

A crooked path forward



Dustin Dandliker moved to Portland at age 10 to escape an abusive home. By age 14, he developed major depression and PTSD that went undiagnosed for years. He sought escape through drugs and alcohol, eventually ending up in and out of jail and homelessness. He also managed to get his GED, graduate college and work in mental health for eight years.

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This series is a first-hand account of the struggles and successes of overcoming trauma, mental illness, addiction, homelessness and more.

BY DUSTIN DANDLIKER
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

The road I've travelled has twisted along grim valleys and inspiring summits. I was born to an alcoholic mother with bipolar disorder and a well-intentioned – but naive – father. I've committed two felonies and graduated college. I've worked in mental health and I've been homeless four times. My life defies logic and categorization.

When I was 9, I went to live with my mother. That year, she beat me. She imprisoned me in the attic. She said she paid kids to spy on me so I never talked to anyone. She threatened to kill me (once over a missing donut).

When my grades dropped, Mom called a social worker. The social worker took me to a playground and bought my first root beer float. I told her about the hidden cuts and bruises. She said she had to confront Mom.

I returned with her, uncertain I would survive. I showed the social worker where the metal had torn into my legs. She couldn't prove Mom was responsible, so I had to stay there.

That night, I faced my greatest fear. Would Mom pin my arms down and strangle me as promised? I felt the floor – the whole house – tilt toward her. She yelled, she questioned but she didn't move. She called my father.

Dad's church bought a plane ticket to Portland. At the gate, Mom gave me \$5. After boarding, a flight attendant said my mother sends her love. The attendant asked if I had a message to send back. I said no. I curled up, turned my face to the window and cried myself to sleep.

When I arrived, Dad asked what happened. I stared at the sunlit curtain, flatly reciting every abuse. He hugged me and promised I was safe. He explained Mom grew up severely abused. While it didn't excuse what she did, he didn't want me to hate her. So, I wrote a letter forgiving her.

At 14, I resolved to make good on that letter and went to visit Mom. On Christmas Eve, she put a capful of rum in my Pepsi. I quickly asked for more. I got drunk to protect myself from this chimera I loved and dreaded. Suddenly, I realized I could drink my feelings.

Back in Portland, I snorted meth, smoked pot, dropped acid; anything to shut out the maelstrom and the monster that brought it. Kill the pain or myself; it didn't matter.

After joining a gunpoint beer run, I turned 17 in jail. I bunked beside two murderers. I saw an adult inmate bounce a kid's head off the floor; the boy had schizophrenia and couldn't stop talking. I prayed for strength – not freedom.

I received four years' probation. It was my first second chance. I faced prison or

addiction so I stayed clean out of fear.

I earned my GED and entered college. My first two years were rough. I was suspended for threatening another student. For a year, I thought I was a father but the child turned out to be another man's. My cumulative GPA was 0.75.

I stumbled along until I got married. After that, I made the dean's list junior and senior year. I developed the courage and motivation to graduate with honors. I owe my success to my wife's faith and patience.

