

A love affair with the white lady

Jesse's vision blurred back and forth. His liquor-constrained eyes could only register a kaleidoscope image of the room. A vulture of a man moved his hands along Jesse's thin arms. Jesse's veins ached in anticipation of this mysterious ecstasy.

Jesse closed his eyes to concentrate on his other sensations—the embrace of the sweet tobacco in the air, the hum of the smooth Grateful Dead hit in the playing in the background, the firm hold of the tourniquet against his arm. The taste of alcohol still burned against his throat. A reminder of the dark rum stolen from his dad's hidden stash in the back of the garage.

There is something so delicious about breaking the rules.

The vulture snapped at Jesse to get his attention. His bloodshot eyes were rimmed with yellow flecks that stood out against the overpowering dilation of his pupils. He gave Jesse an uncharacteristically cutesy wink.

Jesse let his arm relax against the arm of the chair as the vulture filled a syringe with a chalky, white liquid. He hummed to the song in the background, reaching over to the radio to turn up the volume as the chorus hit—

*Ain't nobody messin' with you but you
Your friends are getting most concerned
Loose with the truth
Maybe it's your fire
But baby...don't get burned*

Jesse felt the smooth liquid begin to pulse through him, warming his eager veins. A sigh of relief shook his entire body. He sank back into the billowy chair to bask in the feeling of weightlessness. His heart felt heavy with love for everything around him, and he smiled with the promise of new life.

This was the first time Jesse ever felt love.

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Over the last decade, heroin abuse among 18-25 year old Americans has more than doubled due to the drug's widespread availability, cheap expense and highly addictive nature.

For Jesse Rosenthal, it only took one time to fall in love with the feeling, which prevented him from being able to find love with anything or anyone else in the same way as long as he was under the influence.

Jesse admits that he tried heroin for the first time on a whim. When he was offered heroin one night at a party just before his 17th birthday, he didn't even think about the consequences—to him, trying the drug would just be a bit of harmless fun.

“For a lot of us, it just seemed like a normal thing to do,” he said. “I grew up thinking that heroin was just some party drug that people did on the weekends to bolster their buzz, but it didn't take me long to learn just how much it can screw up your life.”

Just one night of fun with such a dangerously addictive drug can very often lead to death. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, the number of heroin overdose-related deaths in the United States has increased over 800% from 2001 to 2014.

Before heroin, Jesse was a promising author. He loved writing satirical stories on politics and current events, many of which were published by his high school newspaper and boasted a wide and devoted readership. Jesse's friends called him the “juicebox,” spitting out masterpieces with every flick of his pen.

But as a young heroin addict, Jesse's life was punctuated by quick stints and rehab and court dates for petty theft. He stole money from his parents and his little sister. He lost all his real friends, leading him to dive even deeper into his relationship with the drug.

Jesse said that without heroin, he began to think of himself as an empty shell. Unless he was high, Jesse was convinced that he was devoid of creativity and walked through life with no direction.

“I lost myself,” he said. “I always felt like I was just on the outside looking in. There I was, moving through life with no purpose, prospects or personality. I was stuck in a hopeless love affair with the white lady.”

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Jesse thought that his love for heroin could never be duplicated in real life. That is, until he met Jessica, a blonde bombshell with a deep attraction to Jesse's tortured soul, dark eyes and smooth-as-chocolate voice.

Jessica showed Jesse that his love for heroin was only surface level, not substantive. Jesse was immediately attracted to Jessica's beauty, and soon found that spending time with her gave him the same feeling of ecstasy that he got from shooting up.

Within two months of the couple's first date, Jesse was clean.

Jessica also got Jesse to use his writing talent as therapy. Through his literature, Jesse soon began to understand the terrifying hold the drug had over him and fell deeper and deeper into the love that he had with Jessica—the personification of the love he had with his heroin.

In an excerpt from, “The Neon Sign in Our Hearts Reads Vacant,” one of the poems Jesse wrote during the relationship, he explains how his addiction kept him moving blindly through life, chasing after a feeling that would never be enough:

*maybe if we press the like button enough times they will really, really like us. maybe
no amount of stylish swag or dope ass beats
or well formed sentences of pretty fucking pictures
or yoga toned asses or people lining up with pats on the back
or well thought out arguments supported by facts
or the satisfied smiles of out-of-league lovers
or the very, very bottom of the bottomless bottle
or the brown sugar bonfire coursing full throttle
through our heartbeat highways or our god in the sky
or our god inside or our god that tells us what shit we should buy
will ever, ever be enough.*

Jesse said that his therapeutic writing showed him that, in reality, his love for heroin was unrequited. Jesse said that finding Jessica made him realize that there was something in life that was really worth living for, something much more valuable than money could ever buy or any drugs could make him feel—*real* love.

