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a modern approach to recovery

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Season 05. Episode 01

Podcast Title: What Happened One Night

I'm Bruno J. Here to introduce you to Season 5, episode #1 of our podcast Busting Addiction and Its Myths. I shall call this episode What Happened One Night, and more about that later in this essay.

Our mission is to bring the truth about addiction to the families of addicts and alcoholics, to dispel myths that could jeopardise the chances of recovery, and to guide families on what they could do to make a difference, and what to let go of as misguided, albeit well-meaning ideas about addiction and recovery from it.

This topic seems to be endless. There is a never-ending stream of stories to tell, one after another, from a story that will break your heart to a story that will inspire you and renew your hope for a better future for *all* loved ones in your family.

We started our series exactly one year ago and have uploaded one episode a week to virtually every podcast directory, from the biggest like Apple and Google to the lesser known like Stitcher and TuneIn.

In the meantime, we have slowly but surely built an audience of several thousand listeners, and for that, I am personally grateful to you for tuning in.

Our listeners tell us that we have given them fresh insight on topics that make them feel uncomfortable and are often painful to discuss, that they feel relieved that the word "blame" is useless in this context, and that knowing they are powerless over addiction is actually a liberating idea.

I realised a long time ago that the innocent people who love their addict or alcoholic have no clue whatsoever about what their loved one was actually up to when out of sight, but not out of mind.

They do not fully appreciate, if at all, that an active addict's life is completely taken over by his addiction, that the most important and only driver is to feed the addiction - to pursue the drug, to get the drug, and to get and stay high. Period. End of story.

"Wait", you say. "It can't be that simple. Surely, there's more to it than that". Yes, there is. There are many addicts who appear perfectly normal on the outside - they work hard at keeping the secret - but they're churning on the inside, barely able to contain themselves until they get the relief they seek from their overwhelming cravings.

They might be called "high-functioning alcoholics", and here is a real-life story to illustrate the point. I will call it What Happened One Night.

Charlie relays this tale of adventure which took place in New York City in the 1980's when the city was fuelled by "greed, sex and cocaine".

That's when I got to know him. I wasn't yet sober then, and one day he disappeared from my life.

There are two aspects to this story. One, it demonstrates that one's loved ones have little clue as to what their addict is up to out of sight, and if they did find out, they would all have a heart attack and never get a wink of sleep ever again, and second, it shows that when we go round the bend, we court danger and even death in ways we would never even think of when sober.

Charlie came from a prominent New York family who was connected to the big players on Madison Avenue, the cabal who ran the big ad agencies of the day. I got to know Charlie when we worked at the same ad agency on Times Square which was a squalid street scene at the time, yet contained some high-end buildings such as a nice hotel and my building where I had a corner office on the 26th floor. 1515 Broadway was our address. In the heart of Times Square.

Charlie was super smart, so he didn't have to do much to rise above the typical ad man or woman of the day. And he didn't do much. I so admired his brilliance and his eloquence. Compared to my common-sense approach and occasionally insightful arguments, he was clearly way ahead. Yet we made fast friends and ran around town with the ladies and on our own.

That's when we really ran into big trouble. Our girlfriends were a moderating influence, even though they did their share of drinking and doing coke.

Charlie had shared that he had been seeing a counsellor about his drinking and cocaine use, and apparently, she told him that he was a "high- functioning alcoholic". So, he took that to mean that he could continue to keep doing what he was doing but do less of it.

Because ad agencies were (and still are) the buyers of the media time and space on behalf of their clients, we had a lot of clout with the media, which was largely based in Manhattan.

For example - and this is where Charlie's story starts - we got invited to dinner on Malcom Forbe's yacht and were taken for a sail around Manhattan Island with a slight detour around the Statue of Liberty.

The yacht was 93 feet long, had a heli-pad on the stern and was painted a royal blue with yellow trim. Side thrusters got the boat to sidle up to the dock perfectly without the hint of a bump against the tires hanging over the side.

Dinner was great. The women were beautiful. Champaign, vintage wine, filet mignon, sea bass, coke, cigars. Live jazz. Sunset, all the lights on buildings and bridges are on all around the Island. A magical, perfect night as the gods intended. Not a hint of trouble on the horizon.

Until Charlie started on his way to his home in New Jersey in his hot Saab 900 Turbo. I had already said good night to him by that point.

