Addict's tale leaves us wanting more: Why?

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER & PATRICK M. BURNS
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"I am nowhere and belong nowhere," Bill Clegg finally realizes. Once a promising literary agent with a growing list of prominent writers, supportive colleagues, friends, and a loving partner, he "can now see how it all happens — the gradual slide down, the arrival at each new unthinkable place — the crack den, the rehab, the jail, the street, the homeless shelter." Alone in his hotel, Clegg wonders whether his room is high enough for him to die by crawling through and jumping down the airshaft.

In this memoir, Clegg spares no details in telling the story of his addiction and the numbingly repetitive cycle of highs and lows that accompany it. Crack, he writes, storms through him "like a magnificent hurricane raging at the speed of light. It is the warmest, most tender caress he has ever felt and then, as it recedes, the coldest hand." Missing the feeling even before it's left him, he finds himself "on his knees, sometimes for hours — hunched over carpets, rugs, linoleum, tile — sifting madly through lint and cat litter and dirt, fingering the floor, like a madman, for crumbs."

Equally compelling is Clegg's account of the addict's stealthy moves, covert plans, jittery paranoia, and life of quiet desperation. He smokes crack with a taxi driver behind a 7-11, craves "body-crashing sex" with strangers, and sees what he thinks are unmarked police cars parked in front of his building. After only a couple of months as an addict, he reveals, his cashmere sweater, tucked in around his waist, begins to smell, his Levi jeans won't stay up anymore, and hotel clerks refuse to rent him a room.

However, for all its frankness, "Portrait" never fully engages the question asked by Clegg's dad: "How did it come to this, Willie?" A pilot for TWA, Mr. Clegg, Bill indicates, was a "hard father," often drunk, who verbally abused his wife, taunted his 6-year old son because he was unable or unwilling to stand in front of the toilet bowl and pee, and believed that "whatever was broken could be fixed by force." Bill's mom, a stewardess, was emotionally missing-in-action.

In the safety of a community of patients and counselors, Clegg releases the secrets that he spent 20 years "squirreling away, hanging on to, buckling under the weight of." But he seems reluctant to look hard at the role his parents played in his addiction. His "boyhood struggles," he tells his dad, when he emerges from rehab, "did not cause what happened, merely shaped it." Clegg doesn't tell him — or us — what he means.

Back in New York, Clegg somehow gets a good job in publishing. Gradually, he writes, "mornings become mornings, not panic-stricken hours managing the consequences of not coming home before daybreak." That fall, he flies with his father in a Cessna from Connecticut to Maine, experiencing a new high. His pleasure is all the greater, he reveals, because, although they're sitting side by side, the roar of the engine and the wind makes talk impossible.

Some time later, he sees himself at age 2, running to the top of the lawn, "legs pumping under him, air rushing at his face." In the half second before he stumbles, his mother descends "in a flap of hat and tears" to catch and caress him, ushering in a "God-kissed, God-cursed calm, debuting at the zenith of his velocity, the peak of his want."

Did these things happen? Did he imagine them? And, more importantly, will they — can they — sustain him? We hope so. But we're not at all sure.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.
Patrick M. Burns is the Associate Director of Student and Young Alumni Programs at Cornell University.

Associate Images:
Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man
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