

You Can Smoke Crack and Fuck Other Women, Or You Can Have Everything Else in the World

After spending the latter half of the summer of 2009 as a guest at the Nassau County Correctional Center in East Meadow, Long Island, I was released in early September and cannot begin to describe how wonderful it felt to breathe the warm summer air of freedom. The first thing I did upon my release from jail was exactly what I was instructed to do: go straight to the Nassau County Probation Office to meet my probation officer.

When I checked in, the gentleman at the front desk pulled my file and told me that my probation officer was out in the field. The gentleman told me not to worry, that he would let my officer know I had checked in. Later that afternoon, I discovered my probation officer had left me a nasty voicemail, threatening me with arrest because I failed to go straight from jail to see him. And so began my wonderful three-year relationship with The Nassau County Probation Department.

The second thing I did was what I'd been dreaming about while sitting in my cold, dank cell that summer: I took my turn-of-the-century 34-foot Sea Ray with twin gas-burning 454s out for a cruise. Well, to be accurate, the cruise was the third thing I did. The second was taking one of the longest, hottest showers of my life. It was all I could do to scrub the stench of jail off my body, a stench that seeped under my skin like a tattoo. It's not that I had spent a long time incarcerated or suffered some terrible fate like being raped in the shower. I did, however, spend enough time behind bars to understand that I needed to make a profound change in my life.

Living and working near the ocean and having owned a boat for most of my adult life, there is no better therapy for my soul than a solo cruise out on the open water. Boarding the "Amanda Hope" that warm September day was like reuniting with an old friend. I practically tore the green canvas from its snaps as I popped them open one by one, uncovering her shiny laminated deck. The keys were right where I had left them, in the ignition. I pumped the throttle levers back and forth several times, priming her engines, held the shift levers at half-throttle and turned each of her two keys. Just as ordered, her two engines responded, roaring to life, emitting a bluish white cloud of burnt oil and exhaust fumes that only come from a gasoline engine that has been sitting dormant for a time.

The gentle westerly breeze knew exactly where my nostrils were, sending the cloud right into my face. Normally, I would have held my breath as the acrid smoke flowed past me at the helm and out into the open water, but not today. Today, I savored the aroma as if waving a fine cigar under my nose in anticipation of its pleasure. As the boat warmed up, I untied her lines and cast off, beginning the ride through the twisting canal that leads from

my house to the open water. Hampered by the damned 5 mph speed limit enforced on residential waterways, it made the 15-minute ride to open water seem like an hour.

I needed to be on the water. I needed to think. I needed to clear my head. As I passed Cap's, a waterfront eatery I frequented by boat and by car, I waved to Amy, the owner, who was chatting with customers on the deck. Despite this being a simple everyday experience, a chill ran up my spine with the realization that if my life did not do a total about-face immediately, I could very well end up spending the next part of it caged up like an animal instead of enjoying warm summer days like this one.

I headed south out of Seamans Creek, I increased my speed gently as I swung westward toward Goose Creek. Her engines were now thirsty for fuel so I eased forward on the levers. She was teasing me as her bow started to rise ever so slightly. We leveled off for a few seconds, then I slammed her throttles forward. Her engines roared in response, guzzling fuel at the rate of 24 gallons per hour. She lurched forward like a whale breaching the surface, and I gently eased back on the gas.

We planed off and settled down to a comfortable cruising speed. I prepared myself for an easterly turn into Bulkhead Drain, approaching the sparsely marked entrance into this navigable but hazardous channel that leads out to the Great South Bay. I had seen many a pleasure craft run aground at the mouth of the channel and I was not about to allow the "Amanda Hope" to be one of them. Once I was safely in the channel, I settled into my groove and lit a cigar—an Acid Blondie Belicoso, since you were about to ask. I was now at peace...at peace within myself.

