

# Quitting Smack

by Con Chapman

It was the early 70's. The Vietnam War was just coming off its peak, and the traffic of young men back and forth between America and Southeast Asia brought new, cheap and exotic goods back to the states for consumption by those deferred, rejected or too young to fight. The products of that trade consisted primarily of stereo equipment—cool-looking Pioneer brand speakers were one particularly hot item—and heroin.



*Listen to Blue Cheer through these bad boys and your brain will never be the same.*

I was introduced to heroin—a/k/a smack, junk—by my friend Bobby, when we worked at his father's appliance store. Bobby had a big brother Tommy, who was right in the middle of the draftable bandwidth. Tommy knew more than his share of servicemen returned or on leave from Vietnam, and one day Bobby surprised me in the delivery truck by unfolding an aluminum foil package containing brown powder.

“Dig this,” he said, or something similarly prideful as he showed me the stuff.

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“What is it?” I asked.

“Heroin—from Vietnam. You want to try some?”

I knew of the dangers of heroin—addiction, a life of crime and so forth. On the other hand, a number of the men and women I looked up to were known users, current or former: Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Lenny Bruce, Keith Richards, Durward Kirby, William Burroughs, Ben Franklin.



*Ben Franklin, stone junkie.*

Just kidding; I threw Durward Kirby in there just to make sure you hadn't nodded off. As junkies are wont to do.

“Will I get . . . hooked?” I asked nervously.

“No way, not from one snort.”

That sounded promising. “You mean you don't have to shoot it up?”

“Nope. Tommy tells me up the nose is the safe, easy *responsible* way to take heroin.”

That sounded good to me, but we had a refrigerator to deliver, so I stopped him as he rolled up a dollar bill. “You're going to do it now—before the last install?” I asked.

Bobby's face took on a look of deep thought as he considered the issue of timing. "I don't know. I think it's like acid or pot—it takes a while to kick in. I think we should do it beforehand."



*"We'll have you set up in a jiffy, Mrs. McKelvey . . . bluagh!"*

I figured he knew what he was doing—he was the crazy one, after all, not me—so we took turns snorting lines of equal volume, then drove over to the house of an old woman who'd bought a brand, spanking new frost-free refrigerator.

We got the appliance out of the truck, with me pulling the dolly and Tommy doing his best to avoid heavy lifting; I, after all, was the former middle linebacker, while he was the kind of kid who'd lie on his stomach while everybody else was doing push-ups in gym class.

We got the refrigerator up the porch stairs when I felt even the semblance of effort from Tommy's end cease. I heard a noise like a sink backing up, and saw Tommy puking his guts out over the railing onto the shrubs below.

"Jesus—are you all right?" I asked.

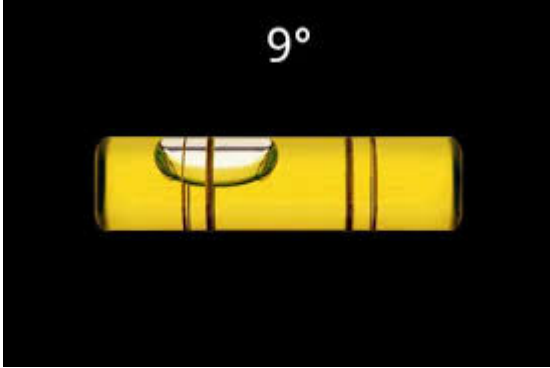
"I don't know." He leaned against the rail, whiter than the underbelly of a trout, and tried to collect himself.

"You're not going to die or anything, are you?"

"No, I feel better now. Must have been the cheeseburger I ate for lunch."

I looked at him to make sure, then rang the doorbell. At this point, I was clearly the more presentable of the two representatives of the appliance store on the porch.

The old woman greeted us and showed us into the kitchen, where what should have been a routine hook-up job was made more difficult by the effects of the drug that supplies pushers around the globe with their daily bread.



“Would you boys like some lemonade?” I recall her saying as I tried to properly position the refrigerator, using a bubble level. My guess is given my condition, she never saw a well-formed ice cube out of her freezer compartment until the day she died.

