Mark. Scott bored my silly. Mark became gay! And I got fired from Tandoor, after I in a drunken stupor dropped a tray of food for four people.

But luck was on my side. Within two days I landed a job at a preppy pub, where—*whee*—where the staff was actually encouraged to drink. So? More partying, more drinking, more shagging, more after-hours clubbing.

In my last year of college, I landed a job as bartender in the hottest spot in Baltimore. Presto! Instant fame and fortune!

I finished with a good GPA (Grade Point Average) from Hopkins with French, Literature and Humanities. What next? *I need a break!*

HOOKED TO THE HIGH

Brendan, a Clark Kent lookalike, came into my life. One night, after an ugly alcohol-fuelled fight, he asked me to choose between him and the bottle. Reluctantly I chose Brendan. He steered 23-year-old me to my first recovery meeting, bursting at the seams with coughing, crochety, incoherent old men. We walked out within five seconds.

"I'll do it myself!" I vowed. For nine months I sulkily gave up drinks and drugs, except for pot. Being trapped in my skin, 24 hours a day, without their anaesthetic effect, was excruciating. I hung on by my fingernails, until I dumped Brendan, and jumped off the wagon.

This time I lost control. Totally. Flirted with heroin again. Got totally hooked, needing more and more to get the same erotic high, progressing from snorting to shooting. Drugs and alcohol became the most important part of my psyche – higher than family, friends, lovers.

I was flying solo. I only needed someone to help me to use it.

My job (and the lavish tips) gave me stacks of cash to indulge my habits without getting into debt. *See how mature I am!* I deluded myself, because I was living with my father who was on the top of his law career.

I lost my bartending job because I had hosted an unauthorized birthday party after hours, and *poof*, my glam identity vanished into smoke. I couldn't land another job, which was actually a blessing in disguise.

My father gave me a position in his law firm as a paralegal and office manager. It felt respectable and responsible, although I needed heroin to take me through the day. After work I went Happy Hour-ing with another paralegal, but unlike her I couldn't stop. I had to move on for cocaine, rounded up by heroin or pills. Finding the drugs at odd hours was not easy, specially since dealers are neither reliable nor honest.

Eventually I was arrested for being under the influence. But the police believed my minimized misrepresentation, what with my butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth demeanour. I was let off on a year's probation.

My ensuing fright was short lived. Within a couple of months I was back to my old tricks with top speed.

NIP CRAVINGS IN THE BUD

- How to deal with wanting to use when ...
- ... you are hungry — eat a meal
- ... you are tired — get some sleep
- ... you are angry — talk it out with someone
- ... you want to go to a Happy Hour after work — attend a Recovery Meeting.

STRUGGLING TO BREAKFREE

With my friend Colin I sank deeper. My tolerance for drugs kept increasing to the point where I never got high. The heroin hit only kept me from going crazy — briefly. I was in withdrawal sickness every day. I needed dope to be able to function. Drugs which were once my slave, were now my master.

Every day I tried to stop and every day I failed. I'd awake and promise *I'm going to stop today*. By lunch time the cravings kicked in and I was counting the hours until Happy Hour. *I'll have one innocent drink to take the edge off*. After the first glass I caved in, alternating coke, heroin and alcohol through the night. Each substance spurred a craving for the next, which would counteract the effects of

"After the first glass I caved in, alternating coke, heroin and alcohol through the night. I vowed to stop tomorrow. But tomorrow never came. I betrayed myself daily"



At the Bombay Port Trust Hospital, Mumbai, in July, 2008



the former. I vowed to stop tomorrow. But tomorrow never came. I betrayed myself daily.

Addiction is a disease of isolation, loneliness, dishonesty, wrapped up in denial.

My frustration mounted. I changed jobs to an export company. *Respectability, here I come!* Simultaneously I joined a Masters Programme in Intra Cultural Communication in the University of Maryland, where my Godmother Angela was a professor in the same department.

I planned to work during the day, attend classes at night. What I hadn't factored in was time to maintain and recover from my addiction which was a full time job in itself. Naturally, I performed poorly on both fronts. Drinking gave me relief and escape. I met each day with shame, dread and a sense of impending doom. I withdrew from college. Yet each day was a struggle to medicate myself to meet my work commitments. *If only I had no schedules to meet!* My closest ties were TV characters and game show hosts. I would isolate myself for long stretches — either recovering from a binge or getting set for another one.

An alternate to street drugs is methadone, another opiate, which alters brain function less severely and is actually used for Rehab Programmes. My "friendly" neighbourhood dealer suggested that I use it to keep withdrawal symptoms at bay. I tried the orange liquid, but like everything else it wore off, and I'd need heroin again. I'd seek out Colin, ostensibly just to chat, and end up getting stoned. I had the money, he had the contacts. We were drug buddies who met each other's dependency in different ways.

Inevitably I was fired from my job. My boss indicated that he knew what ailed me; I, who thought that I had hidden my habits, was deeply humiliated.

