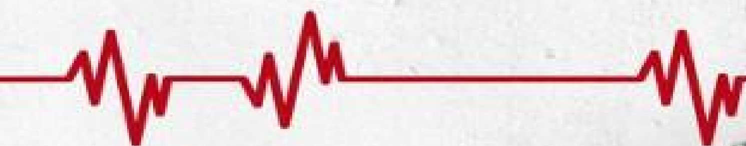
MIKE MAJLAK

with *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RILEY J. FORD

THE FIFTH VITAL



The Fifth Vital

Mike Majlak

with Riley J. Ford

First and foremost, I would like to thank each and every individual portrayed in this book for being a part of my journey and allowing me to be part of theirs. I recognize that their memories of the events described in this book may be different than my own, but I highly doubt it. To be perfectly clear, this book is a memoir, creative nonfiction, and reflects my present recollections of experiences over time, and frankly, much of that time may or may not have been spent under the influence or fighting to reclaim my own mental health. To that end, and to protect myself and the innocent (and not so innocent), some names and characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been paraphrased. With that, you the reader have become part of the journey. For that I am truly grateful and excited to see where you take my humbling experiences and use them to improve your own.

—*Mike Majlak*

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This book is for the millions of people worldwide who struggle with mental illness, addiction, and hopelessness. I pray my story offers you a little warmth in a cold world.

Don’t let your light go out.

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preface

In our lives, we all suffer. For some, the experience of pain—whether physical or psychological—is blessedly short-lived. For others, it can be an enduring life sentence of torture.

Pain is the physical or psychological suffering that reduces a person's quality of life. The opposite of suffering is happiness. If human beings are to live full, happy, productive lives, then pain must be addressed in all its origins, causes, significance, management, and remedies.

According to Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and philosopher, "Meaning is possible even in spite of suffering—provided that the suffering is unavoidable. If it *were* avoidable, however, the meaningful thing to do would be to remove its cause."

In the 1990s, pain was thought to be undertreated in the health-care field, so American medical professionals began looking for ways to eliminate pain in patients. In 1995, Purdue Pharma released OxyContin, a powerful painkiller, to the public. Purdue Pharma actively and unethically marketed this opioid as an innocuous drug that could be safely used to treat pain in a wide variety of people and conditions without the risk of addiction.

In 2001, pain was newly classified as the "fifth vital sign" by the Joint Commission, the country's leading accrediting body for hospitals that helps health-care systems improve performance. The four other vital signs—body temperature, blood pressure, breathing rate, and pulse rate—continue to be definitively measured in order to know the state of a person's essential body functions. With good intentions designed to ease suffering, the medical field tried to measure pain, by asking patients to rate it on a scale of smiley-faces and frowny faces from "none" to "severe." This has erroneously led to the idea that patients can become completely "pain free."

Unfortunately, pain and suffering cannot be objectively measured. They are subjective.

The promise of drugs—opioids in particular—was to release the American people from their pain and suffering. Instead, opioids have become a death sentence for countless human beings. Overdose deaths from opioids, including painkillers, heroin, and synthetics like fentanyl, have increased exponentially every year since the release of OxyContin. Opioids kill more than forty thousand Americans each year. They annually take the lives of more people than cars or guns.

When a plane goes down and kills three hundred people, it becomes headline news. The drug deaths of forty thousand people a year in today's current condemnatory climate is sadly nothing more than a passing sound bite. But the deaths of so many human beings can't be dismissed. It is an epidemic. It is a tragedy. Statistically, most opioid users are young people—our sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers. We are losing our future generations to opioid addiction and overdoses. In our societal and personal quest to eliminate pain, we have created a larger, deeper kind of endless suffering—the destruction of lives, the demise of family structures, and the deaths of people we know and love.

In understanding and managing our human pain from physical ailments, broken hearts, mental illness, or human existence, I hope we will one day find effective ways to relieve our suffering. Part of that is accepting that the human condition invariably involves some degree of suffering. We can't eliminate it completely. It's how we manage the pain that is the question. As a recovering opioid addict who has successfully climbed out of the depths of agony and darkness, I can unequivocally say that *human connection* can be one of the most powerful antidotes to human suffering and pain.

In summarizing the opioid crisis that continues to take so many lives, I leave you with another quote from Viktor Frankl: "For what matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation…we are challenged to change ourselves."