“Jessica was a drug just as potent as heroin,” he said. “She gave me that euphoric feeling that I needed to feel whole without ever having to pick up a needle. Being with her was a very liberating experience, and the memories that I have of her now still help to keep me sane.”

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Jessica died in a car accident only three weeks after Jesse proposed.

The couple had already started planning their dream, destination wedding and had joked about teaching their puppy to be a ring bearer during the ceremony. One of the couples’ best friends, Lauren Slocum, was more than excited when the couple asked her to officiate.

Lauren said that she knew Jessica’s death would be detrimental to Jesse’s recovery. The only real reason that Jesse stopped using was because Jessica made him feel as happy as the drug did. Without Jessica, it was inevitable that Jesse would search for that feeling again anywhere he could, and that kind of potent, forever-love doesn’t come by that often.

“He was stick thin and so, so pale,” she said. “His eyes looked like they were sunken an inch deep in his skull. At first I thought he was just depressed, like the rest of us were, but then it got much worse.”

Lauren invited Jesse to live with her when he was fired from his job for poor performance. Jesse always asked Lauren for money, and she often obliged, persuaded by his sneaky lies that he was using the money for job application fees and flowers for his girlfriend’s grave.

But in reality, Jesse needed the money to fuel his addiction.

“I couldn’t say no to him,” she said. “Looking back on it, everything that he asked me to do for him was masked by lies, and it makes me feel kind of stupid. But, at the same time, I think it was important for me to be there for him in his time of need, and to snap him out of it when I really saw what was going on.”

Jesse said that he is very thankful to Lauren for all that she did for him after Jessica’s death, and regrets taking advantage of her when he was under the influence.

“That’s one of the things that makes me feel the worst,” he said. “That I could hurt the people who loved me the most. She was the only one who didn’t turn her back on me, and I used her for money and convenience. I didn’t care about her at all, I didn’t even think about her.”

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Lauren pounded her fist against the bedroom door, sending paint chips flying with every blow. The loud rock music felt like it was shaking the entire home’s foundation, which threatened to collapse with every beat of the powerful bass.

She dialed Jesse’s number for the fifth time. No answer. Lauren retrieved the spare key from the top of the doorframe, jammed it into the rusted keyhole and swung open the door.

Lauren’s eyes were unsure of where to focus. The music was so loud that she could feel the sound waves slamming against her body. The air smelled of cigarettes and the incense Jesse brought home from the pop-up Chinese market from down the street. It was a lot to take in.

Lauren couldn’t help but smile; this was how Jesse delved into his most creative writing sessions, the ones that produced his best works. For Jesse, there was something about the harshness of this environment that made him ache to write, to create a sanctuary on a blank piece of paper where he could escape the commotion of the real world.

But just as she was turning around to leave, Lauren caught a glimpse of a hand peeking out from behind the bed. The hand was twitching, fingers grasping at the shag carpet beneath it. Lauren

swiftly moved to the foot of the bed, revealing the convulsing body that was previously obscured from her view.

Foam settled along the corners of Jesse's mouth and only the whites of his eyes stared back at Lauren's terrified face. Lauren began to beat against Jesse's sternum, letting the tears flow freely from her eyes as the seconds ticked on.

Time was running out. Lauren dialed 911 as she looked for some sort of human response, some sign that her friend was still in there and could snap out of it.

Suddenly, Jesse was still. Lauren began to pump her hands against Jesse's chest to the rhythm of the music, slowly flowing into sequences of CPR as she waited for 911 to reach the home. Time flowed through the duo's bodies, teasing them with the promise of death. Finally, a pair of sturdy, gloved hands pulled Lauren from Jesse's cold body. Lauren was hysterical as she was removed from the room.

The music was silenced, and as the echo faded from Lauren's ears, she felt as though Jesse's prospects of recovery were being suppressed with it. The house was shrouded in a deep darkness, with only the flashing lights of the police cars outside breaking through the cracks between the window blinds.

Lauren stared at the shadows dancing along the walls, allowing herself to sink into a state of uncaring disbelief as she waited for someone to come downstairs and give her the news. As soon as she heard the slow, deliberate steps coming down the stairs, she knew there was no reason to be hopeful.

Jesse was declared dead at the scene.

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Jesse woke up in a hospital two days later. He was not confused; he finally had clarity.

He finally saw what he had been doing to himself and other people.

He finally understood that using his girlfriend's death as an excuse for his actions would no longer be an option.

"Death was the only thing that could make me stop," he said. "*That's* how far gone I was."

Jesse said that sitting in that stark white hospital bed, by some miracle still alive to see another day, he finally realized just how beautiful the world could be even without his beloved heroin.

“It wasn’t god, it wasn’t imagined, it wasn’t a smokescreen,” he said. “It was the tear on my dad’s cheek when I finally opened my eyes, the sound of my mom’s muffled sobs against my matted hair, the exhausted smile that Lauren gave me from across the room. It was everything.”