He stopped at a bodega on the West Side at about 11:00 to get a can of beer for the 45-minute ride home on the West Side Highway, over the George Washington Bridge, then onto Fort Lee along the Hudson River.

By now, Charlie is good and drunk, and high. Can of beer in hand, he walks out of the bodega to where his car is double-parked on the street and watches as his car keys leave his hand and land on a subway grate embedded into the sidewalk, then slide through the grate into the darkness below.

He is so drunk that he is beyond panic. No way can he get the keys back, although he can see them with the aid of a borrowed flashlight. He gets into the car with the help of a bent coat hanger through a partially open window and hopes he can get into the glove box where he thinks he might have a spare key. Cannot get into the glove box. Two street cops approach. He hopes they don't see that he is wrecked but all they want is for him to move his car.

He explains that it's no way; he has to make it home to retrieve his spare key and prays it's there, somewhere. One cop says: "OK, we'll give you an hour to move the vehicle or it gets towed to Brooklyn". What a break, right?

Charlie takes a cab to Fort Lee and now has to wake up the Greek landlady to let him in because, of course, he has no keys. She is not happy to see him at all.

Once in his apartment, he passes out from the booze and the coke and the stress of the evening. He wakes up at 600 am and takes a cab to the place where ... damn I can't remember... he left the car, but it has probably been towed ...to...damn, Brooklyn?

Off to find the car which has been towed to an impound lot in Brooklyn and now has dings on it (how the hell did that happen?) and he ends up paying the fine gentlemen of Brooklyn Navy Yards Tow \$175, which was real money in the '80's.

And today was a Monday, as the Forbes dinner took place on a Sunday night, so there goes a phone call to postpone a meeting at the office.

Where did it all go wrong? Had he not been drunk and high, he would not have stopped at the bodega for the can of beer. Had he not been wrecked; his keys would have stayed in his hand. Had he not had to find his car; he would have saved his workday.

All of this he hid from his mom. When she later asked him about his night, he told her about the great evening but omitted the back half of it. The insane part of it.

The version to his mom served to reinforce the "high functioning alcoholic" label. he thought for all the times I knew him in New York that that was what life was going to be like, one insane thing after another. Then he got arrested for assault on his girlfriend one very late night in Chelsea at an after-hours club. His girlfriend found him

dancing half asleep on the shoulder of a very large woman and Charlie hit her with a chair after she pushed him off the other lady.

This is a very mild story. This is a story about a well-to-do young man. Other alcoholics don't have the advantages of social class and money to smooth out the consequences. Even after Charlie's assault arrest, his mother had enough influence with the East Side police to reduce the charges to simple non-aggravated assault.

So, she kept enabling him all the time I knew him. He never had a bottom as far as I could tell and even though his mom was often worried, she never confronted him or perhaps never suspected that he was a raging alcoholic and addict. Never lost his job, but did not progress much, either, for all the promise he once showed.

Now there was an intellect degraded by abuse. There was a once confident, appealing man who devolved to become arrogant and insecure at the same time. There was a friend who I came to love and pity all in the same breath. There was a friend who took risks he had no business taking.

Charlie vanished one day in the summer of 1988. He has not reappeared. I often think of what might have been for him and for me, had it not been for this disorder. There is the potential for escape from its deadly grip. There is also the possibility of a lonely death. I do not believe that Charlie knew he had a choice.

What we learned today from today's adventure is that:

1. The addict is a genius at putting up a normal-looking front in order to deceive his loved ones that he is OK. He is even told that he is a "high-functioning alcoholic" by a professional.
2. His life, however, has been taken over by his addiction: chasing the drug, getting, and staying high are all that really matter.

3. Despite his outward appearances, he is insecure, anxious, depressed, and unstable. It takes quite the effort to disguise his inner shame and turmoil.
4. His loved ones have no clue as to the crazy life he lives and the needless risks he takes, especially once he goes on a bender.
5. Addicts and alcoholics of affluent families are often shielded from the worst of the consequences, at least in the short term. Enabling brings its own punishment, however. It simply and always delays the inevitable.

SafeHouse Rehab represents the modern approach to recovery, founded on safety as our first priority. We absolutely outperform traditional rehabs with a sophisticated intake protocol, application of new techniques and more robust after-care program.