I was just a child when the drug company Purdue Pharma unleashed a tidal wave of the powerful narcotic OxyContin into Milford, Connecticut, the small town where I lived. My community wasn't alone. Every city in the United States was affected by what would become the largest drug crisis in U.S. history.

By the time the government and the American population discovered the true danger of OxyContin, it was too late. When Purdue Pharma was convicted in 2007 for misrepresenting the risk of OxyContin and forced to pay $600 million in fines, the majority of Oxy addicts had already switched to heroin and powerful synthetic narcotics such as fentanyl. By 2016, there were more than 289 million prescriptions written each year for opioids and over 2.1 million opioid addicts.

By 2017 at the peak of the epidemic, Purdue Pharma was still actively promoting OxyContin and misleading doctors. Opioid overdoses had become the leading cause of accidental death in the United States. Between 1999 and 2019, almost one million Americans had died from accidental overdoses, 450,000 from opioids alone. The death rates were so high that they depressed the average life expectancy in America for many years in a row.

My loving, middle-class childhood could never have prepared me for what was waiting around the corner for me, my friends, and my family as opioids began to find a foothold in our town. There was no way to foresee that my friends and I—just average teenagers—would unwittingly get caught up in a drug epidemic that would have far-reaching consequences on all our lives. Eventually, I would go from a normal, happy kid who played basketball, hung out with my friends, and got good grades in school to a full-fledged opioid addict and drug dealer. My teens and early twenties would come to resemble a wasteland—a horror story that took place right in my hometown.

Instead of college graduations, where my friends and I would shift our tassels from right to left and throw our caps in the air, there were multiple-count felony indictments and courtrooms.

Instead of climbing the corporate ladder or saving for my first home, I was pulled out of cars at gunpoint during robbery attempts and Major Crime Task Force investigations.

Instead of romantic white weddings or sweet baptisms, I attended the funerals of lifelong friends who'd wanted to shoot up just one more bag of heroin and instead choked to death on their own vomit before exiting this world in a zipped black bag.

Fast-forward a decade to 2019, and suddenly the opioid epidemic had become a national conversation. Strewn across Facebook were photos of unconscious overdosed parents, slumped over the steering wheel while their kids cried in the back seat. First responders told horrific stories of being unable to keep up with the thousands of people strung out on heroin who needed assistance. In some states, freezers lined hospital parking lots because the morgue couldn't keep up with the number of dead overdose victims. Thousands of children went to foster care every year after their parents died from opioid overdoses and left them orphaned.

The situation had reached a critical level, and the government took major legislative action under extreme pressure from parents, schools, and local law enforcement. With over 135,000 people dying annually from addiction—40,000-plus from opioids alone—and more than 100 million people directly or indirectly affected by the disease, it became a conversation that went as far as influencing campaign promises for the 2016 Trump vs. Clinton presidential battle.

Finally, something was being done.

But in the early 2000s, my close friends and I essentially lived in a silo. There was no press coverage. There were no organizations dedicated to changing legislation and making sure the conversation was center stage. There was no conversation. There was just us…a group of seventeen- and eighteen-year-old kids who thought it might be cool to try a new drug called OxyContin. Some, like me, had been prescribed the drug for a past injury and remembered what Oxy felt like. Others just wanted to give it a try during a weekend party.

Before we knew it, we found ourselves strung out on heroin and methadone, clinging on for dear life. We were on our own, navigating the filthy waters of this great American opioid epidemic, without the faintest idea if we'd ever make it back to shore alive.

This wasn't my story alone. This was the story of hundreds of thousands of other addicts who had fallen victim to the same epidemic. All over

America, there were people just like me who spent their days feeling sick, defeated, scared, and ready to give up.

There were fathers who'd gotten injured while teaching their sons to play basketball and wound up hooked on prescription OxyContin, only to turn to heroin when they ran low on cash. They lost their jobs, their houses, and custody of their children as they struggled to support their addictions.

There were beauty queens from high schools like mine who'd decided to act cool at a party and weeks later found themselves unable to break a dependency that developed like a fever and detained them like handcuffs. They would soon find themselves selling their bodies to older men in exchange for heroin and a dirty needle to take away the pain.

There were stories of all-star high-school basketball players who went to the same parties I did and tried the same pills, but instead of becoming addicted and having the chance to battle their addiction, they collapsed on bathroom floors or stopped breathing altogether in the back seats of cars after their very first time using Oxy.

