

An Old Cold Turkey

BY DEXTER JEFFRIES

To become a junkie in your fifties is like hitting the rewind button. Forget about being non-linear and post-modern. These kinds of things were supposed to happen during the halcyon days of the 1960s; the 1970s at the latest. If you were a really cool hippie in 1969, you always knew some really cool black and Hispanic dudes who were junkies. They were the real things – the revolution right in front of your eyes. Pre-junkie Kate Moss chic for sure. It added to the aura of that demonstration you were going to in Washington Square Park. I knew those cats but steered clear of heroin, junk, horse, and French.

No, I got addicted to drugs at 52. Not something to be proud of. However, there was some consolation. Once I started confessing the error of my ways, so many other middle-aged addicts came clean. Tons of people are taking prescriptions for the psychological dismay of their lives. I was shocked. They weren't; some of them had been strung out for years. I never knew it. It's all about looks and appearance.

"What are you, a junkie?" (Nick Nolte to Tuesday Weld in *Who'll Stop the Rain*).

"What do I look like, a junkie?" (Weld's indignant reply because she's middle-class, takes medications for anxiety, and works in a bookstore).

"That's not always a factor!" (Nolte's rambunctious and insightful answer that reveals he's not concerned with tact, only truth).

Not concerned with tact and only truth at 52, I go through my Hemingway era of employing direct language. If a friend had asked me the same question, "Hey, what are you, a junkie or something?" I would have replied: "Yeah, I'm strung out on these drugs, meds; took 'em for my nervous breakdown back in January, and they got the best of me." I know I'm not supposed to use the

expression "nervous breakdown" because that's a negative label that connotes certain expectations and behaviors. But when you're crawling on your living-room floor, crying, it's a nervous breakdown.

**JOURNAL ENTRY: TUESDAY,
JULY 5, 2005**

*Feel half-bad and half-good.
Took one pill – doing my best to take*

them and get off them at the same time. What a life, my life has become. Talked to Victor for the first time in months. Victor said one interesting thing; that I can't depend on anyone, not the drugs, not Marlon or Olivia, not anyone to help me with this recovery. A good bit of advice, I now believe. I was starting to count on Olivia... Tonight I did something I never did before.

*Maybe it's part of the cure. I set things up in my bedroom so I could smoke, eat a snack, and watch a movie. I found it very relaxing, and I didn't do my usual evening obsessive thought processing. Just watched Fredric March in *Death of a Salesman* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Fought the urge to take the Lorazepam and practiced a mantra that Victor gave me yesterday: The*