Gliding along the sea with the front half of the boat completely out of the water, I could hear and feel the whoosh of the water as it passed under the hull, occasionally tossing a drop or two over the gunnel and onto my face. The water is like glass today, I thought to myself. There was not another boat in sight or a cloud in the sky. I glanced back and saw small twin rooster tails of water spitting up from the propellers. The trail of my wake marked my path for as far back as I could see. I savored the warm moist summer air blowing across my face. This is my own private heaven, I thought. I'm untouchable here, all alone on the water with only God and Mother Nature to share it with.

The one thing you do plenty of in jail is think, and I thought a lot about how and why I had come to be where I was. All I could think about as I glided along the bay, greedily soaking up more than my fair share of the remaining bliss of summer, was a visit from my girlfriend on one of my last days locked up. She gave me an ultimatum. Her words were barely above a whisper and I leaned across the visitors table so I could hear. They say if you want to be heard, speak softly: it forces the person you're talking to concentrate and listen. What she said caused the tiny light bulb in my head to spark, and it illuminated my soul. She said, "You can smoke crack and fuck other women, or you can have everything else in the world."

You see, for the two years prior to that statement, I'd been smoking crack cocaine just about every day and not giving a rat's ass about anything or anyone else in the world besides myself. I hadn't cared about my friends, my family, my business or even my 4-year-old daughter, Amanda. All I thought about was getting high.

In the beginning, I had it all. I thought I was fooling everyone, but it was only me I was fooling. I was getting high and convinced myself I was functioning normally in society. Maybe I pulled it off for the first few months, but probably not. I was living out my fantasies in my own private drug-induced reality. Nights were about the thrill of getting high, and by day I played the part of the secret agent, living the “normal” life.

It was a game to me, one that has been played by thousands of people before I ever came to the table, by people far smarter and wiser than I. It’s a game that takes on all comers; everyone is welcome at its table. It’s clear to me now that I want no part of it. It’s way too expensive, and the stakes are much too high.

There is no doubt it’s being played right now: maybe someone just moments ago has won the game. Oh Lord, I hope not. I don’t know why I thought I was special or why any addict thinks they can beat the game. We all think that way. We think we can beat the odds...or more accurately, that the odds don’t exist for us. It’s such a thrill, rolling the dice with every hit, every pull on that glass pipe rising higher and higher and closer to the win. I never won. Thank God, for the only prize in the game of addiction is death, and when you’ve reached its highest level, there is no replay.

It may seem so simple to give up two little things, smoking crack and fucking other women, in exchange for everything else life has to offer. To simplify it even more, it’s actually only one thing, because giving up smoking crack in crack houses undoubtedly leads to not fucking crack whores. A no brainer, right? Her words were barely above a whisper and I leaned in close so I could understand. Give up one thing and I can have everything else in the world. Everything! If I just give up that one little thing?

On paper, yes, it seems so simple, but in a mind infected by addiction, it is not. In order to have “everything else,” I would have to get an evil little monkey off my back. I had smoked away nearly \$200,000.00 in cash and gotten arrested five times within a year and a half before finally landing behind bars. Over a two-year period my addiction alienated me from all my friends and relatives, drove five properties into foreclosure, and put my restaurant in danger of being padlocked for back taxes.

As I’m about to turn 54, I can’t help but realize just how lucky I am. My life is an open book (*I couldn’t resist that*). As I share my story with people I will never meet, it is my therapy and also your warning. As an alcoholic would stand up in front of a room of strangers and tell his story, I will tell you mine. I write for the sake of Dave and Veronica and the thousands of others who can no longer speak for themselves, to try to give you an understanding of the disease from the perspective of an addict. I’ll tell you the funny, the sad, the pathetic and the perverse. I write for myself just as much as I write for you. I’m a lucky man, one of a small percentage to survive a disease that for most users ends in either jail or death. The disease of addiction is as devastating and indiscriminating as cancer, with a relapse rate that’s through the roof. “Hi, my name is Ivan, and I’m a drug addict.”