

## I Had Become A Drug Addict

by Randolph Outlaw

By twelve, I was using heroin regularly. It helped me cope with the constant pressures of my environment and the burden of negative experiences that weighed on my consciousness and left me with feelings of low self-esteem. Using heroin I distanced myself from these problems by numbing myself to them. The induced tranquil state left me relaxed. There was no more doubt, fear or worry after using heroin. I had fantasies that I would be a success in life - feelings of happiness and confidence.

I was fifteen years old when Junior (step-father) brutally beat Mama one night in the front room of our new two and a half room apartment. I lay in bed listening to her plead with him. The strain in her voice made my stomach nervous and in my anxiety I crept to the closed door and spied Junior through the keyhole shaking Mama like a rag doll. When he hit her on the head with his open hand, I sprang from the bedroom and jumped on him. He grabbed me and twisted my arm behind my back. Then he tormented us until Keith began crying and came into the living room with his nose bleeding.

Mama bathed Keith when Junior released us. While she was in the bathroom, I went into the closet and got my cub scout hatchet. I put it under my pillow before Mom returned. Afterward, I lay awake on my stomach holding my hatchet for a long time. I contemplated how I would kill Junior if he came into the bedroom and bothered us again.

At the age of sixteen, I was getting the money for heroin through work and illegal means. I worked in a neighborhood pool hall and I still carried luggage in the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Other youths who also hustled at the bus terminal taught me how to steal merchandise from department stores. Hanging out with Bob and his gang, I learned how to commit burglaries and

petty robberies. During the summer, I was arrested for robbery and confined on Rikers Island in Queens, New York. Another youth and I had acquired a twenty-two-caliber pistol from a prior burglary of a small candy store. Once we had the gun, we thought it would be easy to commit robberies. We were caught attempting to rob a man in a subway station. Subsequently, I was convicted and given a five-year sentence. I served two years of the sentence working in the prison's electrical shop before being paroled.

I reentered society unchanged. I was unchanged because there was no rehabilitation in prison. I had no support or anyone to show me how to change by teaching me how to begin to cope with drug addiction, peer pressure, low self-esteem, child abuse, and rape. In prison, I was placed in an environment where I was expected to adjust according to a certain narrow assumption that I could only change and become a law-abiding citizen through hard work and discipline. This assumption did not take into account the environment and experiences that shaped me. Furthermore, it did not help me to cope with the problems I would be confronted with as a poor, young, ill-educated, black ex-offender. Therefore, I was paroled without a chance of making a successful re-entry because I was still unprepared to cope with the conditions of my neighborhood.

In my neighborhood, nothing had changed during my two years of incarceration. I found that many of my friends were drug addicts and unwed mothers. A few youths I knew had been violently killed and others died from overdoses of heroin. Other youths I was familiar with prostituted their bodies or lay in the streets, homeless and rejected by their own families. Those that worked complained and were unsatisfied with their low-paying, dead-end jobs. At home, Junior made it clear that I was not expected to live with the family for very long. Now, at the age of eighteen, I was a man. I had the responsibility of caring for myself.

Two weeks after being paroled, I was using heroin again. It was a way to escape from my feelings of worthlessness. I was a poor, black, eighteen-year-old with a prison record. No one wanted to give me a job. I lived in a Brooklyn ghetto with many other poor youths and young adults who were unemployed and had no career choices. None of my friends were successful. I perceived that there were no options available to me. I would live in the ghetto all my life — It was only one month before I got arrested again. I was confined to Rikers Island for three days before Mama raised the money to bail me out.

Back in the streets, I continued using heroin and committing petty crimes. I never thought about the victims of my crimes. I never thought about how I was deteriorating physically and mentally as a result of using heroin or how it pained my family to see me in such poor condition. I was numb to everything but my need for the drug and the induced illusions of success that comforted me.

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