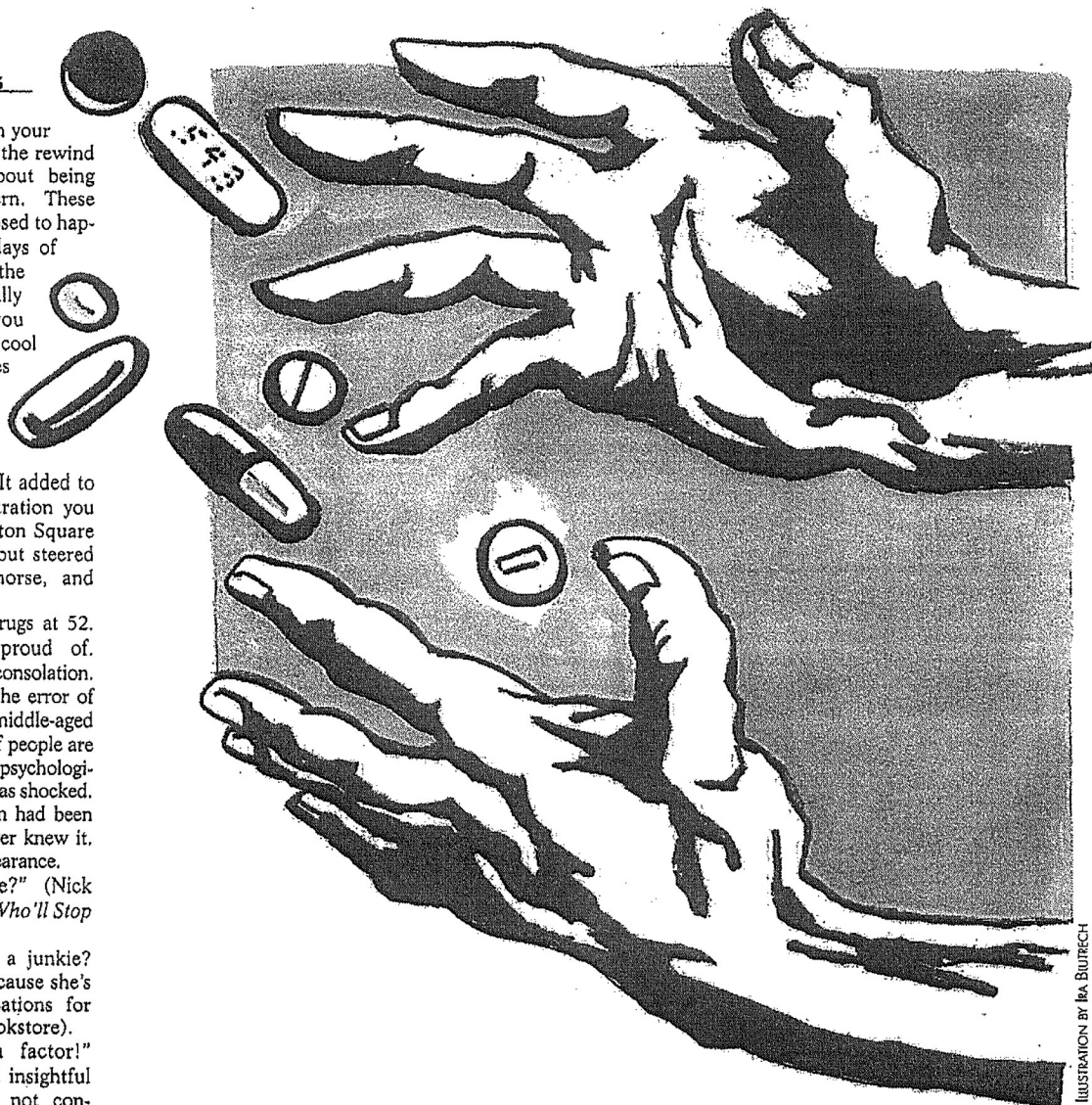


ILLUSTRATION BY IKA BUITRECH

only person that you can count on to get you out of this is you. The only person that you can count on to get you out of this is you. The only person that you can count on...

I started to lose it in November 2004, right around Thanksgiving. A woman I had been seeing for about two years told me two weeks after we broke up that she was engaged to somebody else. Because Kim was much younger than me, I cautioned her with: "Let me talk to you. This is called rebound. You don't get engaged two weeks after you break up with somebody, anybody. You fantasize about that, but you don't do it. Understand?" She let me talk, listened, but she had made a decision.

I began to feel unsettled. I started to cry. At first I figured, just sad, extra sad, because it's between Thanksgiving and Christmas in New York City. Then I had another theory: crying a little extra because I'm older. That's it. You're just a little sadder because you're middle-aged, and things affect you more. Then I began to worry. I thought, wait a second, things are supposed to affect you less as you get older. At 51, I was crying more than I had ever cried before.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 6, 2005

Decided spontaneously not to take any more drugs. Wretched night because I just couldn't go to sleep. Should change that. Went to sleep at

about 1 a.m. and woke up at 3 a.m. and read — pleasantly read and read and unpleasantly read and read and read. Made a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and drank some milk and still couldn't go to sleep. Was not upset, was not preoccupied with anything in particular. But I didn't go to sleep until about 5 a.m.; woke up at 6. Not the best way to spend a rainy night with a thunderstorm, car alarms going off, and just not sleeping.

JULY 8, 2005 (BLACK FRIDAY)

Tried to lie down at 2:30 p.m. to rest, and all the anxiety and pressure came bubbling up. I tried to lie there

and do nothing and fall asleep. I tried; I tried. Getting off these drugs is going to be harder than I predicted. Cut the pill roughly in half. Washed it down with Poland Spring. No relief. My heart was beating fast, faster, so I had to get that stinking Lorazepam pill. It worked. I wish it hadn't. I'm a slave to these drugs. Will try taking the Cymbalta in the morning instead of at night. What a mess. What a stinking mess. Drugs, addicted, messed up, and depressed about that. Started to relax and feel

good and wondered, is this it? Am I going to take a pill every time I get agitated, and what's the definition of agitated? A little, a lot? Is this going to last weeks, months, years?