Some of these people had been prescribed drugs. Others had made an unwise decision to experiment. None of them were bad people. None of them could have ever imagined the horrors that their decisions would lead to in their lives. None of them deserved to die. But so many of them did. And they continue to…every day.

I was eventually admitted to Connecticut Valley Hospital for Addiction Services, but in the months before, my life had taken a turn for the absolute worst. My drug use had led me down an indescribably nightmarish road. I had progressed to smoking large amounts of crack cocaine, snorting entire grams of heroin, and drinking up to a liter of vodka a day. I was also abusing Xanax and other prescription drugs.

Before detox, I was going entire weeks without sleep. When I finally did sleep, my nights were filled with terrifying nightmares, massive tremors, and night sweats. Every bone and muscle in my body burned and twitched from withdrawal and lack of sleep.

The month before I walked through those hospital doors, I began to experience a new emotion—a feeling I hadn't experienced before in the context of my drug use. It wasn't the feeling of pain from withdrawal, or guilt for betraying my family and closest friends. It wasn't the desperate state of my life, or loneliness, or depression. It wasn't even anxiety over my

probation officer filling out paperwork that recommended my imprisonment for the full five-year felony sentence I had narrowly avoided until then.

For the first time since I could remember, I felt only one prominent emotion: fear.

Pure, unadulterated fear.

I knew I was going to die. It was inevitable. It wasn't a matter of if, but *when*.

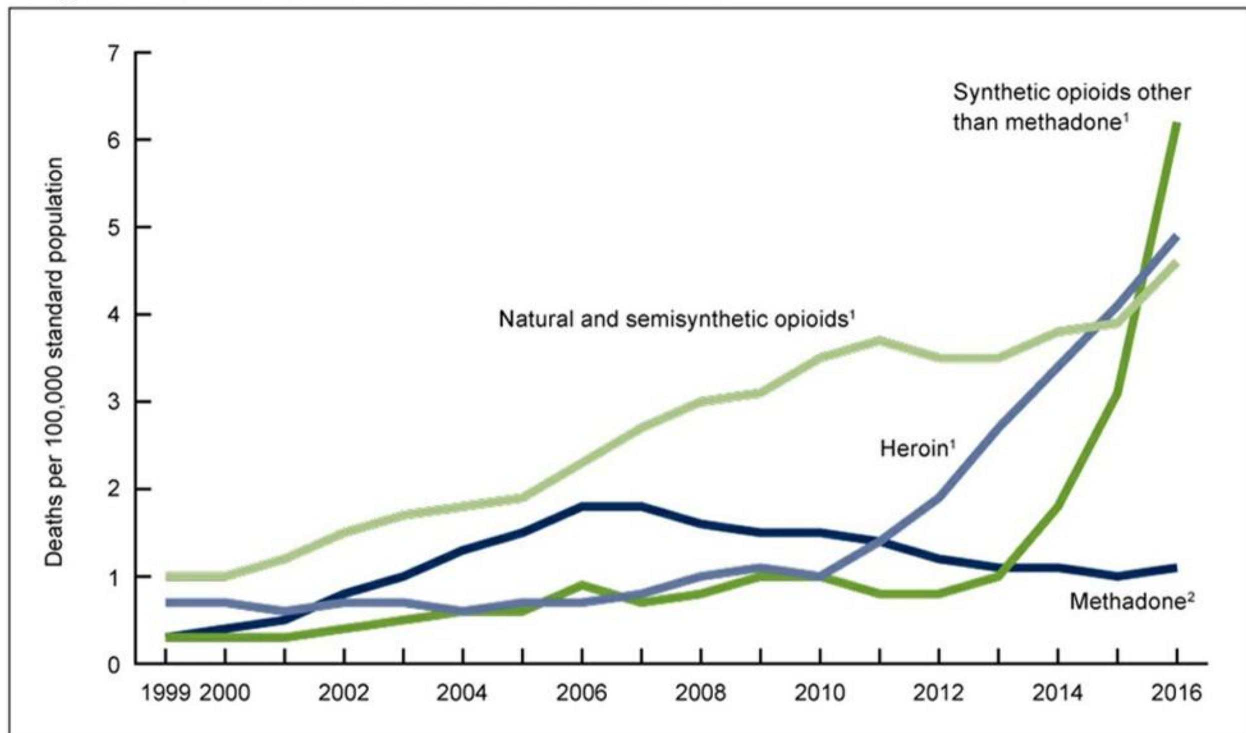
I was scared that I was going to leave behind a family who truly loved me and wanted nothing more than for me to come back to them and return to the person I once was. I was scared that all the dreams I'd once had for myself in life would go unfulfilled. I was scared that I would be remembered only as Mike Majlak, the drug addict. The kid who threw his life in the garbage, traded it all away for a few lines of heroin or cocaine. Swapped his family, his friends, and his potential for a good high and an early coffin.

