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The help that never came (My Story)

The very first time I saw track marks on my brother's arms I eighteen years old. To some that is an age of experimentation, rebellion. In contrast, I had spent the previous twelve months hiding out in my bedroom, studying through perpetual late nights for my TEE. So for me the world of drugs, abuse, violence and self harm was very far removed from the life I inhabited. But things changed so quickly.

I remember the day my brother stepped on a plane and left for the United Kingdom. I knew that the man who left would never return. When we said our goodbyes I pleaded with my brother, take me with you I said. His only reply was that he didn't want to take me down with him. On the way home I cried so hard I lost my breath. For days I slept in his bed, I refused to get out of my pyjamas. My parents were confused by the magnitude of my pain. That was the day I said goodbye to my beautiful brother. It was the very last time I saw innocence in his eyes, a smile that expressed any sort of happiness. It was the very last time I felt hope for his future.

I was right, my brother never come home to me.

His time away was horrific. He arrived in Denmark to meet up with family. Within a week my Uncle had died in a workplace accident. Luke flew out to London within a few days. He found it hard to get work. He slipped into old habits, and before long he was calling for money. We were confused by his lack of communication. He was hiding things.

Within twelve months my brother was a heroin addict. By now he had travelled to the far reaches of Scotland- were he told me the drugs were cheap. He overdosed a few times. He still has a scar on his back from the time his 'mates' pulled his down the stairs and onto the sidewalk after he had refused to wake up after a hit. They did this to protect themselves, but also in the hope that a passer by might call for help.

The money that my family sent over to the UK was sent with good intentions. My parents had a naïve hope that things were just tough for their son; after all he kept assuring them he had work. Money was tight, the exchange rate was not favourable, and the money we sent never seemed enough. Was I wrong to keep things from them? At the age of nineteen should I have had the perspective to cry for help? I am not sure, even looking back the decision seems difficult. Although Mum and Dad maintained a sense that things were not quite right, they could never have contemplated the depths that my brother fell to. Perhaps they didn't want to believe.

Luke came home within 18 months. But not by choice. He had serious debt in Edinburgh and his habit far outweighed his income. The only answer was to

come home. He made it as far as the airport, unfortunately he had made friends with all the wrong people and before he made it on the plane he was assaulted and robbed. He was flying out with a stolen laptop, and it was taken from him as payment for drug debt.

The day he arrived home I sensed that a new journey was about to begin. From the moment he came back into our lives, I had to throw away whatever childhood I had tried to cling to. The time for hope and naivety was over. I knew that the storm clouds were up ahead, and no matter how hard I tried to fight against them, the darkness inevitably caved in on us.

The first time I saw him he was sitting at the dinner table. When I saw him I felt an immense compassion. The frail, hopeless looking man who stood before me was in a very dark place. It was not my brother. In fact I have never seen my brother again.

The first few days were dramatic. I quickly realised the extent of the situation, he told me the whole truth about his time away (he even snickered when he told me heroin was better than anything else in the world). I was frightened by this man. I guess looking back I was a little angry. Angry at the indifference he felt, angry that he fell back into our home and expected so much. But my family pulled together immense love, and stood by him. The first few nights he raged with sweat. We were doing our utmost at hiding the extent of the situation from Mum and Dad. At this stage they were bewildered, devastated at the state of their son, but unable to connect any dots. They believed he was ill, not withdrawing from one of the most addictive drugs on earth.

I sat by him in those horrific nights. He sweat through all the sheets in the house, and the perspiration that came out of him was white. We put down towels, we keep watch all through the night. The very worst thing was for him to somehow get his hands on any more drugs. It was not possible to continue on without letting Mum slowly know just how bad things had got. And whether they just didn't want to know, whether they were so naïve about the horrors of drugs, they still did not contemplate the magnitude of the moment.

I took Mum to see Lord of the Rings. I remember sitting next to her. She was upset about my brother, without knowing exactly why. It was time to share the secret that was hurting me so much. I wanted to save my parents from the immense sadness, the horror, the pain... I didn't want them to ever feel the hopelessness I had endured for two years. But it was time. There was no other way than to tell my Mum straight out. Imagine this. Sitting next to one of the kindest people in the world, who has never even been intoxicated by alcohol before, who adored her son, loved him, supported him, admired him, stood by him... imagine letting her know that he was a drug addict. That he may

not make it through the night, that he has lived the last 18 months in a drug-crazed mayhem, and that your money fed his habit. Imagine that. To this day I will never forget the pain in my Mum's eyes. I remember my words, I can't help but feel an immense guilt when I remember the sentence... "Mum, for God's sake, don't you get it? Luke is a heroin addict!". My Mum lost a little bit of herself that night. It has been a long time since she has laughed and I haven't seen a faint glimpse of sorrow in her eyes. Some days I wonder if she will ever go back to the way she was before that evening.

