

An Addict For Life

The demon is not in the substance but in the compulsion to abuse it. And that's not a bad thing – sometimes.

I've been an addict all my life and will die as one.

At 15, I am dependent on blue eyeliner and boys for approval. At 28, I'm obsessed with my job as a television writer and proving to the entertainment industry that I'm the voice of my generation. At 32, I consume four books a week and make infinite notes for a novel that I will write one day. And at 43, I have a neurotic need to work out, to get lean and flexible, to sweat from every pore and clear my mind of every doubt while I'm at it.

And so an hour and a half of punishing, acrobatic ashtanga vinyasa yoga is a part of my daily morning fix – others being caffeine, Gold Flake nicotine, checking various social media for updates and the act of making endless lists of things I want to do, plan to do, might do but only after this summer, etcetera. That's my morning, and the routine is a habit – like changing underwear – it has to be done or I won't be able to breathe and actually get on with life or any kind of real work.

And so in my opinion, having an addictive personality can be a positive thing; that little X factor that marks a zealous achiever rather than a 'going with the flow' idler.

Sure, there's a downside to extreme compulsion, a danger zone that's as innocuous as an unmarked landmine. Somewhere between my years of 35 and 39, lies my very own Half Decade of Lost Time, my customized Female Pre-Midlife Crisis, a shadowy blur of people and events that I cannot recall thanks to my drug of choice at this point : Riviera White. A bottle a day, maybe another at night. Preferably alone. Actually, make that

definitely alone. It's a ritual that stretches from an hour into 24 or 48; a dull, hazy liberation from the shackles of tiresome social pretences and the boredom of churning out corny soap opera scripts. I knock back a glass, pour another. That's better. Now I can start to relax and really, really talk to myself. Pick my topic and go on and on, there's no one to stop me. When I am flying high on drunk, evangelical righteousness, I make a series of aggressive phone calls and rant my opinions to friends, colleagues, ex lovers, producers of cheques that have bounced, next door neighbours that have pissed me off. I tell them exactly what I think of them until they hang up on me or I hang up on them, whichever comes first. I pass out, wake up a few hours later. Oops...a wave of embarrassment. Did I go too far last night? Or was it this afternoon? More irritating than a hangover is the obligation to make amends. So I forget about it for now, draw the curtains, talk to myself and imbibe the Sula in the fridge. This time, I safety-lock my phone.

Two hours later, nicely buzzed, the familiar feeling of invincibility kicks in. The Force is with me and I can achieve anything, be anyone, in this state. And so I vow that starting tomorrow/this weekend/next Tuesday, it will all be different. No more booze. Clean, healthy living. A sharp mind, a toned body. I make a schedule for the New Me to follow. Half way through Day Two, I give up, cave in, call the guy at Princess Wines. He always delivers with a smile – my only anchor in an uncertain world.

In the life of every drinker, thinker, seeker or occasional manic depressive (and I have been all these), there is a high that lasts for about 27 minutes a day. What follows – without warning, like a sharp turn on a mountain road – is a crashing wave of despair, loneliness and utter panic. This is when Reality pays you a visit, showing up like a

snotty cousin. It says : Hello. You know you've lost your way. You've missed the boat on varied family get-togethers, reunions, new trends, work deadlines. Most importantly, don't you miss your own self? Once smoking hot, now a sluggish mess. You look 50, and you're nowhere near 40 yet.

I tell Reality to fuck off. I haven't hit Rock Bottom. Yet.

Known Fact : Addicts talk of hitting Rock Bottom as a turning point in their story. Some drunks wake up on a crowded street in broad daylight, and realize they just missed being run over by a truck, and being flung into a ditch, skull cracked open. For others, the process of self-realization is slower, less dramatic, more rational. The dull fear of losing family, health, a relationship, the job they are good at, self-respect. They are sick of suffocating under a blanket of social disgrace, of the pain that comes with avoiding mirrors and staircases.

In my case, it is none of the above. One day I merely forget about wine because a new addiction rings my doorbell one morning, moves in and devours me. Before I know it, I'm celebrating four years of sobriety and a wedding anniversary with my new soul mate : Fitness.

Fitness. It starts as an experiment. One workout only, because the flyer that sails in through the grill on the window promises me a Free Trial class. Three months later, I'm clocking two hours of cardio yoga a day. No alcohol, no junk food. Empty bottles evicted and recycled. No more Princess Wines on speed dial – delete the number. Only fruit after 6 pm. I run up four flights of stairs, glide through 108 suryanamaskars. Everywhere I go, I sip benignly, smugly from a flask of hot water. The Sula leaves me frigid. The

Riviera is like an ex-wife I can't be bothered with anymore because my new mistress has me on fire.

One day, I discover the Ashtanga Primary Series, and it's like graduating from mere addiction to Meta Religion. I fall into worship, like a New Age Scientologist. Group 'ashtangi' discussions on WhatsApp and Facebook revolve around castor oil baths (for supple limbs), Manduka mats (no slipping during transition movements), Kino videos (good or no good? You Decide). There are 42 postures in Primary, and some people get stuck somewhere around the fourteenth one, from where on it will take them years more, or no time at all because they give up. But I am an addict. I don't give up. I crack the gateway posture in two months, Marichyasana D. Then get stuck in the pinnacle pose that is Supta Kurmasana. Ego smashed. But wait, Garba Pindasana is getting better...and after that Primary is easy, I'm told, but only until drop-backs begin, and then there's the Intermediate Series, and my target is to get there, by next year, or in roughly 20 years. Practice, practice, practice, all is coming, is the chant around me, the chant of 'Guruji'.

The best thing about me, says my teacher one day, is my willpower. Yes. I am a relentless machine. I push myself, because there is so much to learn, and it is as if I know nothing, as if I have been in a coma right upto this point. Go Slow. Learn Patience. But the symptoms of the old virus are back, the virus of addiction. Only this time it is pure and clean, in an avatar that is hardened and determined and constructive instead of weak and helpless and shivering. I am a Take No Excuses type of person and it's a good thrill, a cool feeling, like, well, an addiction.

I don't miss wine. Ashtanga is a drug more potent than cocaine, more exhilarating than heroin, more lethal than tragic first love.

It's a high to have a jutting clavicle, sharp cheekbones, size 8 jeans, the constant rush of adolescent stamina, the ability to bare headstand on a beach. It's even better to have all that with the underlying, long-term benefits of yoga: an iron discipline, the ability to deal with pressure without helpless anxiety, that power to not have to justify yourself constantly.

I finally embrace addiction as a Good Thing. It has led me to this, in a way that moderation and balance would never have. Moderation is not my key, balance is not in my lexicon. These are oxymorons, mistaken assumptions like 'social drinking' and 'gentle exercise.' The truth is you have to Go Rogue. Make addiction your friend, your inspiration. Because for an addict it can only be All or Nothing. The addict always makes that one choice: the extremity of electric success (or black-out failure) over the low-wattage bulb of routine mediocrity.

All I pray for is that the next obsession – if or when it hits – is an even greater high.

I am an addict and will die as one and now that I've made my peace with this, I can get on with life. There is much to do.

Like bringing out that novel that is inside me.

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