This new fear—this belief that the end was close and the thought that I might not see another sunrise—pushed me through that set of hospital doors on a hot July afternoon.

Through this fear, I found another feeling that was burning deep within me—the courage to change. With that courage, I would forge a new path that would allow me to reclaim my life and inspire other addicts and sufferers to continue fighting.

This new path would be perilous, filled with its own failures, setbacks, and heartache. In the end, my decision to change would give me an opportunity to experience the one thing I had dreamed of for so long: redemption.

Drug Overdose Death Rates, United States 1999-2016



[1]Significant increasing trend from 1999 to 2016 with different rates of change over time, $p < 0.05$.
[2]Significant increasing trend from 1999 to 2006, then decreasing trend from 2006 to 2016, $p < 0.05$.
NOTES: Deaths are classified using the *International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision*. Drug-poisoning (overdose) deaths are identified using underlying cause-of-death codes X40–X44, X60–X64, X85, and Y10–Y14. Drug overdose deaths involving selected drug categories are identified by specific multiple-cause-of-death codes: heroin, T40.1; natural and semisynthetic opioids, T40.2; methadone, T40.3; and synthetic opioids other than methadone, T40.4. Deaths involving more than one opioid category (e.g., a death involving both methadone and a natural or semisynthetic opioid) are counted in both categories. The percentage of drug overdose deaths that identified the specific drugs involved varied by year, with ranges of 75%–79% from 1999 to 2013, and 81%–85% from 2014 to 2016. Access data table for Figure 4 at: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db294_table.pdf#4.
SOURCE: NCHS, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality.

one

2005

U.S. opioid deaths: 14,918

"You better not be getting blood all over the place again!" Nicky smashed his fists against the locked bathroom door. "Last time, I couldn't get the blood off the fucking wall. Come out, you fucking *pendejo*!"

He beat the door so hard, I thought he was going to break it down.

Inside the bathroom, I huddled over the tiny porcelain sink. Blood poured down my face. I barely registered the sour taste on my tongue. In my hand, I held a rusty razor blade.

Outside, Nicky continued to pound on the door.

"Leave me alone," I shouted. "I'll be right out."

An hour earlier, I had sat with three others, bagging up hundreds of grams of powder cocaine and heroin. The basement was dimly lit and moist…so dank it sometimes made bagging the drugs nearly impossible. But still we persevered.

Sometimes I would sneak off, after hours of bagging up powder and snorting line after line after line, and find solace in this cramped, dirty bathroom. It was my safe place…a place for me to be alone.

My nose was numb from twenty-four hours straight of sniffing, but I could still feel the scab tickling at my damaged septum. It clogged the passage of air. I couldn't breathe through my nose. My mouth was dry and parched. I wanted to clear the scab out. I *needed* to…I had to get rid of this nuisance.

So just like the night before, I dug at the scab with a razor. Blood dripped out of my nostrils and down my chin as I scraped the inside of my nasal canal with the rusty blade. The pain was a dull, throbbing background noise, numbed by the drugs and not nearly as important as my primary mission.

Finally, I severed the tissue. It gave way with a tug, releasing a gush of red liquid.

I pulled the rubbery tendon from my nose.

Satisfied, I gave one last hard blow into a tissue, filling it with blood, mucous, and cartilage. I turned the light off in the dank, dingy bathroom, leaving a streak of fresh red blood down the white switch.

When I came back into the room, Nicky was sitting at the bar in front of the digital scale and a mound of unbagged cocaine. He looked at me with revulsion. “I told you to stop with that shit,” he said. “It’s fucking disgusting.”

I ignored him and took a seat at the bar. A loaded 9mm handgun lay next to me on the glass aquarium that doubled as a makeshift countertop. Two cameras equipped with cheap night-vision lenses gave us a full view of what was transpiring outside from monitors set up in the basement.

