

The Solution to All My Problems

by Tim Elhadj

IN BOX 12 OF DD FORM 214, the Department of Defense requires a narrative reason for every military discharge. Mine reads: *Continued involvement of a discreditable nature with civilian and military authorities.* I was nineteen years old when I watched the Yeoman First Class type those words, and all I could think to say was, “*Oh, come on now.*”

I felt certain he was exaggerating. There had been two Captain's Masts, an NIS investigation, and various fallouts with a grizzled old master chief, but I was positive this yeoman had no knowledge of any problems I had with the civilian police force. I realize now that my biggest problem then was that I had no clue what my problem was. So after my discharge, I returned home and terrorized my poor mother.

I blamed alcohol.

Vowing never to touch another drop, I began using heroin instead. Soon my life unraveled like a cheap knit scarf. And the worse things got for me, the more I antagonized Mom. It started off small, the little problems. Mom complained that all her spoons kept disappearing. Of course it was me! I used my mother's spoons to cook up my heroin and then cast her cutlery— scorched and bent—into the sewers, or sometimes I forgot them on the top of toilets at a fast food restaurant. It was a small offense, but it wholly annoyed her.

Soon I started dating prostitutes. By this I don't mean that I paid women for sex. No. The little money I managed to accumulate always went for drugs. Yet I went through a phase where I was romantically involved with a series of women whose job it was to trade sex for money. I did not set out to date only prostitutes, but

this is exactly what happened. I am not even sure why. Most women terrified me.

I met these women in drug treatment or 12 step meetings. I would always think, "This person is great, a real step up for me." Not wanting to scare her off, I was cautious with the personal information I shared. But soon we'd get to know one another, and I'd realize these girls were in the same place as me. We were like comrades in arms, like perfectly tuned magnets, drawn to one another by invisible forces beyond our comprehension or control.

There was one woman with whom I was especially smitten—let's just call her Anne. After we got to know one another, I would occasionally drop her off at the motels by the airport. While she worked, I waited at the bar.

I considered this the night shift.

When I was sure I liked her, I brought Anne home to meet Mom. I intuitively knew that I ought to wait until the two of them seemed to be hitting it off. Not surprisingly, Anne had a real knack with older people, especially folks from my mother's generation. One afternoon the three of us were lounging around the pool in my older brother's backyard. When there seemed to be a budding relationship between Anne and Mom, I sidled up to my mother and whispered, "Anne is a prostitute, you know. A call girl."

"Jesus, Timmy." my mother said, her face twisted in shock.

Mom was sipping iced tea and she practically choked.

"Don't tell me this crap," she said.

"What?" I said. "I just thought you might want to know."

"Why?" she asked.

It was a fair question. Why? Why did I tell her this? Why did I do these things? Was I looking for revenge? I don't think so. I just wanted to stand out, to be special, to do something that none of my brothers and sisters could do. I wanted her to notice me, to find me worthy, but I always seemed to go about it in exactly the wrong way.

This essay, for example.

That afternoon in my brother's backyard, I shrugged my shoulders and said, "*I'm just saying, is all.*"

BUT ALL OF THIS WAS NOTHING, UNTIL the night I snuck into Mom's bedroom and stole from her purse. As she slept, I slipped up to her bedside on my tummy. This was actually distasteful for me, so I imagined I was doing something heroic, like crawling under razor wire in a war zone. Grabbing her purse, I dragged it back into the hallway. When I saw the huge stash of money, my heart leapt.

But with my next breath, I felt awful inside.

I took the money out of her wallet. It was a thick wad of bills: tens, twenties, and some fifties. Two thousand dollars. I considered taking only some of it. Maybe only take one hundred, or two. Leave the rest. This thought was short-lived. Next I felt myself grow angry with Mom for keeping so much money in the house. Who shares their house with an addict, yet walks around with this much cash on hand?

Saying that Mom shared her house with me is actually a stretch. I snuck into the basement through an unused window I had pried open when I was twelve. I broke into the cellar because it was October and cold outside. While my mother and younger brothers slept, I went upstairs to the kitchen to make sandwiches. Standing at the sink, I wolfed down the food and drank Mom's Diet Coke straight from the two liter bottle. After I finished, I would go back downstairs for the night. Mom always checked the basement before going to work. When she found me, she said I couldn't stay, but she never nailed that little window shut, so I felt as if we did share the house.

When I found myself getting angry at Mom, I knew I was going to take all two thousand. Although it was still dark, I left the house. There was a chill in the air. I was truly homeless now, but I had two thousand dollars. I felt awful. Guilty. But I reminded myself that I had two thousand dollars. I purchased a small cache of drugs. The

heroin and cocaine made me feel better, less guilty. I soon found other addicts to stay with. I shared my drugs, but I did not tell anyone about the money. If these addicts knew I had so much cash, they would certainly rob me.

