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# WILDFIRE

SHANNON LALLY

Have you ever made a mistake? I bet you have, even if you don't remember it. Maybe it was something small, like locking yourself out of your house and having to use the spare key you hid under the flower pot. Maybe it was something a little bigger, like saying something to a friend you can't take back. Those mistakes are like rain. For a while, the outside world is gray and bleak and wet; but soon, the sun pushes out from behind the clouds, and all is well again. These are not the kinds of mistakes I have made. My mistakes are like wildfires: disfiguring the entire landscape, forests turned black and flat and charred beneath my feet. After something like that, people will always look at you like a walking natural disaster, will always be smelling the air for smoke. I guess that's my fault, but I would do anything to take it back. Anything.

It all started where most mistakes happen in high school: a party. The summer before I started high school, my dad and I moved to a stereotypical small town in rural Oregon. It was deceptively picturesque with a little historic downtown and snow-capped mountains lining the horizon. My dad said it looked like a Christmas card, but to me, it felt like a snow globe. "Come on, it's a fresh start in God's country. It'll be good for us," he said. I knew the divorce hadn't been easy on my dad, but this didn't feel like a fresh start. It felt like a life sentence.

From the minute we moved there, the town felt barren. Untouched. Lonely. Of course, there were other kids my age in the town, and I went to school with all of them. You'd think this would help with the overwhelming feeling of isolation, but it had the opposite effect. Throwing together a few hundred chronically bored, desperate-for-trouble teens is about as good of an idea as it sounds: it's an awful idea. It became us against the world, a case study in desperation and mob mentality. Without that anger and desire for more, what did we have? There was nothing for us to look forward to besides escape. Every day in that tiny school and that tiny town felt the same, like we were living in a time loop. It would almost be cool, like a science fiction movie, if it wasn't so abysmally boring. So we determined that if we couldn't get to the outside world just yet, we would bring the outside world to us. Like the stupid kids we were, we thought the outside world was like one giant rager, so we threw some pretty killer parties. I never understood how the word "killer" could both mean something good and bad at the same time. Now I do.

Flash forward to a Friday night sometime during my senior year. We had survived yet another week of classes and teachers and homework, and graduation was just around the corner. We were so close to being done. So close. Naturally, we decided to celebrate the only way we really knew how: we threw a party. We kept the house dark and the music loud and the blinds drawn. For those few brief hours in whoever's house we were crashing that weekend, we weren't trapped in rural Oregon. We were living the life in L.A. or New York or some other far away city with places to go and people to meet. Our hearts slammed inside our chests, echoing the beat of the music and chanting for more, more, more. For those few brief hours, we were free.

Freedom has a price, though. That's the part they skip in the movies. The characters have a crazy night, something goes wrong, chaos ensues as the characters try to fix whatever sticky situation they had gotten themselves into, the problem works itself out, and the characters laugh about it afterwards and have a sentimental moment. Cue happy music. Roll credits. The end. That's not how it happens in real life. That night, we made a mistake. We started a wildfire. The moment my friend set down a beer bottle for a pill bottle, I should have known to walk away. I should have said no, but that night, I felt invincible. I thought nothing would hurt me, not when I was so close to my life finally starting. I looked around at all my friends, drunk and high and so alive, and I took one. Oxycodone didn't sound scary, not like heroin or cocaine or meth. They gave it to kids when they got their teeth pulled, so how bad could it be? One pill wouldn't hurt. I had stopped saying no a long time ago.

If only I had known that one pill would turn into a habit, and a habit would turn into a full blown addiction. Soon, I had pills in my locker, in my car, in my bookbag, in my purse. Any space I inhabited on a regular basis became my drug cabinet, my hiding place. It became increasingly difficult, however, to keep my addiction going. I was in high school, and my dad would obviously be furious if he found out. I didn't have nearly enough money to keep buying the pills I wanted. No. Needed. So I found myself at

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a new low. Hooked on the high and stupid enough to keep my problem a secret, I bought heroin for the first time. It was just from a kid at my school, and the deal was cheap and quick. The needle was intimidating at first, but not as scary as the thought of withdrawal. The tremors, the sweating, the chills, the pain. Itching for a high in the tiny bathroom attached to my bedroom, I closed my eyes and didn't focus on the pinch of the needle. I didn't think about what would happen once this high wore off, too. I just let the wave of euphoria wash over me and felt a sudden calm. Looking in the mirror, I could see my first bruise already beginning to show. I changed into a sweatshirt before my dad came home. I would wear long sleeves for years.

