

Room for a view

Silhouette

She sat bolt upright in a chair, a hoodie pulled over her head and braces gleaming from the shadows that obscured her face. She was fidgety, skittish like a high-strung horse. Here we go again: another day, another kid on drugs. I sighed, recalling a teenage boy I had recently interviewed.

He was sullen, that boy, trapped in a spider's web of addiction, immobilized by the bite of a toxic drug. As I introduced myself, I noticed miniature earphones hooked around his neck and a small CD player on his lap.

"Mind if I ask what you're listening to?"

"Led Zeppelin."

"Really? But they broke up ages ago, didn't they?"

"They're totally huge again, man."

He was 18 years old; I was likely closer to his father's age than to his own. We shared nothing but a common appreciation of an English rock band *circa* 1974.

"I remember going to parties, everyone listening to Led Zep, the whiff of pot in the air," I said. "How about you? Ever smoke weed?"

"Yeah, for a few months before getting into the serious junk, you know what I mean?"

"Uh huh. So how old were you when you got into the heavy stuff?"

It struck me, listening to him, that he wasn't a Bad Kid. He was burdened with the expectations of a family that pushed him to reach beyond his grasp. Though he was a good student, he was not an outstanding one, and he eventually gave up trying to please his parents. He began to feel defeated and worthless. He fell in with the Wrong Crowd.

"I guess I was 14 or so," he said. "Don't know why I started. Like, I knew guys who had tried it. And so I wanted to. Honestly? I didn't think you could get hooked this way. I only ever smoked it; I never injected."

As he talked I could picture him smoking, drawing the heroin into his lungs while a warm feeling swam through him. Life had no sharp edges at such moments; his body was a floating cloud of pleasant sensations. The drug called to him repeatedly, and he grew emaciated and gaunt in response to its beautifully poisonous fumes.

"I went clean for five months on methadone," he told me. "But as soon as they tried to wean me off, the craving would return and I was back on the street. Anyway, I didn't particularly like the way it made me feel. A high enough dose to keep me off heroin left me depressed and feeling like shit. It was all I could do to lay on the couch all day."

"I see," I said.

"Fuck. How did it get to this? I want out of that recovery house. I've gone cold turkey for three months now and still I don't know if I can make it." He fixed his gaze on the floor. "Like, what have I ever done in my life?"

"You've cleaned up, for starters. No small achievement, right?"

"Come on Doc, I dropped out of school. I've never had a job. My family has basically disowned me. I'm an addict. Brilliant future."

She was 18 too, but with different problems. Her father had brought her in after she had returned from a crystal meth binge. Over the months and years, she had wandered from drug to drug, as she had from friend to friend in her childhood.

Ecstasy and alcohol had been her starter kit. E allowed her to connect



Fred Sebastian

to people in a way she never had before. She developed several new party friends, finding them amazing and warm and fun to be with. Without ecstasy, it came as a cruel shock that she felt no emotional bond to these people, who no longer seemed so wonderful. This was deeply deflating, a return to the way things had always been for her.

She slid down the road of adolescence on a lubricant of booze, marijuana, ecstasy and then cocaine and crystal methamphetamine. She smoked, snorted, swallowed or sipped her way along this path of obliteration; she never injected. Her life had narrowed to a noon-hour rising, and a specially arranged 2 p.m. class. She told herself that this was all she could manage right now. Her parents were afraid to de-

mand more of her, for fear of chasing her into a void from which she might not emerge.

She was before me now, appearing surprisingly healthy with sweet, innocent looks that hid her desperate life. But she was agitated in the manner of someone who hadn't slept or eaten in days.

"I realize now that I'm an addict," she said to me. "I can't handle drugs.

Some people can. They can take them and then stop. I can't. I can't stop. I keep using until there's nothing left. Well, finally, I can't anymore. This has to stop. I need to stop. There's practically nothing left of me. I need help now."

We shook hands, the young fellow and I, as he stood to leave. I watched

him exit the department, slipping his miniature earphones into his ears as he stepped out into the street. The evening sun cast a long silhouette behind him. His shadow, his addiction, followed.

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Lifeworks

Writing on the wall

Fourteen Dalhousie medical students worked literally from dusk to dawn recently to complete 2 murals that explore images and themes from the science and practice of medicine. The 8' x 16' and 8' x 8' acrylic-on-wood murals gracing the walls of their student lounge were completed during a day-long art marathon that lasted until sunrise on March 21. Led by Jeffrey Burns, artist-in-residence with the Medical Humanities Program at Dalhousie University, Halifax, the perennially time-pressed students liked the idea of a marathon. Although art marathons are held at other universities, creating a mural was definitely "more ambitious," said Burns, a professor at Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB. The students opted to use imagery from biology, nature photography and the medical sciences. The square mural depicts a "real and fantastic place" where science is integrated into the natural setting, while the rectangular mural is a composite of more abstract individual projects. "The challenge was to make that mural cohesive," says Burns, who is "very happy" with the results. "The students were really committed to it and it has generated a lot of buzz. The mural will live on and be a point of discussion about humanity and the arts," said Burns, who has been "exploring the territory where art and medicine converge" for several years. The marathon was supported by a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*