Jesse and Lauren have now been dating for two years. The pair recently moved to Santa Cruz, California where they settled into an easygoing life by the ocean. They share a simplistic and deep love, made stronger through their collective love of nature.

The pair often indulges in gnarly mountain biking excursions and backpacking trips throughout the beautiful Sierra Nevada mountain range—adrenaline spikes sans tourniquet.

Jesse said that he feels very lucky to have beaten his addiction, and admits that there was no way he could have made such incredible strides towards happiness by himself. Jesse credits Lauren and Jessica, his family and nature for helping him get himself back on track and realizing what love really is.

“I loved heroin because it made everything seem beautiful,” he said. “I found beauty in the most unlikely of places, and in the most unlikely of people. I thought that was the drug, but I realized that that was actually me. I was the one who could see the importance of beauty, and I’m lucky to be surrounded by so much of it now.”

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Jesse beat the odds. Jesse found something better than heroin—real love, true happiness.

But most aren’t as lucky.

Bob Brannigan met Jesse on their first day of middle school. The pair clicked immediately, bonding over their love for pretty girls and the rush they got from staying out after curfew. The pair started shooting up together when they were only 17.

Bob said that although Jesse’s touch with death terrified him, it wasn’t enough to turn him away from heroin. According to Bob, Jesse had a number of reasons to stop using—a supportive group of friends, dedicated parents and a talent for the written word—while Bob had nothing.

“Jesse was always a happy kid,” Bob said. “He told me that when he was high, he felt like a kid again. He felt all those good emotions, wrapped up with this incredible ‘fuck yeah’ sort of feeling that just elevated the whole experience. For me, heroin was just necessary. It was the only taste of happiness I ever got.”

Bob admitted that although he has tried to quit, he has yet to have any real success.

“I think I’m just scared,” he said. “Jesse got so lucky, but I feel like that’s almost a once in a lifetime thing. It wouldn’t make sense for me to turn out that well, too, especially when I started out so much lower than he ever did. Without heroin, I have nothing.”

And then there’s Laura, who neither Bob nor Jesse ever met.

Laura lived in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia and received a 4.0 GPA from one of the most prestigious private schools in the state. She was an avid churchgoer, and felt most comfortable hanging in the shadows at parties talking about literature and activism with her buddies from class.

On the surface, Laura was a superstar—smart, beautiful, talented, overflowing with potential. She was always surrounded by friends and had a picture-perfect family life with conservative values, a beautiful golden retriever and an American flag flying proudly in the front yard.

That’s why so many people were surprised when Laura’s mother found her lying dead in her room, tourniquet still wrapped tightly around her arm. Now, she’s just stuck in time, frozen at the ripe and promising age of 18.

Caroline Muller, one of Laura’s best friends from church, said that although Laura never confided in her about her addiction, she did tell her how much she was struggling to keep up with her happy-go-lucky, highflying charade.

“She was under a lot of pressure,” she said. “She was this incredible, well-put together person on the surface, but most of that just wasn’t real. I think she was just looking for some sort of release, something to make her feel like she was actually worth what everyone thought she was.”

Caroline said that she never thought that heroin would touch the life of someone so close to her, but she is glad that so many people have learned from Laura’s passing.

“Laura wasn’t one of the lucky ones,” she said. “Neither am I. I’m still trying to get over losing someone so close to me. But her death also helped people realize how big of a problem heroin actually is in neighborhoods like ours. It gave us a platform to speak out against the drug. I know that her story could really help a lot of people.”

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Heroin is dangerous because it makes the entire world look like a fantasy—colors are more vivid, laughter is more potent and you feel like you could reach up and grab the stars with your very hands. It’s a hint of unbridled happiness, a taste of unconditional love.

For so many people, it’s *everything*. That is, until the high fades, and it’s time to shoot up again.

For every Jesse, there's also a Bob and a Laura—for every success, a hideous failure. People can only live under the façade of the high for so long. Eventually, everything builds up, and you become a Jesse or a corpse.

Jesse was lucky because he realized that heroin made the pain within his heart expand, not diminish. By allowing himself to mask his pain with the high, he was not engaging with a deep love like he initially thought, he was just continuing down the path that so often leads to death.

The ending of Jesse's "The Neon Sign in Our Hearts Reads Vacant," sums up his love affair with the drug and the reasons that he held on for so long. It also gives some insight into why so many people battle so viciously with the addiction:

*Maybe we romanticize the pain.
Take it dancing.
Take it for drinks.
Take it to dinner and take it to bed
Maybe we fuck it and then don't call it back
But maybe we feel guilty
so we crawl back between the sheets
snuggle up to the lunacy that loves us with knives in the night.
Maybe the madness feels like home.*

Sources:

Jesse Rosenthal
Lauren Slocum
Bob Brannigan
Caroline Muller