

A Recovery Story

by

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My narrative of being taken hostage by the disease of addiction isn't unlike many of those who have struggled and are still suffering in the grips of an awful demon with a ferocious appetite for human life. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) releases data every autumn collected during the previous year on the use of legal and illegal drugs, as well as psychiatric maladies. In 2019, 20.4 million American adults (aged 12 and older) battled a substance use disorder, and 9.5 million American adults (aged 18 and older) identified as having both a mental health and substance use disorder, or co-occurring disorders. I fit into the latter group of individuals.

This story of recovery centers on the factors of Saturday, April 16th, 2005. I had foreseen the happenings of that day for a while. In hindsight, I would never have been prepared enough for its actual arrival. I had played different scenarios of these events in my subconscious, perhaps thinking I might avoid despair, mourning, or trauma. I allowed myself to believe that when the occasion occurred, I wouldn't so much as flinch in the face of sorrow. My mind stood at attention, like a soldier awaiting a command, bracing for an enemy aiming to take me down.

My mother was an addict, and that understanding revealed itself to me when I was very young. Being of grade school age in the 1980s, I took part in the "Just Say No" campaign proposed by First Lady Nancy Reagan. The D.A.R.E. program born in Los Angeles, California, by a Chief of Police also had a notable presence. Both endeavors, whose intent had been to establish an active fear of using narcotics in children, have had their fair share of scrutiny. I recall teachers, law enforcement officers and guest speakers telling haunting accounts of dopes and their fatal results. They stressed that anyone who dared to do drugs and or drink alcohol would meet an early grave. In my case, concern over losing my own life isn't what I took away from those lectures and "first-hand" testimonies. The nature and "red flags" of a dope fiend caught my attention. They had advised us that if we suspected someone in our families might be an alcoholic or hooked on drugs, we should tell a teacher, our principal, or a police officer in order to get them help. I became uneasy because how they described the dope fiend fit many behaviors my mother possessed. However, I couldn't bring myself to report the information to anyone. The right moment to share that part of my life didn't arise until about 25 years old, while entering the early stages of addiction myself. A child, at the start of first or second grade, I became anguished by the worry of losing a loved one to an overdose. An assortment of scenarios would play over in my mind to make myself "ready" for the unavoidable manifestation of her death.

The worry of drugs seizing my mom from me festered into resentment as I developed into my preteen and teenage years. Seldom did I speak about this woman, and because of her lifestyle, my admiration became nil. When she came around, I was cold and unavailable. I looked down at her. She embarrassed me. The older I grew, the more I would snub her from my life. I wanted to have her removed from my existence, and I worked hard to make that my reality. My mother took notice. She didn't push back often from my decision to escape her. One day she asked, as we spoke over the phone, "Am I still your mom?" At yet another attempt to hurt her I replied, "The most we can ever be is friends." I thought this to be the sharpest dagger I could throw at her. However, she responded so that I could picture her smile through the telephone by saying, "Okay, I think that's good!"

Firm on not being compared to my mother, I failed to see the early warning signs of drug dependency and mental health challenges in myself. In my late teens, I drank at a few high school parties, and I would go to the legendary Juarez, Mexico, underage strip of nightclubs. However, consuming alcohol, or any other mind or mood-altering substances, daily, wasn't my thing. While very active in extracurricular activities, I couldn't sit still long enough to keep up with academic requirements. I was clawing to break free from the actuality I had known, and so I did. The last semester of my Junior year, I dropped out, got my GED, and signed up for the United States Air Force. It had been a brief stay in the armed forces, and the attraction to abusing drugs and alcohol set in soon after I returned home. A few months before my 21st birthday, I allowed the floodgates of addiction to burst open like a swollen water dam. Behaviors I had witnessed and things I swore I would never do became somewhat of a "to-do" list. I drank, popped Xanax pills multiple times a day, and used copious amounts of cocaine. I thought I had been vigilant against becoming anything close to resembling my mother, and yet, the slow process of allowing myself to spiral downward had begun. It feels as though it took an entire lifetime before I could realize or admit that I was a full-fledged, out-of-control addict.