The next few years were worse. Mum and I then decided that we needed help from some external agency or medical resource centre. But we had never known anyone with this problem. We were completely unaware of the parts of society that deal with the horror of drugs, how on earth were we to know where to start? We approached a GP, who sent him straight to a Psychiatrist on an emergency referral. Within 24 hours he was on Valium to help with the withdrawals. But this started an even longer addiction. Replacing Heroin with prescription drugs Luke took a turn for the worse.

He became violent, aggressive, emotionally fragile... addiction took hold of him once more. This time was difficult. Financially, we were finding things hard. Sending so much money over to the UK to help Luke out, now paying for weekly appointments with the psychiatrists, filing his prescription bills... it was hard to keep up. During this time Luke managed to find a job. He worked in a Bank. Perhaps we should have seen these red lights earlier than we did. But as addiction grows, rationality fails. Over a period of time Luke stole a large amount of money. Whilst doing this he also was selling off CD's, DVD's and anything else he could find in the house that we might not notice going missing. Before our eyes he was being swallowed up again.

He then began a cycle of self-destruction. I was in the middle of a Contract Law tutorial when I got repeated phone calls from a private number. My phone would not stop ringing, so I left my class to answer it. It was the hospital, Luke had overdosed. I would like to say I was surprised, but in honesty, I had been waiting on the call for a long time. It was impossible for Mum, Dad and I to look after him 24 hours a day. One time I dropped him at the doctors. And between the time I spent looking for a car parking space and got out to meet him in the doctor's surgery he had already made his way to the chemist and acquired some form of drug.

It is difficult to explain the intensity of these years. It seems like these times lasted forever, and as we lived through them we thought they would never end. It was like the seasons- at times he would be reasonable, then we would find he was being reasonable because he was constantly high. Then we would attempt to stop the drug taking, and he would become violent, self destructive. Then he would overdose or get in trouble with the police.

The thing that I hated more than anything was his complete lack of empathy. The drugs took out of him the ability to relate to others, perspective, and any emotion whatsoever. He was dead to us. But dangerous. We all struggled to keep up with our own lives, but adding to this the late nights, the aggression, the immense sadness of watching someone you love attempt to destroy themselves was at times almost too much.

One of the worst moments was one time in an emergency ward. Luke was waking up from another overdose. This time we found him in his bedroom, having some sort of fit... the ambulance attendants looked despondent, they had seen it all before. But at the hospital he woke up relatively lively, he started to make a noise, attempted to fight one of the security guards who had been assigned to him. They strapped him down, and that is when I came into the ward. I had a long day, Uni exams were approaching, and the last thing I wanted was another Bad Luke Day. But as he was strapped down I lost my patience and said "are you happy now, have you got the attention you wanted?" - he looked at me with such vengeance and said "don't talk to me like I am a child". The doctor laughed.

I won't ever forget that look in his eyes. He didn't want to be treated like a child. Yet here he was being strapped down in a hospital bed after nearly ending his life from an excess of sleeping pills. I wanted to scream out- I wanted to tell him that I was the child- I was four year younger than him- but he stole that from me. I didn't want to treat him like he was a child, but to me that is what he had become. A high needs member of the family, who absorbed all of my energy, my time, my love.... He managed to take the hope out of all of our lives.

It is impossible to tell this whole story in a way that can make you understand its magnitude, its desolation, its terror, its indefinable loss. It is impossible for me to write down the sadness I see every day in my parents eyes. It is impossible to tell you of the years of endless worry, the nights spent in hospitals rooms, Psychiatric wards, and nights spent driving around searching for the brother I could not control. I was just a girl, but I had lived through many lifetimes with the pain, the sadness and the isolation.

Our lowest point was when my Mum fell ill. Luke had a really bad week. He had begun using speed now. This meant the aggression in his eyes had returned. We knew we were treading a very fine line, and Luke had nearly reached rock bottom. I got another hospital phone call. Again, whilst I was in a Law lecture. I had left Luke at home for one hour whilst I went to Uni. I thought to myself, here we go again. I leave him for one hour and he does something stupid. It wasn't about Luke though. It was Mum. Her thyroid had wrapped itself around her windpipe, and she was scheduled for emergency surgery. Things happened so fast. I arrived at the hospital, Dad brought Luke

with him, and Mum underwent surgery, at 3AM we were told she was in Intensive Care but looked like she would make it.

Dad took Luke home, but he was in a bad way. To come down from his large hit the night before Luke was high on some sort of relaxant. Dad ordered Fish and Chips that night. And with Mum lying in Intensive Care, my Dad was experiencing great distress. Luke managed to sit down at the table, but only for a few seconds. He then got up and sprinkled pepper into the kettle. Boiled the water. He went outside for a cigarette. Came back in, got the Toaster out. Luke's brain had begun to deteriorate. He was at a stage where it looked as if there might not be any recovery.