“No ma'am, but thanks,” I said, trying to bring the transaction to a conclusion. I got her to sign the receipt and we headed off to the truck, with Tommy a festive combination of green, blue and white hues.



*Bob Seger*

We went back to Tommy's place—his parents weren't home—and listened to “Stone Junkie” by Curtis Mayfield, over and over. I don't think it was by choice; back in the day, as they say, a properly screwed-up record player would repeat an album over and over again until you got up to turn it off. Which, if you're on heroin, you're incapable of doing.

That was the sort of trouble you could get into in a small town in the summer, surrounded by kids who were, in the words of the Bob Seger song of the time, young and restless and bored. When I returned to college at the University Chicago in the fall, I genuinely believed I would never get near the stuff again, but I fell in with a bad crowd; pre-med students.

There is probably no more daring group of drug consumers among the undergraduates of this country than the boys who will some day become men with the power to dispense pharmaceutical products to average schmoes like you and me. Their willingness to risk their lives by exposing themselves to drugs in varying dosages, or dubious purity, and unknown origin is admirable. By the time they get their long white coats and stethoscopes they will have sampled just about every item in the Physician's Desk Reference pharmacopoeia—and then some. It's almost saintly, when you think

about it; these guys wouldn't expose a patient to a substance they hadn't tried—in highly excessive quantities—first.

I had immediate credibility with the Doogie Howsers *avant la lettre*; I had not only taken heroin, I'd installed a major, big-ticket item “white goods” appliance while under its influence. I wasn't some tyro, I was—as Jimi Hendrix might say—experienced. A drug kingpin among mere wanton boys.



*Leopold and Loeb: I named my cats after them.*

Why, you might ask, was a group of high-SAT scoring undergraduates driven to such desperate pastimes? I can't answer that. Perhaps it was because we lived in the dormitory that had housed Leopold and Loeb, the UofC thrill-killers whom Clarence Darrow spared from the electric chair after their botched attempt to commit the perfect crime. With that sort of aura permeating the halls, you needed to do something more dramatic than play “Gimme Shelter” so loud the graduate dorm monitor told you to turn it down in order to assert your innately stupid young manhood.



*Curtis Mayfield*

But these guys were serious technicians, not two kids slurping stuff up their noses in a delivery van. They had hypodermic needles and syringes, and could calibrate dosages with precision. I trusted them the way you trust your family doctor. If your family doctor sells controlled substances out the back door.

And so I became—off and on, over a period of months—a more-or-less regular user of heroin. You learned to spot other users; the willowy blond in 20th Century French Drama with the little bruises on her feet, where she had to shoot up because she couldn't find a vein in the crook of her arm and didn't want the marks to show on her hands. We had gone out on a couple of dates the year before—then she discovered she knew more about jazz than I did. She ended up becoming an anchorwoman in L.A.

With that descent into the hell of heroin, dramatic changes in my life occurred. I got involved in a steady relationship for the first time in years. My grades improved dramatically; straight A's in Aesthetics and Ethics—bringing me closer to Phi Beta Kappa than I'd ever been before. Those hopes were dashed when I earned my customary B in Genetics, but I had an excuse—my high school biology teacher had gone walkabout when he suddenly came down with amnesia. When my girlfriend broke up with me, a girl I'd been friends with in high

school sent me a postcard saying she was coming through town, and we hooked up. I was rolling in it; the Big H, horse, whatever you wanted to call it—it was like pixie dust!

But despite all the positive changes that heroin produced in my life, I knew I couldn't continue to use it as a crutch that helped me focus on my studies and improve my interpersonal skills. For me, smack had one fatal flaw; it was expensive, and was starting to crimp my budget for record albums. That's right; the most powerfully-addictive drug known to man was no match for my deep-seated cheapness.

And so I sit before you—actually, before my computer—clean and sober tonight. Straight edge, hard core, as they say. I went cold turkey and got the monkey off my back, to mix my animal metaphors. I can laugh about it now, sure, but back then it was a serious thing. I still can't believe how close I came to a life of complete and utter degradation, dissolution, and depravity.

If I'd done just a little better in Genetics, today I'd be one of those dorks wearing a Phi Beta Kappa key in his lapel.

*Available in Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection "Chicago: Not Just for Toddlin' Anymore."*