When I started to feel guilty, I slipped into the bathroom and used more drugs. I no longer felt guilty, but then I grew immensely paranoid. I knew I needed to sleep. But to sleep, I needed to hide the money. Because I was now homeless, I had few hiding place options. I was vacillating between guilt and paranoia. Finally I decided to fold the money up into a tight little knot and shove it up my ass.

This turned out to be the solution to all my problems!

At first, I didn't understand. I didn't realize that having that money shoved up my ass would actually solve all my problems. I just felt pain. Let me tell you: It is incredibly uncomfortable to have two thousand dollars—in tens, twenties, and fifties—stuffed up your ass. But I felt so guilty that it somehow seemed right that I should suffer. *What kind of man steals two thousand dollars from his very own momma?*

And suffer I did.

I had a hard time walking at first. I had to practice. Driving was also an issue. I felt as if I were sitting on the gear shifter. Bumps were a challenge, but soon I grew accustomed to my burden. I developed a sort of shock-absorbing system while driving in the car, a way of lifting myself off the seat and then slowly rolling my weight back onto my buttocks.

As I became accustomed to my situation, I began to appreciate the benefits. I was homeless, but this was a portable solution: Everywhere you go, your ass goes too. Security was less of an issue. Who but the most loathsome of thieves is going to burgle your ass?

In the mornings, I retrieved enough money to get me through the day. If I felt guilty, I also felt penalized by the pain in my ass. If I felt paranoid, a simple shifting of my weight told me my money was safe. With heroin comes constipation, but even this worked for the best.

The money lasted almost two weeks.

I grew comfortable with my new solution. Some mornings I didn't even bother to slip my wallet in my back pocket. I even considered shoving my driver's license and social security card up there, too. These cards are valuable documents!

Sure, it was occasionally problematic. I'd go into the 7-11 and place the last of the day's money on the counter. I'd purchase five gallons of gas, a carton of something to drink, a little treat to eat, and then the cashier would say, "You're a dollar short."

I hated that.

To consummate the purchase, I needed the restroom key. And how best to explain money at 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit?

NOT LONG AFTER THE MONEY RAN OUT, Mom sent word with my little brother that I should never appear on her doorstep again. My brother had always championed me in the family. He found me in a dodgy part of town and delivered the news.

Trying to sound hopeful, I said, "A little time, she'll forget all about it." She always had in the past.

My brother looked glum.

“You know that was the Christmas money?” he asked, shaking his head. Wishing me luck, he climbed into his truck and took off for home.

I was truly alone.

Anne and I had broken up months before. As it turned out, we were so much alike, we were exactly wrong for one another. Consumed by our own needs, neither of us had much to give the other, much less anyone else. Last I heard she had entered treatment somewhere down South.

I had a pending court date and knew I was too soft to go to jail. To make a good impression on the judge, I had to get myself into treatment. With no insurance, I didn't have many choices. None of the rehabs in Pennsylvania would take me back. The director from one of these facilities suggested that I enroll myself in a public program in the South Bronx. I made the arrangements. At the time, I kept thinking how ridiculous it was for a addict to go into the Bronx for treatment. Most heroin addicts *left* the city to clean up. I felt doomed and hopeless, sure to die a terrible death.

Who would have guessed the solution to all my problems required hard work, patience, and most of all kindness? I had to learn that if I felt worthless one day, no one needed to be punished, least of all my poor ass.

In one of the treatment facilities I had attended in Pennsylvania, I remember a therapist who had once complimented me and then watched my laconic response—a simple shrug of the shoulders, a weary sigh. Exasperated he said, "Complimenting you is like tossing a stone into a deep and empty well."

I looked at him, confused.

"No one else," he said, "can do this for you."

Almost two years after I left for the Bronx, I found myself on Mom's doorstep again. My mouth was dry as she led me to a kitchen chair placed in the center of her living room for just this purpose.

Clutching her purse to her chest, Mom scrutinized me. She vaguely listened to whatever small talk I made. After five or ten minutes, she indicated our time was up. She had had enough. I wasn't surprised. In treatment, they warn you not to expect too much. I let Mom lead me to the front door feeling mostly relieved that our meeting was over, but also wondering where we would go from here. On the porch she told me I was welcome to write, to let her know how things were going.

I promised I would.

Parting that way felt good, deeply satisfying. On the train ride back to New York, thinking about my meeting with Mom, I felt as if I were suddenly worth more. I thought about all the challenges I had faced in the Bronx over the past two years. I thought about how difficult this meeting with Mom had just been. Not just for me, but both of us.

Wouldn't it be lovely, I thought, if building self-esteem were a much simpler task? Something as easy as, say, stuffing cash inside a piggy bank?