In all of these years we searched for rehabilitation facilities for some sort of respite centre to help us. When Mum was ill, I needed help. Dad was working so hard all day, coming home and helping with Mum and Luke. And I had University exams coming up- I was so tired from the years of looking after Luke. I also had to work, to pay for Uni books, to pay off Luke's debts. All of us were working endlessly to save him. But as every day went by we seemed to be failing more and more. All we needed was a little bit of help. We needed a place to send Luke, a place where they would treat him with respect and try to help him. It is impossible to watch a junkie twenty four hours a day. They learn how to deceive, they want the next fix so badly- they will steal cars, hurt people and betray everyone just to get there. And they do not differentiate between their Mum, Dad, Sister or stranger on the street. It is an illness and they cannot control it. Junkie's become highly secretive and brilliant at deception. They will hurt the ones they love for just one more moment of drug induced euphoria. I have looked into Luke's eyes millions of times and seen death. But he looked straight past me.

Why didn't society come to our aid? Is it too hard for us to face the truth of an epidemic taking hold of our youth? I come from a normal household with two parents who love me, and yet drugs stole the best years of my life. It can happen to any one of us, at any time. If Luke could have had help, a safe place to go, things might have been different. The psychiatric ward he stayed in released him within five days... why? Because he said he wanted to go home. When I asked them, have you made a medical examination of him, they replied No. If he wants to leave, they have no power to restrain him. I begged the emergency wardens at Joondalup hospital to take Luke many nights. I remember crying and yelling at the top of my lungs- can't you see? He is not going to make it through the night! Please, I just want one night to stop this worrying.

But it's the same old story. Without consent, it is no use.

What did my family need during those horrific years?

A place for Luke to go. A facility to assess the extent of his psychological state, a place where a trained psychiatrist could make an assessment of his health. A place that would restrict him from leaving. A place that would keep him safe- from himself, from society, until he was ready to make decisions for himself. The justice system does not provide the answer. Luke was driven to crime, not because he has any disrespect for society, or any desire to break the laws, but because he had no where left to go.

In the end it is true that we must all save ourselves. We must all take responsibility for our actions, our misgivings, our mistakes. But no one can deny that we all need help at some stage in our lives.

I needed help. I needed someone to support me and my family. I needed someone to explain to me the process of drug addictions, the ways to handle aggression. Mum and Dad needed for Luke to be placed in a facility that would provide the resources he needed to begin the journey of overcoming addiction.

If these things had of been present in society, the events of my short life would surely have taken a different course.

Things reached rock bottom soon after Mum had returned home from hospital. Luke was at his lowest point and I knew in my heart that he would not make it many more days in the state he was in. My heart was already so full of pain, I had been overcome with sadness so many times before, I felt as if I could never feel any worse than I already did.

The acumination of events resulted in the most devastating moments of my life. Luke wanted to go to the city he had a "King Hit" lined up- he was going to kill himself. His eyes were hollow and I knew he meant what he said. Dad tried to calm him down. But he had stolen a knife and there was not much we could do. The knife was taken off him through negotiation, but when he tried to leave the room Dad attempted to step in front of him, block his way. Luke responded with sheer force.

Dad can walk again now. He spent nine months rehabilitating his leg, and when the doctors predicted he would never walk or ride a bike again- they were wrong. Dad even takes his motor bike to work again now. But it has been a long road.

Luke has his moments still. After the culmination of events leading to Dad's assault we had no choice but to put a restraining order on him. Luke lived on the streets for six months. I remember finding him once at the Charles Hotel, knowing that seeing him was breaching the order, but I wanted to take him some food. He saw Mum driving down Wanneroo Road and he threw his mobile phone at the driver's side window. These times seemed even harder

than when we could watch him. During these months we had no way of knowing if he was surviving, struggling... if he had failed to make it through the night. I missed him so much.

I turned 21 in October of 2004. It was only a few months after Luke had left. I didn't hear from him. I know that he couldn't contact me- after all I had a restraining order out on him. But I admit it was the longest day... I longed to hear his voice, I longed for him to wish me Happy Birthday. The call never came. Sometimes I just want him to say sorry. Sorry for the life I stole from you. Sorry for the sadness I caused you. I am sorry for taking away so much of your youth. I am sorry for my mistakes. But sometimes sorry is the hardest word.

The horrors of drugs are far more complex, far more devastating than these few pages can illustrate. The hundreds of incidents my family have endured can never be reduced to writing. It would take too long, and how could you ever understand what we have been through? I do know that we needed help, and that help never came. We needed some support from the community, some rehabilitation facility open to people like Luke. But all of these places close their doors for minor reasons, the courts offer no long term solutions... and all we really need is some support. No one can survive this on their own.

But in truth we are the lucky ones. Luke is still with us. In some form or another I still have a brother. Although the man I loved left me many years ago, at least I still have him in some form. Many people have it much worse. There are stories far worse than my own. Hundreds of them.

One day when I was visiting Luke in the PsychWard at Charlie Gardeners Hospital I read a passage that hung in the entrance way... and the words of this have never left me. It was a prayer. It said- God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can... and the wisdom to know the difference. The irony of those words has never left me.

I dream of the day when stories like mine are things of the past.

Before this occurs, we as a community must find the courage to change the things we can. Before it is too late.