At 23 years old, I moved to Houston, Texas, and that made it easier to avoid my mother. Despite many losses, her persistence in keeping up with my doings and whereabouts was noble. She would find out places where I worked at random times and call me on a whim. If she found out my home number, she would phone, befriend my roommates, and probe for details about my well-being. When we had conversations, the comment about her and I only ever becoming friends became more and more true. True, in the positive sense in which she perceived it, not the nasty and hurtful thing I had intended it to be. I developed a different view of this woman I thought I wanted nothing to do with. I recognized her as having her own reality, versus only identifying her as the woman who gave birth to me. She had life experiences and feelings, just as I did.

A simple notion revealed itself to me. Perhaps the manner in which I used to describe myself as a human being may fit her as well.

On April 16th, 2005, I was working a double shift as a server in a restaurant in Houston, Texas. By this time, drugs and alcohol showed red flags of addiction in many areas of my life. My inability to keep a job proved to be one of them. However, two weeks had been the longest time out of work. There are a few things I could always count on in the restaurant industry: restaurants are always hiring waitstaff, they never verified employment history, substantial amounts of quick cash, a reliable source for drugs onsite, co-workers who also used, and no drug testing by the companies. I had started a different gig, and my family was unaware of the location. A hostess came up to me during a busy lunch and stated I had a personal call on hold. Certain that I had kept my new job under wraps, I answered with a baffled voice, "Hello?" The person on the other end of the receiver shouted, "Jermaine!," and I identified her without hesitation. My mother had a distinct voice, especially when in good spirits. I asked her how she had located me and she responded, "You're my only child, I'll always find you."

She impressed me with her investigative skill. I didn't have time to ask the many questions about this situation that flooded my mind because of the lunch rush. I only laughed and told her I had to return to work. Before I could hang up the phone, she asked, "Can you call me when you get off?" I said I would and meant my promise. I explained to her it would be late because of my double shift. She made a last plea for me not to forget about her and I assured her I wouldn't. Satisfied with my promise of calling later that evening, my mother ended with, "Ok, I love you," and I replied, "Love you too."

I worked through the rest of a busy restaurant double, and remember laughing to myself about my mother's ability to track me down. To this day, I still don't understand how she did it. As the shift dragged on, thoughts of my mother faded, and the cravings to use engulfed my mind. A plan formed of what substances I would hunt down, and which seedy neighborhoods I would enter to get them. Would I isolate and use alone, or fade into the night with a few choice working buddies? The deciding factor came down to when I prepared to clock out and if there might be anyone else ready to hit the streets with me. On this occasion, I would fly solo.

It was a race to gather my poisons before heading to my apartment. I bypassed the front door and shedding my work uniform couldn't happen quick enough. I darted towards the kitchen to put my liquid drug in the refrigerator. On the way, I noticed my answering machine flashed red with new telephone messages. My senses returned. Cravings had gone to the wayside. Perhaps my mother had called and left a message. As I listened through them, it relieved me that none played with her voice. As I

approached the last recording, I thought to myself, "I'll just call her tomorrow." My brain receded into darkness. The last message played. My mother's youngest sister spoke in a calm, clear, and balanced tone, "Jermaine, this is Angela. Emergency. Emergency. You need to call me back."

Perhaps my overwhelming desire to use, or that I remained distant from my family, prevented me from giving my aunt's words any rumination. No worry over anything needing my immediate attention. Not even my aunt's twice use of the word "emergency" affected me. No consideration of calling her back. I erased my messages, poured my first alcoholic beverage, and took out a paraphernalia mirror. This binge would go deep into the next morning.

Around 9 am the next morning, my one-man party steadily continued when I heard a sudden knock on my apartment door. A firm fist hitting a cheap, hollow, wooden door that echoed in authority or urgency. I crept to the door as silently as I could and looked through the peephole. A panic came over me as I recognized two female figures staring back. My mother's two sisters, Angela and Erika. Being in no shape for visitors, I ran to my room to put on a clean shirt and a fresh pair of shorts in order to not appear disheveled. I dashed to hide all my paraphernalia that, upon first glance, would tell the entire story of the night before. I sprayed air freshener throughout my entire apartment in hopes to eliminate a smell reminiscent of a dive bar.

Now prepared, I opened the door to both of my aunts. As they entered my apartment, both wore smiles and seemed glad to see me. I invited them to sit as I took a seat myself on one of my living room sofas. To my surprise, I sat down, and they seated themselves one on either side of me. The situation became more and more peculiar by the moment. Any reasoning why these women had paid me a visit escaped me. As you might assume, the alcohol and other substances coursing through my bloodstream wouldn't allow me to make a proper assessment. My aunt Angela asked me how I had been, and as I spoke something made up of untruths, my aunt Erika leaned over into my right ear and whispered, "Your mom died." I hadn't heard her words correctly. I spun my head so that my eyes met hers and asked for clarification. Erika repeated the same phrase she had whispered only seconds before, but this time with my full attention, "Your mom died." Without taking a moment to register what had just been said, my mouth spat out the words, "I knew it!"