December 2004 was a time of comparing and contrasting. That is what you do when you're hurled beyond that comfort zone of accustomed psychological parameters. My orbit was becoming more and more elliptical, and I had a strong desire to establish a frame of reference with some familiar longitudes and latitudes. I was becoming a bit lackadaisical. By Christmas I was losing

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direction and becoming "textbook withdrawn." I was lost and could not express any concern for my welfare. I became automatically "okay" no matter what the query. Complacent with drifting and analyzing my life from a remote distance was fine with me. I would have been satisfied with a Boy Scout compass that just pointed magnetic north, as opposed to what cartographers call "true north." Magnetic north means that your compass is giving a false reading because it's being deceived by the magnetic

field of the earth. Early explorers were always pulled off course by a few degrees because of this, and their expeditions sometimes ended in odysseyian disasters because of it.

The past was my specious guide to mental health. Comparison and contrast was my methodology. I had lost my wife and son through a divorce that took the stuffing out of me, but I hadn't felt this broken. That worried me. The divorce in 1993 had been my litmus test for being crushed. While going through those months and years of despair, I'd said with confidence: "Nothing like this can ever come my way again." There's nothing worse than never seeing your wife and kid again and knowing that they're still alive and living in Manhattan and you're alive and living in Brooklyn. Right?

But this was different. The first time I cried in the classroom I knew that something was awry. I was reading a passage from an essay by Erich Fromm that caught me off guard. Getting up from the desk quickly and adroitly, I was at the blackboard in a second, and the students weren't the wiser; for all they knew I was having trouble with my eyes.

SATURDAY JULY 9, 2005

A bad day, and I should be talking about what happened in London and the bombing of the trains. I should be thinking about a lot of things.

ADDICTION, continued from page 25

Can't think. It's either the drugs I'm taking for anxiety and depression, or me. Funny, I never thought I would go crazy from the drugs, but they definitely can do things even when they're supposed to fix you. My theory: Chemicals in the drugs disrupt your ability to obsess. That's good. That's bad. When you try to concentrate, you can't do that, because it's a type of obsession. Therefore, can't focus on the London bombings and what's going on over there, because of the drugs. Today I made a concerted effort not to take the drugs; I tried very hard not to take the Lorazepam, the drug for anxiety. Spinning like a 78-rpm record, even while sitting down. Feel like someone has flipped a switch in my head marked PAIN. Can't turn it off. I rub my head, press at the temples to get the pain out. I roll from one side of the bed to the other. Nothing works. These spurts of pain and crying are terrifying, too, because nothing tips them off. No provocation, thoughts, feelings. Just sitting, holding on to the arms of my swivel chair, and whom! Been crying so much I now keep a towel wrapped around my neck, so when a spasm comes, I don't have to flee to the bedroom. Always scared.

A teacher can stay at the black-

board and always make notes on the spot, especially an English professor. That day back in December I remained in my little protective sanctuary, my back to the class, scribbling and containing. By the time I turned around to face them, I was okay. However, this kept on occurring, and I was only so quick. "Maybe I should tell them," I thought to myself. "Kids from this generation, they've heard everything. Tell them you're nuts – they might just shrug and say: 'Big deal. What's the reading assignment?'"

No. Just hang in there. It's almost Christmas and the end of the semester. Besides, you have Monica, your psychotherapist from a lifetime ago, who took you back for a drop-in visit that quickly morphed into every Wednesday morning at 10.

JULY 20, 2005

Two questions: Why am I crying eight months later? Maybe it's the drugs. Lines from songs roll around in my head. Frank Sinatra: "Each place I go, only the lonely go." Yeah. I know what that means now. December 5 is a long time ago. Been taking the drugs for seven months. I don't feel so good. Thinking about killing myself again. That seems like the only way to get out of this. Can't take much more of this. Second question: Forgot what I was going to write. Jesus!

I almost made it through my collapse and teaching the last few classes of the semester without being caught. But I was finally rooted out one afternoon and it was funny. Rene Bailey had asked to see me about her research paper that was naturally due on the last day of class. We had made an appointment. Knocking on the door right on time,

smiled and started to read. That was my mistake. Not the reading, but looking at another human being. Taking her in. Digesting her. That's all it took. I started to weep.

RENE: Oh Gawd, professor, this is terrible.

ME (between sobs): It's okay.

RENE: Oh Lord, this is something.

Tell the kids you're nuts. They might just shrug and say: "Big deal. What's the reading assignment?"

she entered my office. I had been weeping only seconds before she arrived.

RENE: Dr. Jeffries, since this essay is so important, being that it's worth 25 percent of the final grade, I thought I should show you my thesis statement. The first paragraph. You know, the introduction. I'm shooting for a high grade in your class.