I took the summer off to chill from working and studying. Once again, what really wiped me out was my addiction, which is really hard work.

There I was, 27 years old, with no life plan. I spent my days sleeping, and hitting the bars at night, staying out till dawn, drinking and doing drugs. But with no job, I quickly ran through my



savings, and was running up debts. Life was becoming increasingly painful.

My old fantasy: *If I can get just the right high and the right guy, I will live happily ever after* was giving way to harsh reality. The party was over. So were the fun times. Even when I did manage to get high, I felt stale, numb, empty.

CHEMICAL OVERDOSE

What I really needed was a new me, but instead I tried to change everything outside of me. After much soul-searching I applied for a Masters in French Literature in the Catholic University, Washington, which was tied up with a teaching job. *I can translate my love for French into anything, everything* was my rationale. But even with the best of intentions the commute for Baltimore to Washington was too ambitious for my fragile self. To keep me going and control my usage I tried different computations of opiates, coke, alcohol. It was like switching seats on the Titanic.

And then I regrouped with my old drug buddy and occasional lover Alex from John Hopkins, who had since suffered multiple injuries when under the influence of heroin, had been arrested 17 times, and had been jailed for fraudulent medical identities and prescriptions. Not a pretty picture, what?

Alex was stoned and I wanted some drugs from him. We guzzled cough syrup, spent the night together, and had sex. After which I moved in with him and he gave me enough of *Codeine* cough syrup and pills to suppress the heroin withdrawals. All I wanted was to make it through the day. I didn't want a high. Marijuana killed my energy – I was quite content to do nothing but marvel at my thoughts.

I am going to fail! I told myself sorrowfully. So I drowned my sorrows in tequila shots. A hardened addict needs to ingest a chemical to solve any problem. Ergo, the solution becomes the problem.

I blanked out and came to in a police station, screaming abuses at the officers. Alex rescued me. I was terrified that I would be sent to jail, as this was my second offence. Subsequently, I was put on a year's probation, made to pay a

small fine and attend alcohol education classes. By that time I was on the Road to Recovery.

Yet for that New Years Eve Alex and I decided to get higher than usual to celebrate our engagement, and added heroin to our cocktail of pills and cough syrup. For the first few days of 1990 I was totally non functional. They were my

Did you know..... Studies show that depression and anxiety lessens in people who participate in self-help programmes. The disease of addiction, which thrives in isolation, withers and dries without it.



With husband Ronald Smith on their wedding day

“After sleepwalking for 15 years I learned to live again. To eat, wake up, go to bed, make friends, date, work take care of my health, eat sensibly”

darkest days. *Nothing is fun anymore* my brain registered

I need help I cried soundlessly. I reached out to my father who offered me his unconditional support. With trepidation, I called my mother, who I had always fed with lies and avoidance; to my surprise she was accepting and loving.

Once again I determined to do it myself. I dropped out of college, but decided to hold onto my teaching classes. I had to wean myself from the pain killer *Tylenol* and worked out a complicated routine that failed. Relapsed into pills and cough syrup. Tried again. Failed again. It was like being on a roller-coaster that

never stopped. With Alex and me there was always one of us caving in and going off track.

After one last aborted try, I decided to go to daily Recovery Meetings. It was a feeling of relief. I was with happy confident people, who were once just as miserable and confused as I was. They would help me... For them fun no longer came in a bottle. There was sharing, structure, support and social interaction, although I was not yet fully clean.

GETTING WEANED

March 5th 1990 was my Sobriety Date. No more codeine, Valium, pot, alcohol, or anything else that was mood altering. I was scared stiff. *Could I go it without my crutches?*

The one-day-at-a-time dictum helped. I would not “use” today. And when tomorrow came it was a new today. When I could not do it myself, I learned to “bookend” – call someone for support before and after a difficult event.

It was my toxic brain which could not make choices and decisions. I left Alex and roomed in with a friend from the Recovery Group who handled my anxiety, depression, low blood sugar, emotional outbursts with compassion.

After sleepwalking for 15 years I learned to live again. To eat, wake up, go to bed, make friends, date, work. To furnish and clean, wash my clothes, take care of my health, eat sensibly. Each day was a learning experience.

My first job in sobriety was in a hotel Front Office. It was stressful, what with changing shifts and a demanding clientele. The old feeling of worthlessness crept back. For 18 months Recovery Meetings were my Sanity Line.

Yet I was still drifting. I went into a series of tempestuous relationships that fizzled. This took me into therapy, which helped me to focus.

For the first time in sobriety I visited India and felt a sense of belonging.

With my therapist cheering all the way, I enrolled in a Masters Programme in Psychotherapy at the Catholic University. This was me in a new avatar.

Despite profound anxiety I never missed a class, took copious notes, participated meaningfully, got straight



At her book launch party in Georgetown, Washington, DC, November, 2007