If taking oxycodone for the first time was crossing a line, shooting up with heroin for the first time was obliterating it. There was no line anymore. Every day, the drugs worked less and less, and I had to buy more and more. At this point, I was covered in bruises. Anywhere that could be hidden with jeans or long sleeves was a canvas of blue and brown bruises and puncture marks. If there was something drugs had taught me, it was that I was a good liar. I could hide anything from my dad, and he never figured it out. At least, he didn't figure it out for a long time. It took three years for me to hit rock bottom. When I overdosed for the first time, a lot of things changed.

I was in college. I mean, I was enrolled in college, but I wasn't in my classes more often than not. My grades were slipping, and my attendance was a disaster, but I could never seem to make it through the day. Not without getting high. I'd gone home early that day, exhausted and ready to add another bruise to the collection. If I had counted how many times I had felt the sting of a needle, it probably would have been enough times to have given myself a full tattoo. Countless. One minute I was in the bathroom, pulling my sleeves down to hide the shameful thing I had just done, and the next, I had stumbled into my room. I laid down and closed my eyes, which is apparently how my dad found me. Prone. Unresponsive. Barely breathing. I woke up a day later in the hospital, my dad sitting next to the hospital bed with his head in his hands. He lifted his head and looked at me, eyes clearly red and bloodshot. He didn't say anything. He just looked at me. I told him it wasn't his fault, but I could tell he didn't believe me, that he felt the burden of my secret as much as I did as he sat there and looked at my arms, a stark picture of my addiction. He checked me into rehab the next week.

Rehab was not like the hospital. The hospital was cold and smelled like rubbing alcohol and formaldehyde. It was sterile and final feeling. The hospital felt like death. Rehab, on the other hand, was filled with warm colors and art classes and friendly faces. Withdrawal felt like dying, but at least it wasn't death. It was resuscitation. Revival. Resurrection. I left a month later detoxified and rejuvenated, ready to pick up the pieces of my life and live as if that night at that fated party never happened. Too bad good things almost never last.

I would overdose three more times. Each time, my dad sent me back to rehab with a little less hope in his eyes. I could tell he was giving up hope a little. I had given up a little, too. It was at my fourth trip to rehab when I met Rachel. She was nineteen, bone thin, and pregnant. It turns out that if you do heroin while you're pregnant, the baby gets addicted, too. If the mom tries to go cold turkey and stop feeding their addiction, the baby also goes through withdrawal and can die. So there sat Rachel, medicated on methadone and just waiting until her nine and a half month wait was up so that she could get her act together. When I asked her about her situation, she said, "If it was just me, I probably would have never gotten clean. But it's not just me anymore, and Child Protective Services can get involved at any time. My family doesn't think I'll make a good mom. I need to prove them wrong. I just made a mistake. It was one time." It was this heartbreaking admission that made me see that if I didn't get clean, I could easily be in Rachel's shoes in five, ten, maybe fifteen years. I could never drag my kids into this. Never. That was my last trip to rehab. I never touched a needle again.

## Five Years Later

"And that's how I got here. I'm almost five years clean, and I'm finishing community college in a couple of months. I already have a job lined up after I graduate." Claps and congratulations filled the room as I announced this news, a success story that the other recovering addicts in the room could aspire to. Heroin Anonymous had taken up my Monday nights for the past four years, and every meeting attended felt like I was earning my place back in society. Rachel sat across the room with her daughter, who was fast asleep in her lap. I wondered if Rachel would ever tell her what these meetings were, who she used to be. My father sat next to me, smiling and proud at my recovery. It is true that some mistakes are like wildfires. They burn down everything that was once familiar, and you are left with only the ashes. But that's the incredible thing about wildfires: after the flames have died down and the heat no longer persists, the scorched ground becomes green again. Life always finds a way. Things grow back. It may never be the same, but it sure is something.