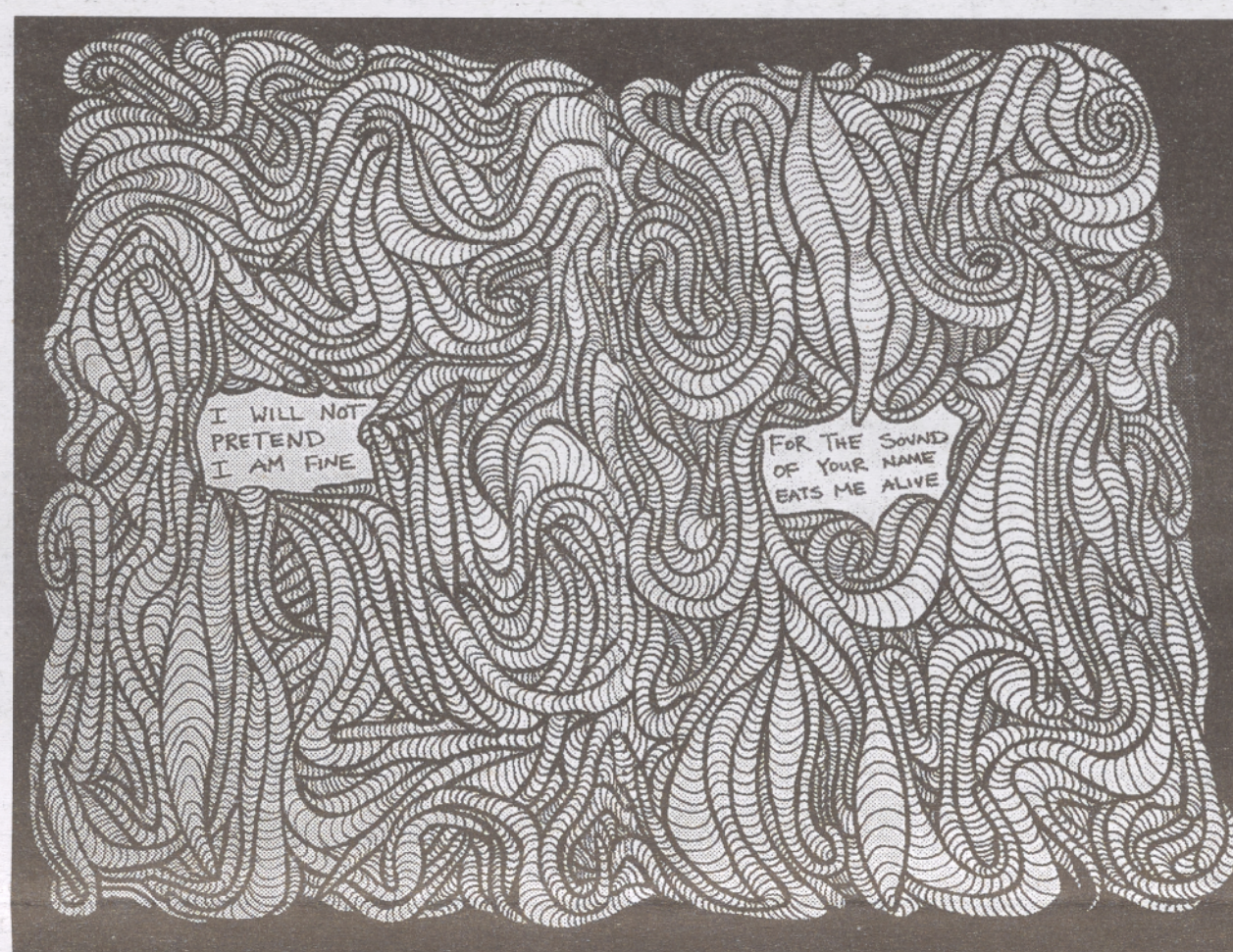


ILLUSTRATION BY KATHLEEN DAVIS

Love, however, didn't keep us together. I was terrified by my intense feelings for this powerfully bright woman. Never having developed the language of empathy or the capacity to trust it, I held her by my side with fear. I became a belligerent, self-righteous dictator.

When she left, my world went flat and I sailed over the edge. Her absence cast everything in gray. Fond memories became regrets.

I pretended to move on. In my career, I helped reunite almost 200 families. I also watched a boy taken out of his mother's arms because she couldn't let go of the needle. She died of an overdose two days later. Similar tragedies occurred too often so I succumbed to burn-out and left the agency.

Then my mother was diagnosed with ALS and throat cancer. In October 2005 she committed suicide rather than face a gruesome, drawn-out death. My 14-year-old sister had nowhere to go so she ended up with our violent, alcoholic uncle who then lost her to the foster care system.

I bounced around various social-service jobs and tried graduate school twice but dropped out. I refused the help I provided others. Then addiction and depression overwhelmed me again.

I lost a great job and moved into Dignity Village. I drank through the winter and kept to myself. When summer came, I spent every afternoon at the Columbia River. I swam, drank and laughed with other villagers. Although I played the part, I sat

alone for every sunset. I was Odysseus, stranded and allured by Calypso's charm; weeping on the shore with no way home.

Then a religious man started visiting the Village. He drove me to Outside In where I talked to a counselor. He took me to the Social Security Office to get an ID.

Eventually, I moved into my own apartment.

I was stable but had unresolved trauma. So, I climbed back into a dope bag. I let meth dealers live with me. My fragile house of cards folded when I burglarized a neighbor.

On the anniversary of my mother's suicide, I turned myself in. I paced around a concrete room one more time, waiting for grace or exile. I confessed to burglary and spent a year in drug court.

Afterward, I reunited with my sister who'd disappeared into a foster care institution. The night before my flight, however, her boyfriend broke her jaw and she moved out. So, we did what Mom taught me to do. We drank our feelings.

I spun the wheel and set in motion an all-too-familiar cycle. Drinking led to pot. Pot led to meth. Meth led

to the streets.

Somehow, I found a moment of clarity. My free weed hook was at a music festival for three days. I'd stolen from Dad too many times and no dealer would front me dope. I was out of options for getting high.

So, after bedding down in the Portland Rescue Mission, I asked the silence for direction. Then a thought came to me. I had three days; three days with the demon outside the door, not on my back. I could get help or circle the drain. I got help.

The last treatment center on my list was the agency where I'd worked 12 years before. There were 144 men on the waitlist. I was going to give up until they said someone abandoned a bed that morning.

I asked, "How soon can I show up?"

I am now eight months clean and sober. I have a part-time job. I volunteer at a library and I'm on a board that oversees five medical centers.

You may wonder what's different this time. This time I want it for myself – not a parent, pastor or probation officer. This time I'm reaching into my past, taking my childhood self by the hand and walking out of hell with him. This time I'm chasing a dream instead of fleeing danger.

Real change comes with progress, retreat and meandering digression. Over the next few months, I will share stories about my indirect course to a better life. Along the way, I hope to make sense of my experience and invite others to progress with me on this crooked path.