ME: Of course, sure, no problem. Let me read the opening paragraph. That's the important one.

She sat with her legs crossed. Lean, angular, and bronze, her earrings dangling like hula hoops. I

ME (between sobs): It's okay.

RENE: Oh my Gawd, I'm so sorry.

ME (between sobs): What are you sorry about? I'm sorry.

RENE: My writing, it's that bad? I'm sorry. It's so bad that it's making you cry?

I started to laugh and pulled myself together to help her with that research paper, a project about the process of mummification in ancient Egypt. Even then I could laugh. That meant something to me, since in the words of Ken Kesey's R.P. McMurphy: "Man, when you lose your laugh, you lose your footing."

JULY 21, 2005

Feel pretty good as I'm taking 60 mgs of Cymbalta, 60 milligrams of anti-depressant chemicals instead of 90: 30 less. Stuff makes me sleepy, though. Man, do I like to sleep. I really like to sleep.

JULY 22 (KILLER FRIDAY)

The end of the month and time is rushing by and my life is rushing by, but today I'm determined to get off the drugs. I haven't taken any since those 60 milligrams last night, and I'm in terrible unrelenting pain. That pain switch is on, worse than ever. Please, Lord, help me. I have to stop taking these drugs. Please, Lord, some people want so much. I never asked for anything. You'll see. So please, Lord, turn off this pain. I know you have so many requests: People are thirsty, hungry, rich people want more, and the war's a mess, but this is important too. If you could just take some time out and turn this thing off, I would be so damned grateful.

JULY 22, 2005 (LATER THAT NIGHT)

GONNA BEAT THIS THING BECAUSE IT DOESN'T KNOW WHO IT'S MESSING WITH. GONNA BEAT THIS THING BECAUSE IT DOESN'T KNOW WHO IT'S MESSING WITH. I'M GONNA BEAT THIS THING.

That fall semester concluded with me giving finals, grading them, and going through the bureaucratic motions of filing the grades. Fortunately, the days of using a pencil to fill in empty circles next to "A" and "B-" were over. All I had to do now was move my mouse in a halting fashion and click A, A-, B+, B, and down the line to F.

I muddled my way through Christmas and New Year's and kept getting worse. The mornings were hell. I would wake up, brush my teeth, and just when I was about to shave, I'd start to cry. The bathroom mirror was unforgiving. The short days of January compounded my feelings of being morose, and my best friends, from New York to Georgetown, started to worry and care for me.

They did what they could, but were overwhelmed.

Analyzing the problem ad nauseum was no longer beneficial. It didn't matter whether the problem was the sudden departure of Kim or my Mom living with me for over a year; I was finished.

My psychotherapist made it official. Explaining that she could only help me so much, Monica mentioned that I might have to go on drugs. I brushed this aside – medications were for weak people – and didn't consider it for longer than it took me to smile and say: "Sure, that's something to be think about."

JULY 23, 2005

Fought the good fight and didn't take any drugs for one day, a little more than a day. The real battle begins now, but I know one thing: I would rather stay up all night than take one of those pills or at most I should take half of one of those pills, or a quarter. Took the sleeping pill Seroquel. Funny, I don't count that as a drug, but it is. What that thing did to me last night and this morning was horrendous – gave me nightmares like I never had before in my life. Kafkaesque stuff. Salvador Dali stuff. I have to stick with my plan to go cold turkey. No more Seroquel. I'll read Ulysses all night if I have to.

JULY 24, 2005

Well, that was a prophetic statement, "I'll read Ulysses all night if I have to," since that's what I did. I went to bed at 2 a.m. and stayed up reading until 6. I slept for about 30 minutes and then slept for another 30 somewhere between 8:30 and 9:15. It wasn't fun, but I didn't take that Seroquel. However, I'm weakening; I'm tempted to take half a pill if this happens again tonight. It definitely got out of hand last night as I read James Joyce, word for word, from 2 to 6. Read out loud.

January 2005, a new year finds me broken and on my way to being a pharmaceutical junkie. The suffering deepened. Monica had intimated

that I might have to take some drugs. Stubbornly, I kept telling myself that this psychological anguish could not last much longer. The not sleeping, for instance, I projected that I would start sleeping again just out of pure mental and biological exhaustion. I was wrong. A person can roll around on his bed all night and still not fall sleep the next day.