Nicky broke off a piece of scaly rock from the baseball-sized chunk sitting on the counter and crushed it under a Bic lighter. We’d just scored a pound of this “fishscale” cocaine, so named because its holographic surface resembled the textured skin of a fish.

With my debit card, I scraped the yellowish white powder over to my side and lined up a massive rail. I rolled up a bill, scooted my stool closer, and sniffed the massive line into the same side of my nose I had just finished gouging out with a razor.

The fine powder tore through the raw flesh of my nostril like shards of glass. Ignoring the pain, I inhaled deeply, tasting the pungent mixture of cocaine and blood dripping down the back of my throat.

My entire face went numb. I closed my eyes, experiencing the familiar, filthy rush of energy that rushed through my brain and body.

My phone rang, jolting me back to reality. My customer was outside. I grabbed a $50 bag of coke that sat waiting next to the scale, quickly sniffed another line, swallowed one more big drip down my throat, then walked out the door into the crisp winter air.

It was time to work.

The year was 2005. I had graduated high school just two years earlier. Many of my classmates from my predominantly white Connecticut town had gone off to college. Instead, I’d skipped academics and had gone straight into a different kind of existence.

I'd had a good childhood. I'd had such a promising life.

Now, a decade later, I braved the most dangerous streets in the country to sell drugs so I could support my own insatiable addiction.

To support this addiction, I sold narcotics to others like me to keep from getting sick…to keep away the pain.

I often wondered, "How did I get here?"

But then I pushed away this distracting self-reflection and continued down the path I'd chosen for myself.

Except…I hadn't really chosen it.

In many ways, it had chosen me.

two

2018

U.S. opioid deaths: 46,802

"Mike, come on, man, what're you doing in there?" the producer yells through the door. "You can't just storm off like that."

I huddle over a large marble sink. I'm locked inside a bathroom on the first floor of an enormous Los Angeles mansion.

Beads of sweat roll down my face and into my mouth. I splash water on my face, fighting to catch my breath.

"I'll be right out, man," I say to the producer. "Just give me two minutes."

The year is 2018. At thirty-three years old, I've taken the social media world by storm. I've partnered with a world-famous multimillionaire social media celebrity and businessman named Logan Paul.

A few weeks ago, I'd moved into Logan's $7 million house just outside Hollywood. I'd relocated to the West Coast to assist in the rebranding of Logan's public image and his Maverick brand, which included a clothing line, a team of talent, vlogs, and other business ventures. The move away from Connecticut has been therapeutic for me…a way to bookend a story of pain, grief, and regret that had rooted itself firmly in the town where I was born.

On this particular day, we're filming the pilot episode of a new Internet show and podcast, *Impaulsive*. We've been preparing for weeks leading up to this day. For our first episode, we'd booked a famous sex doctor. I'd mentally prepared for the show: what I was going to say, how I was going to act.

Everything was perfect.

Until it wasn't.

I was on set in the middle of filming when the waves of an anxiety attack started to take hold.

"So how did you get into this?" Logan was saying to Dr. Shannon Chavez, the sex expert. "Sex is kind of a taboo topic…"

It became harder to breathe. The stage lights felt as though they were 500 degrees. My chest tightened. Sweat gathered on my forehead. My stomach tied itself up in knots. It felt as though my whole life might suddenly crumble around me in an instant.

"I'm so sorry, guys, I need five minutes," I said. I stood up and rushed off set as the cast and crew glowered at me, not knowing why I was leaving.

"Did Mike just have a breakdown?" I heard Logan say jokingly behind me as laughter broke out from the panel. I raced toward the exit door of the studio. The sounds of the show faded to silence as I closed the door behind me, the giant spotlights replaced by darkness.

I ran into the bathroom and locked the door.

Now, here I am.

I splash more water on my face and take deep breaths.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My eyes look sad.

Why? Why is this happening? Will this ever go away?

My nerves are hard to control. Eight years after getting clean from drug addiction, the damage I caused is still there. It manifests itself in uncontrollable anxiety attacks and a revolving cycle of negative thoughts.

I ask myself, "Is this because I used drugs, or is this the reason I started using in the first place?" My brain is foggy, and sometimes I can't fully recall the horror—the visceral details—of being a drug addict.

