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Back From The Brink

A story of addiction, redemption and the ground war on crystal meth

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If you are not a slave to a wildly addictive substance like methamphetamine hydrochloride, it may be hard for the true meaning of "rock bottom" to fit inside your brain.

Some cases to consider:

* Here's a curious kid in her early teens. Her rock bottom should be that first nauseating hangover after raiding her parents' liquor cabinet. But as nauseating as it is, it's not nauseating enough to keep her from raiding it again. And again.

* Here's a high school sophomore. She’s hoisting a marijuana bong that she built out of a pop can. Her rock bottom is the hazy realization that she will never graduate from high school. She reflects on this possibility for a moment. She puts the can to her mouth and lights up. She inhales. She forgets.

* Here's a 17-year old mother on the ropes. Her newborn baby is out of sight and out of mind. This young woman's rock bottom is that at long last, she is throwing away her meth pipe. Why? Because in the depth of her addiction, the pipe has proved to be inadequate. She makes a casual yet monumental decision to switch to a needle.

These not-so-sunny snapshots may remind you of a scene from an over-the-top Lifetime Originals movie. Sadly, however, the narrative is more fact than fiction.

In Idaho, meth itself directly claims the lives of about 200 to 300 people per year. Unfortunately, that modest estimate does not include homeowners who are bludgeoned in drug-related burglaries. It doesn’t account for unsuspecting neighbors poisoned by basement lab explosions. It certainly doesn’t factor in those desperate addicts who choose suicide over the prospect of waiting a few days to attain their next high.

Even without these tragic add-ons, the scope of life-ending possibilities is enough to send the most optimistic mind into malaise. Imagine what it must feel like to look in the mirror and know that you are not just an addict, but a destroyer of entire families.

That any one individual could survive such magnitudes of physical, mental and spiritual freefall is incredible enough. But to hit rock bottom, survive, and then recount the ordeal for the public good? Consider it nothing short of miraculous.

On that note, say hello to Rebecca Allbright.

Rebecca is not an actress. She is not a case-study from some far-away city. She’s not a manufactured poster model or a fictional character drawn to scare you straight. Take her or leave her: Rebecca is very

real, and her rollercoaster story of meth abuse—should you be willing to ingest it—is a graphic but inspiring testament of the human spirit's capacity to survive and transcend.

As any recovering addict can attest, however, a personal transcendence is never more obvious than after a person can fall down no farther.

"I was a mess," Rebecca says. "Meth just destroyed me. It destroyed everything around me, and I lost everything and everyone that mattered. If I have one wish in sharing my story, it's that others on that path will change before it's too late for them."

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Rebecca speaks little of her early childhood years, but she does paint a picture that ought to be familiar to many of us.

For starters, she reflects briefly on her roots in eastern Idaho. She then alludes to her earliest relationships with friends and neighbors, her varied experiences in school and the ever-present pressures of her faith. In an aside that seems trivial at the outset, she offers a brief summary of her earliest memories, including the vague recollection of a parent's soothing embrace after some painful scrape.

By her early teens, Rebecca had made her first forays into substance abuse. Rock bottom would still be decades away, but even by the tender age of 13, she was discovering that the scrapes of childhood already seemed trivial by comparison.

"More than anything I remember the warm, good feeling it gave me," she says, referring to her earliest experiments with alcohol. "By 16 I ended up pregnant, and that's when I started my using 'career.' It's actually no small miracle that my children ended up so healthy. I had this certainty that no matter what, I would be an addict."

Throughout her teenage years, marijuana was also fairly easy to access. That opened the door to other more potent substances. "I started using cocaine, and that quickly led into crank, which was like an earlier rougher type of meth," she says. "It didn't take much at first but I gradually had to double up, taking more and more to get off. Then it wasn't long before one of my husband's friends came over and introduced me to the needle."

Despite the weight of these words, Rebecca's voice is calm. It is obvious that the sordid details of her life have been recounted before.

"I have been married six times," she says. She lets that revelation permeate the quiet air for a moment, then adds, "My personal little joke—and it's kind of a sick joke—is that I'm just trying to rack up enough guys to carry my casket."

"Six times," she repeats. "I know that seems crazy. But for me the men, the alcohol and the meth—they all went hand in hand. There was no room in there for a real relationship, no room for children either, no room for anything good."

In her early child-rearing years, she made an effort to stay clean. For a time, she did. "Then I fell again, I lost my kids. I ended up in a relationship where the guy was abusing me, which was no surprise because I seemed to be a magnet for that type. Again, when you're using, normal relationships aren't possible."

As one relationship fizzled into the next, she gradually found herself shacking up with "Louie," a local gent (and eventual Husband No. 3) who was once considered a trafficking kingpin of sorts—right here in I.F.

By the time she met him, she was already using daily.

“I felt more than just ‘high.’ I felt invincible,” she says. “I actually got to the point that I had no fear. I was convinced that not even the cops could touch me.”

As her “casual” use of meth turned into a hardcore mix of business and pleasure, Rebecca’s life began to revolve around the drug—financing it, using it, stashing it, moving it. “I had people coming and going at all hours,” she says. “Just not normal.”

Even less normal was the realization that she had become aware of people and “things” that were not necessarily real. By the time Rebecca was deep into Louie’s crazy world and entrenched in her own near-constant meth use, paranoia had become the norm.

“I just knew I was being watched. Sometimes while driving, I’d know I was being followed, so I would whip around—turn the tables on them, you know? Sometimes it was just nobody. Sometimes not.”

Such talk of “them” seems far-fetched, perhaps, but in actuality, they were being watched by Big Brother Himself.

