

Addiction by Prescription

Aftermath

The days and weeks following Derek's death were arduous and confusing. The grief that Alan and I were experiencing was made surreal because of the upcoming Christmas. While other families were making plans for Christmas and the New Year, we were making plans to bury our son. Alan retreated deeply into himself during those terrible days, not able to be of much comfort to me, nor I to him. Derek was buried very near our home, and the sight of his gravestone hit me hard. I just couldn't believe that he was truly gone.

I realized it was important to try to keep up a strong front for Deb, but it was nearly impossible. I decided to discontinue my MBA program at UBC, it just didn't seem important to continue, and I wanted to go back to work. My new positions provided me with a focus and helped to relieve my terrible sadness during the day. There is nothing more difficult than losing a child, and there was no one to whom I could talk about it. No one understood the battle I was fighting on the inside, or the grief that overwhelmed me.

Things at home were moving along somewhat mechanically. I got Deb off to school, and then went to work. Alan and I were still not relating to each other very well. My busy days could stave off the grief during the day, but weekends were unstructured and the pain and sadness left me feeling increasingly alienated from Alan.

I began having a few drinks on the weekends. A couple times I overdid it and this caused me to become weepy and emotional, thinking about Derek and reliving the night he died. Three-day weekends were particularly troublesome, the most likely time for me to indulge in alcohol. At the time of Derek's illness I received a prescription for barbiturates to help stabilize my emotions. Now my Dr. began asking how I was doing and I confided in him about my grief, my marriage, as well as my occasional bouts with alcohol. During one of these visits, he gave me a prescription for something he said would "help me get some sleep."

By late spring, Alan and I were pretty well living separate lives. I was very busy with my life and he was quite removed from everything I was involved with. He seemed to take no interest in my job and I became resentful toward him. He seemed uncaring and resisted any efforts I made to bring about any emotional connection between us. He did spend quality time with Deb, but beyond that, he didn't seem to care much about anything. He began to work late at the office and took long walks in the evenings alone. Then came the truth! He was seeing another woman and I was angry. There was no way I could be reconciled and I knew our marriage had been significantly damaged. I knew I had to carry on, so I worked with a renewed vigor. Other than my love for Deb and being with her, my career was the only thing that seemed to make any sense in my life at that point.

I had been at my government job for about six months when I was assigned to do an analysis on the George Weston wholesale company. I was offered the position of staff assistant to the president. The job was just perfect and came with a substantial salary increase. This job kept me so busy and engaged that I soon had little time to dwell on my troubles with Alan. My job came with much travel back east for conferences, which I gladly included in my busy life. This way I could visit with my family, who I missed more and more. I ignored the signs of a decaying marriage, thinking that with time this rift would heal. We again saw our family doctor, who again referred us to a psychiatrist for counseling. He understood my feeling about our marriage and gave me genuine support, yet I was the one that he began treating with psycho-tropic drugs. At some time in the first few sessions, Dr. Hirt issued me a prescription for Dalmane, which he said was a very mild sleeping pill. He assured me they were neither addictive nor habituating. I only used them occasionally. However, soon after that, he also prescribed me Librium, a tranquilizing medication in the same class as Dalmane - A benzodiazepine - to use in the daytime as needed.

So by the summer of 1967, I had been prescribed two different tranquilizing drugs, one to take as a sleeping pill, and the other to take during the day. I certainly never understood that they would impede my mental, emotional, and physical abilities in any way. I started taking them regularly, as prescribed, and carried on with my busy life. During a routine annual checkup with my doctor, I told him how distressed I was with the Christmas season, as it brought back all my grief over the loss of our son. I complained that sometimes my stomach would be in painful knots. Other than that, I was physically well. I came out of the appointment with a prescription for Stelazine, which the doctor told me was for my stomach. I did not know it then, but Stelazine is a very strong drug that is likely to affect my ability to work, drive a car, and concentrate fully on anything. Nevertheless, off I went with my third prescription, and attempted to carry on with my busy life.

Early in 1968, we decided to buy a house. We were thrilled to find just the place we wanted and I was sure this was the beginning of a change for us. When we started packing, I realized I couldn't leave the house Derek was raised in so we postponed our move for a whole year. With the move, I realized I was expecting another baby. We both had many conflicting emotions, but the new life gave me new hope. At that time I was assigned to head up the biggest consumer study on grocery shopping ever conducted in the province. My previous jobs had really thrust me to the forefront of consumer research and my professional life was moving ahead full steam, despite the uncertainties of my personal life. Was I using my work to escape from the pain I was constantly feeling? I was seeing Dr. Hirt regularly, and he kept me supplied with tranquilizers. I had grown to trust him completely, and had no reason to doubt the safety of the drugs on me or on our unborn baby.

On June 28, 1970 our baby girl was born after some difficulties, which nobody explained at the time. Despite her robust size, she had to be placed in an observation ward because her responses after birth were on the slow side. I never understood that this phenomenon was connected with the drugs I was taking during my pregnancy. I named our baby Carrie and brought her home a few days later. Alan was uninterested in our family and, though I wanted to stay home for a year, Alan insisted we bring Auntie back and I go back to work. This was tremendously stressful for me and I kept right on taking my tranquilizers three times a day as prescribed. Although I was unaware of it back in 1970, I was being guided down a very dangerous path, a path that would ultimately threaten every aspect of my life.