It's not easy to remember exactly what it felt like to be thrown from a car and experience the flesh tearing off my body. It's difficult to remember seeing my friend get beaten in the face with a black 9mm pistol until blood coated the basement wall of a Bridgeport traphouse. I can't fully recall the agonizing details of waking up sick from heroin withdrawals and pulling old bags out of the garbage, trying to scrape enough residue together for a bump to make the pain go away.

I can't remember.

Maybe I don't want to remember.

In the eight years since I've gotten clean, the life I used to live has become an antiquated tale—something only a few of my current friends in

L.A. even know about. My fans are aware of some of the skeletons from my past because of surface stories I've told in online content. But they don't really know much at all.

My closest friends, like Logan, know a little more from our late-night chats over lobster dinners in Beverly Hills or on first-class flights to the United Kingdom or Saudi Arabia. But even the dearest of my new friends don't know how deep the rabbit hole goes.

It really is quite astonishing, the trajectory of it all.

I've lived in L.A. for a short time but have already begun to leave a major mark. I've made a name for myself, building my own YouTube channel from nothing into millions of subscribers. I've received offers from MTV for a television show. I've had agents interested in selling the movie rights to the very book you're reading right now.

My life now plays out inside massive houses in the Hollywood Hills, partying with the elite. My roommates and I have a private chef who cooks us whatever our hearts desire. Life has quickly become something you might see on an episode of *Entourage.*

To be honest, I'm not exactly sure how I got to where I am today. It involved a lot of putting one foot in front of the other. Trying new things with confidence that I'd succeed. Looking to always be better than the day before.

At times, people ask me, "How the hell did you do it, man?" I don't always have the easiest answer for them. I usually say, "It's a mixture of God and working really fucking hard. Connecting with like-minded people. Staying positive when every sign says otherwise."

Whatever the formula, my career is on a meteoric rise. Week after week, I continue to blow past all expectations, including my own. I create and build incredible relationships for both myself and the Maverick brand. I get millions of views per week on videos I make for my YouTube channel on a range of topics, from interviews with Hollywood celebs to surreal poetry.

Around Los Angeles, I'm known as a positive, upbeat guy. Everyone from the hot new TikTok star to the door guy at Mastro's seems to love it when I come around. I get free food at Catch because the owner is a fan, and the valet guy brings my car up before anyone else's. I try my best to greet everyone I meet with a positive vibe. I take the time to hear people's issues and try to help them through their problems. I want to brighten people's days, and I seem to do pretty well at it.

In public, I’m a regular comedian. I can make a joke out of just about anything and can make anyone laugh at any time. I make new friends everywhere I go, and women always have a girlfriend that I “just have to meet.” I’m told I can hold a great conversation and really know how to work a room. People say I just know how to talk.

I wear a smile at all times, in all situations.

The people who watch my videos or see me at the club say, “Damn, man, you’re killing it. I wish I could do that kinda shit!”

Through a grin, I say, “Yeah, I’m really blessed, man. It’s a lot of fun.”

When I get back to the house from an event or a dinner with studio executives, my jaw is tired from smiling. I kick off my shoes, put my feet up, and stare at the ceiling.

None of these people know shit…

The familiar dark thoughts start to cycle through my mind. Nobody knows a single fucking thing about what I’ve seen.

I have close friends now. Very close friends. Friends I’ve made over the last few years. We connect by way of the culture or the content we create. But they don’t know what it’s like to withdraw from heroin to the point where the thought of death is a welcome relief.

I have the opportunity for real romantic relationships now. When it comes time to let them in, though, I rarely do. Because of this, things hardly ever work out. Even after the girls get to “know” me, they know nothing about the shame of waiting outside a dealer’s house on bleak days when money was tight and the only way I could stop the withdrawals was by my girlfriend sucking the drug connect’s dick in exchange for a couple bags of dope.

I have colleagues and costars now. I work next to them every single day. They don’t know what it’s like to hug your twenty-two-year-old best friend’s mom at his funeral after he overdoses on heroin after trying desperately for years to get clean. There is no grief like wearing a shirt soaked with your own tears mixed with those of a mother who will never see her son again. And then doing it another two times, or four times, before the year ends.

One of the hardest things in the world is going through life with a secret. Out of sheer laziness or dedication to new business pursuits, I stopped going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings after about six months of sobriety. Even though NA was the only place I could freely talk about the horrors I’d