

Dry Drunk

A friend who had been following my Facebook updates sent me a private message. He congratulated me on reaching nearly three months sober and said he hoped it would continue. The next week he sent another message in which he told me about support groups that people can go to and talk about alcoholism. It all sounded very serious to me. I wasn't an alcoholic. I'd proved that by giving up alcohol for nearly three months on my own. I didn't need meetings or other people; I already had it covered. I was self-willed, determined and on a mission. I thanked him for the support and for spreading the message, but I wasn't ready to hear it. I wasn't prepared to accept it. In his message, he'd used the catchy term 'dry drunk'. I'd never heard that before and I didn't know what it meant. I asked him to clarify.

A 'dry drunk' is an expression used to describe an alcoholic who has stopped drinking alcohol but still maintains the same behavioural patterns of an alcoholic. I thought about that, and it rang true in many respects. Even though I wasn't drinking

anymore, I was still living with a sense of unease and anxiety. My new-found positivity and bursts of energy weren't sustainable. Crippling amounts of insecurity plagued all aspects of my life: finances, health, my transition, relationships and career. Granted, I'd taken two huge steps forward towards living the truest expression of myself, and this felt beyond scary. But something was missing. I couldn't quite explain it. I'd felt my overall health improve, but somehow I knew I wasn't addressing the real issues. I knew that transitioning and stopping drinking weren't the quick fix to change those familiar feelings. I still felt lost.

Behind closed doors, I was using other things that weren't alcohol or drugs to escape my feelings. I was getting little hits and fixes whenever I was in discomfort or pain or just wanted to get high. I was avoiding my reality, pushing the issue I didn't want to look at further away. I began drinking excessive amounts of coffee in the morning. I needed to feel my heart beating so fast I thought it would explode. Just as if I'd taken speed. That physical reaction was weirdly welcoming, and I was buzzing and productive. I liked it. I used that hit to catapult me through a double whammy of yoga and Pilates at the local sports centre. I'd also started exercising obsessively. I would double up classes, which meant I was working out intensely for two hours. Not just once a week; I would do this every other day. The amount of time I was dedicating to this pursuit was unhealthy because it took me away from the daily admin and larger problems I needed to solve, such as my financial situation. I was using the exercise routine to push myself to the point of exhaustion,

without taking the necessary care and eating a diet that was full of protein and carbohydrates. It was as if I had something to prove: I had to become the best yogi and the strongest and most flexible person in the class. My ego was in the driving seat. Instead of the exercise being pleasurable, it became a place where I judged myself and others. It wasn't wellness at all.

Taking away alcohol was a game changer in the sense that I was able to see other behaviours that I'd been using to mask my feelings. To *not* feel my feelings. I'd also developed an obsession and compulsive spending habit of purchasing and collecting lava lamps. In 2011, my attention to lava lamps was reignited due to the phenomenal amount of time I was spending online browsing eBay and generally procrastinating on the internet. At one point I must've googled 'lava lamp' and then I fell down a rabbit hole that lasted years. Six months into being a lava lamp hobbyist, I'd already spent in excess of £500. I was stockpiling lamps in my basement and sneaking them into my house so my partner wouldn't notice. At one point, he asked, 'Do we really need another lamp?' as I added my new purchase to the already full living room where seven lamps were currently running. I could never say 'no' or stop buying. I owned 20-plus models with many more colourful bottles of replacement lava. I kept buying. I'd stay awake late into the night so I could win an eBay auction in America or Europe which ended well past midnight. I'd do anything to find a rarity. At one point, I travelled to the outskirts of London on public transport to meet somebody who was selling a lamp. He stood me up and never appeared. I'd lost

a whole afternoon. Days later, he phoned me up and blamed me for not meeting him. He said I'd been harassing him and told me he'd report me to the police. It was crazy. I lied to my partner about where I'd been; I was too ashamed to tell the truth. I was unavailable to my partner and friends because I was preoccupied with my next hit. The incessant desire to buy more took me away from everyone I loved. My self-worth had become wrapped up within lava land. I joined internet forums for the die-hard collectors and avidly searched online shops for rare lamps. That was all that mattered to me. I felt shame and guilt. I knew that in reality I was excessively spending money and losing time. I'd feel so unhappy and low that I'd start the cycle again, trying to secure another hit or 'high' in the form of another lamp. And so it continued. When we moved house several months later, the reality of my addiction became apparent. In the light of day and out of the basement, the severity of my habit was clear. It was unmanageable and out of control.

The reality was that this addiction kept me isolated and separate from other people and nurturing intimate relationships. It drained my financial reserves and consumed my time. My head was kept busy with lava-related information instead of dealing with the real issue in my life: gender dysphoria, mental health and sustaining my career. I used the lava lamps to veil and push these problems further away. I put my addiction at the centre of my life, allowing my partnership, career and responsibilities to become secondary. I suspect that my lava lamp addiction was intrinsically linked to my adolescence – a time when I was

embarking on male puberty, discovering my sexuality and dealing with my parents' separation. I'd been briefly obsessed with lava lamps when I was fourteen. In the mid-1990s, lava lamps were everywhere, especially on my favourite TV shows such as *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Clarissa Explains It All*. I begged my parents to buy me one so I could facilitate and fulfil a fantasy life and identity – a means to channel the discomfort and confusion I was feeling into something else. When I had a lava lamp in my room, I was cool. I was OK. When that same crisis hit me 16 years later, I regressed and used the 'thing' that had worked before. Only this time, as an adult, I had the means to take it much further.

Alongside the lava obsession, I was also using pornography in similar ways to exercise and compulsive spending. I was losing vast amounts of my time viewing and searching for content as I continually looked for new and exciting videos. No matter what I discovered, or the weird and bizarre corners of the internet the frantic search took me, I would always end up back at the same video that I'd started looking at hours earlier. Porn kept me locked in my room, with the focus of sexual acting out present in my brain during the day. I was preoccupied with how I would spend my evenings: spread out on my bed with my laptop next to me – like a friend or a comfort blanket. This activity kept me further away from other people and isolated from the world. It was depressing. I could feel so wired from staring at pornography for a couple of hours that it was akin to being on drugs. I was like a zombie, where the only thing that mattered was me

and the screen. These behaviours caused problems that were similar to what I understood about alcoholism. They kept me separate from other people, they created feelings of resentment and judgement, they made me angry and sad. Physical hangovers had been replaced by emotional ones. The fleeting moments of pleasure were also followed by feelings of shame and remoteness. Once the activity had climaxed and the initial buzz had left my body, I felt alone again. I felt worthless. The only way I knew how to fix that desperate sense of loneliness was to act out again. That was the safe zone for me. That's where I belonged.

Had the friend who labelled me a 'dry drunk' somehow transplanted himself into my brain? I wondered how he knew that, beyond my shine of sobriety, I was still deeply unhappy and restless. Could my experience be something he'd also experienced or knew of others who felt the same? I thought about contacting him; I wanted to explore the possibility that I was indeed an alcoholic.