One Friday morning in mid-January I wondered why this pain, anxiety, and despair were always worse at daybreak. Doctor Singleman the psychiatrist was to tell me a few weeks later that I had "morning melancholia." How could something so literary and romantic be so vicious and painful? At 10 a.m. I gave up and called my friend Marlon. Park Slope is only a few minutes from Clinton Hill, and my buzzer was ringing shortly.

MARLON: Did you ever consider taking some drugs?

ME: Huh?

MARLON: They have medications these days, far different from what they had in the past. I'm talking quasi-professionally to you. Can you hear that, in my voice? You know this was part of my job, right? I know someone – he asked me not to mention his name. He was going through something like this. His doctor put him on these meds, and he was stabilized. That's what you want.

ADDICTION, continued from page 27

You're falling. You have to stop falling. Gotta stop spinning.

ME: How come they call them meds? I don't like that. They're drugs.

MARLON: Okay, medications, drugs, what's the difference?

ME: I'm not taking any drugs. I'm not taking any stinking drugs.

MARLON: Who are you? The bandit in *Treasure of Sierra Madre*? "I don't need no stinking badges. No stinking badges, no stinking drugs?"

I went to the psychiatrist and he prescribed Cymbalta and the Lorazepam. They were beautiful things. I'll never forget when I told him that I hadn't slept in six weeks. Doctor Singleman looked at me and smiled a warm, knowing smile. "You're going to sleep tonight," he said. "Don't worry about that. You are going to sleep like a baby tonight."

I did sleep like a baby, sometimes until noon the next day. I slept better, and the terrible feelings of distress and anxiety abated. I could feel the difference. No more crying in classrooms or English Department offices, I felt confident about my duties. I was new man and found these miracle drugs to be just that – miracles.

JULY 27, 2005

Haven't taken any drugs in five days. Tuesday night was no sleep.

Went to bed at 2, read until 6, slept until about 6:55. Terrible dreams about terrible things – being exposed, naked, no clothes, and dismantled in so many other ways.

JULY 29, 2005

Watched The Cruel Sea from 2:30 to 4 and then tried to sleep. Lying there with eyes wide open or wide shut makes no difference. Reset the pillows,

turn up the fan, turn it down, adjust the position. Turned the digital clock away since it's a source of torture. Couldn't sleep. Tossed and turned until 5. Slept until 6. Woke up. One hour. Then slept from 6:30 to 7, and again from 7:30 until 8:05. Nightmares about being somewhere like Georgetown or Pratt campus and being pursued by bearded white guys who were scraggly and rough. All carrying knives and bothering me, even after I summoned police officers on and off campus.

SUNDAY, JULY 31, 2005

Nine days and no drugs. Last day

of the month. Woke up feeling rested because I slept for seven long hours, 1 to 8, and I've felt beautiful ever since. At one point I just said: "I feel happy." Can feel the poison leaving my body, like the first morning you wake up after a departing flu.

Turned on the stereo and listened to Dylan belt out "Tangled Up in Blue." I'm supposed to pick up

*A new year finds me broken
and on my way to being a
pharmaceutical junkie.*

Marta on Atlantic Avenue in about one hour. Made this plan a long time ago. Going to Jones Beach. Feel exhausted but relieved to have slept seven wonderful hours. This was how you felt in the Army after pulling a stretch of guard duty. You would flop down on your bunk and go to sleep, sometimes with your uniform on, even your boots. No more junkie days for me. I'm a lucky man to get out of it, I think. "You look like the silent type." Yeah, go Dylan, go.

I almost called Marta and canceled our outing to Jones Beach. I was ashamed of how I looked and

just wanted to be myself. However, Marta was a self-contained woman, European-intellectual type, who could read everything from art criticism to Thomas Mann hour after hour. I knew if I weren't forthcoming she wouldn't mind; she wouldn't even notice. We drove out to the beach and I was scared. As we were driving, I noticed that my body and mind were sensitive to every piece of stimuli – sounds, smells, salt, sand, smoke from Marta's Marlboros. Maybe I had developed another sense; perhaps this was one beneficial outcome of having being on psychological "meds" for eight months. A layer or two of outer casings had been stripped away. My onion silks had been peeled and I was inundated with light, words, noise ...I could hear new music in old music.

When a doctor prescribes drugs for anxiety, depression, sleep problems, you have to be very, very careful.

Dexter Jeffries is the author of the memoir, Triple Exposure: Black, Jewish, and Red in the 1950s, published in 2003 by Dafina Books, an imprint of Kensington. He is also a professor of English at the City University of New York, and at Pratt Institute. Mr. Jeffries lives in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn, New York.