The growing tension hit a crescendo on May 25, 1995.

“We had a feeling it was coming,” she says. “By that point we had most people stripping at the door when they came to buy.” But sometimes they wouldn’t strip, and they’d leave. That added more paranoia.

“I would look out the blinds and just know I was being spied on,” she continues. “The same cars [were] going up and down the street, over and over, slowing as they passed. If I thought someone was watching the house, I’d just open the blinds wide and yell at them to come and get me.”

Then one early spring morning, they obliged.

“We got busted big-time,” she says. “We had 50-plus federal agents, cops and dogs come to our door.” Unfortunately for Louie, it turned out that no less than nine of his repeat customers were actually confidential informants.

“Right up till then I hadn’t slept for eight days,” Rebecca recalls. “I was just so full of dope. It was 3 a.m., and the door blew open. All of the sudden I heard this thundering sound of footsteps flooding through the house. They found me under the sheets. I stood up on the bed and screamed at them, then started hyperventilating and fainted.”

Amazingly, up to that point Rebecca still had a relatively clean record.

“My story was that I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. They started reading me my rights and I just told them, ‘You don’t have nothing on me—nothing! You can’t touch me.’ Well, that was while we were heading up the stairs so I could get my things,” she says. “One of their sniffing dogs was right there and got pretty interested in my purse.”

In the confusing haze of the moment, right after the officers extracted the bag of dope, she told the agents to put it back because it was a present for her upcoming birthday.

“Well, that sure did it—without even thinking, I had ratted myself out.”

One might assume that a harrowing situation like this would constitute “rock bottom” for just about any human being. But if nothing else, the ugly picture shows just how powerful meth’s hold can be.

By the time of the raid, Rebecca’s life had coalesced into a heap of trouble. Louie went away for four years into the state pen but Rebecca, because of her cleaner record, was sentenced to only a few years of probation.

Unfortunately, the get-out-of-jail card didn’t do her any favors.

“It was the following April when I blew off my appointment with my [parole officer] and I got arrested for transporting narcotics across state lines,” she says.

From that point on, she knew the ongoing pattern could end up defining her entire adult life: in and out of rehab, in and out of husbands, and in and out of trouble.

“Gradually it got to the point that all I cared about was the dope,” she says. “I just wanted to die. I wanted to go, and I knew some people had gone this way, so I started slamming as much of it as I could.”

Due to years of practice, she kept slamming right up to the moment that her body finally shut down. As she describes it: Her breath grew shallow. Her arms and legs began to convulse. Her bladder gave way as she collapsed to the floor.

At this late, dreary chapter of Rebecca’s tale, it’s worth reconsidering the scenarios mentioned earlier. In fact, all three of those cases were drawn specifically from her own personal experience.

Rebecca’s rock bottom could have been that first nauseating hangover. It could have been the prospect of dropping out of school. It could have been the loss of her children. But not then, and not years later, either—not even for a woman who would eventually wake up as a 39-year-old addict with a quarter-century of substance abuse under her belt. Thanks to the special, undeniably demonic nature of methamphetamine hydroxide, Rebecca had ultimately discovered that her rock bottom, like that of so many other meth users, was death.

As she now reflects on what should have been her darkest hour, Rebecca again recalls the endless string of cars that were passing back and forth in front of her front window in the days just before the raid. It turns out that not all of those vehicles represented the Evil Eye of Big Brother. In fact, there was one particular vehicle that couldn’t have been any further removed from Rebecca’s paranoid suspicions. It was a car she knew quite well, actually. It was driven by her mother.

Through all the unimaginable heartbreak, through all the disappointment and anger and humiliation and failed interventions, that car had kept on passing, day after day.

And on the afternoon when the dark curtain of rock bottom had finally been drawn, something amazing happened.

“I found out later I had actually been laying there for four days,” she says, tears welling in her eyes. “I was a goner.”

Or so she thought.

“My mother never came to the house,” she says. “Not ever. But she says she drove by that day on her way to the store, and that something told her to drive back. When she came in, I couldn’t see a thing, but I could hear her balling.” That’s when Rebecca’s eyes had fluttered open, and through the darkness, she

could see a dim figure over her, then reaching out to her. “And my mom picked me up, and she held me. She held me just that way, like I was a baby.”

Rebecca says she is well aware that there is no fast track to recovery. Still, some steps cover more ground than others. In her case, the biggest step thus far seems to be her willingness to recognize that the pain and suffering was never hers alone to bear.

“No woman should have to go through that,” she says of her mother, “To see your daughter lying there, your baby. I just can’t imagine what that poor woman went through.”

At the time, of course, Rebecca’s fleeting thoughts were a bit less endearing. “I was just trying to tell her that I didn’t want her to be there, and that she was interrupting what I was trying to do,” she says. “But she held me anyway. She bathed me. She drove me to see my P.O., and as we pulled up, something in me changed. I realized if she hadn’t come in there when she did, I would have been gone. There’s no question. I would have died on that floor.”

So at long last, Rebecca found her rock bottom. And somehow she had survived it.

She has since learned that survival is an ongoing process.

Along csame a year in prison. Along came four years of rehabilitation. And along came Rebecca, body and soul, a she battled her way back from the brink of self destruction.

“I’ll never forget what it was like—that feeling of knowing that there wasn’t any dope,” she says. “That’s when I’d start to panic. I would get bitchy and angry and jittery and just awful to everybody. It was a lot of work, you know, constantly trying to figure out how to get that next high. I honestly don’t know I did it for all those years.”