I went into a mode of actions comparable to those who have made "doomsday" preparations. This was not a drill. The time came to invoke my so-called preparations for this event. I had no tears. Not a single question of how this had happened. I knew the answers, no need for details. My aunts' visit turned out to be brief, considering the

severity of what brought them to my door that morning. My constant reassurance of being alright, and the need for them to exit my drug den, got them ushered out and on their way. Once they had gone, I continued to ingest my supply of poisons until all that remained was an emptiness inside of me.

In the next few days, I would return to my hometown of El Paso, Texas, and become the other half of a duo that headed the tasks of funeral arrangements and services. Everything from going to the medical examiner's office and gathering my mother's belongings recovered from the site of her passing, to picking out a casket and a dress for my mother to be buried in. All performed by my grandmother, or "Big Mom" as I named her, and myself. We walked down that grim road together. Two people going through the motions of the aftermath of a traumatic event. Big Mom identified the body alone. The medical examiner told me it would be too disturbing for me to handle. The experience for my Big Mom is hard for me to fathom. During my time in recovery, I've heard women say more times than I'd like that a mother losing her child is one of the greatest devastations there are. Big Mom had bravery enough for the both of us during it all. For me, it is a blur. I self-medicated for the entire return to my hometown. I remember a high school friend who attended the funeral service approaching me and saying, "It's okay to cry. You don't have to be strong." My face wore no mask of strength. My full presence never arrived.

As one person's life spent on the battlefield of addiction came to a close, another fell in to take their place in combat without consent. The details aren't the same, but the physical hardships and emotional struggles run parallel. Loneliness, isolation, shame, embarrassment, guilt, the endurance of pain and agitation of physical withdrawals are a few elements those of us with mental health and addiction challenges will face before hope becomes an idea of something possible to have. It would take me 20 years in active addiction, 4 months of homelessness, over 10 lost jobs, 1 DWI, 2 car crashes, 1 theft charge, 1 month of jail time, 6 months of probation, 2,000 dollars in fines & fees, 1 suicide attempt, 4 psychiatric diagnosis, 8 visits to detox facilities, 3 rehab stays, and an unthinkable amount of wreckage in the relationships of loved ones before I even gave myself a chance at long-term recovery.

For some time, I resigned my fate to that of my mother's. Allowing the knowledge of needing help to give way to the desperation of wanting to live was the only way my opportunity to heal would present itself to me. Through my journey in recovery, I have become closer to my mother as I learn about the insidious attributes the disease of addiction possesses. Having a mental health diagnosis has helped me to become empathetic towards people whose minds have turned on them, much like my mother. I

now carry her with me daily. Every milestone I reach in my recovery has my mother's name attached to my own.

As for the rest of my family, I am very fortunate. Throughout my life, they have always loved me unconditionally. They have never turned their backs on me. I can acknowledge that today and give it the respect it deserves. Big Mom is the best there will ever be, all biases accepted. She is someone I proudly refer to as my best friend in any discussion, and still only ever asks of me what she has asked all along. Live well and do better. The rest of my days will be spent working to fulfill that request. Not only for her, but for me. She has always been, and remains, a guiding light home no matter where she may be. I know that not everyone with mental health and addiction challenges has the blessings I do yet. It is important to me I pray for them and help spread the word of hope in recovery, so that others may find their own Higher Power and allow themselves to be wrapped in forgiveness, love, and guidance.

On October 1, 2021, I will celebrate one year clean and sober. It's not only stopping the use of mind and mood-altering substances. It's the work of putting together a puzzle that I can now take time to find the pieces of because recovery is the deconstruction and reconstruction of oneself. Because I no longer abuse drugs and alcohol doesn't mean all of my days have become easier. However, my bad days in recovery are a far better experience than any day I've spent in active addiction. Each day that I am blessed to receive, I start with gratitude for waking up clean and sober. Then, I put one foot in front of the other and take my day one step at a time. Recovery is not a race. Recovery is the link to making my life worth fighting for.