Extraordinary

We all knew “that kid” back in high school. They were the ones sitting somewhere in back of the class getting better grades than everyone else in their sleep. You didn’t see them study or sweat through a class, but when grades came out they always got the best one. Maybe they were just genetically smarter, or maybe they were raised right, or maybe God reached down when they were born and turned their brain into a supercomputer, but it always made everyone else wish they had it. Whatever it was my friend, who we’ll refer to as Molly, had it in spades.

I loved my dad. He was always so funny and someone that was really great to be around. I was seven years old at home with my brother, and my dad told us he wasn’t feeling good, so we went into the other room to play. A little while after we went to the other room we heard him start making noises, we thought he was just being funny. When my mom got home that night he was dead, my brother and I thought he was just faking sleep. We tried to wake him up but he didn’t move. The autopsy revealed that he had an enlarged heart.

Molly is a student here at Duke, it’s where I came to know her, and for better or for worse she’s unlike any person that I’ve met here. Molly went to a small high school where she was “that kid”. Being that kid is the reason most people get into Duke, but Molly got into Duke by being “that kid” who also did an enough MDMA and other drugs to make Motley Crue worry about her health. Molly grew up stoned. She started smoking when she was thirteen and was doing ecstasy by fifteen.
It’s mind blowing to think that Molly passed high school, let alone is currently attending Duke University. Hard drugs, partying, and trouble with the law—ranging from truancy to minor in possession and shop-lifting were Molly’s extra-curricular activities. Molly now sits legs folded under her casually with a textbook on her lap answering questions about a troubled childhood between math problems. I’m sitting on the chair next to hers, writing down her life story and trying to keep my dropped jaw from hitting the keyboard while I type.

*My first time doing weed was winter break in 8th grade. My friend Harris was my older brother’s age. One day him, my best friend, and I snuck out and smoked at the middle school down the street. Everything was like a movie or a dream. Everything changed. I was walking around and laughing and singing songs.*

Molly and I talk easily, it’s not an interview it’s a conversation. I find myself sharing as much of my life story as hers. We share a penchant for building close relationships with inanimate objects (she still has her teddy bear, Porridge, I talk to my truck and my baseball bats) and procrastinating more than we should, though I don’t think we’re very much alone in the latter.

Emotions radiate off of Molly throughout as she talks. When she talks about her old friends or a particularly funny experience her smile is brighter than the stadium lights at my high school’s football field. When she talks about the hell she put her mom through her entire body falls and she develops a fascination with the zipper on her coat. Her drug history brings out an interesting range of emotions. A nostalgic smile flashes across her face as she recounts a funny story spending time with her friends, only to give way to a wince as she thinks about everything that time cost her.
I remember my freshman year I came to school so drunk I could hear myself slurring my words. I told a teacher I was going to kick his ass, luckily he was cool and I didn’t get in a ton of trouble for it. I had to sit in the corner of a senior class for the rest of the day. God I was stupid, that gave me a lot to overcome because from then on I was the girl that came to class drunk.

Emotion overtook Molly talking about her father. The majority of that interview will never be recorded, partially because my role changed from writer to friend and partially because some things are sacred and aren’t meant to be shared. Everything about Molly changed in that moment, the girl sitting relaxed on a lounge chair in an abandoned common room became the girl she was at age seven again, reliving an experience visited too many times in the past when once was one time too many. She sat legs folded in front of her with her arms around them as she tried to be brave.

I don’t know if it was an act or just mental fortitude that allowed her to pull herself together, but she changed back into the happy 20 year old girl as soon as the subject changed leaving only a pair of swollen eyelids surrounding smiling eyes to hint at her previous sadness. I look at her, wondering to myself where the tears disappeared to as she talks and I realize that I should probably be taking notes on what she’s saying. Her pen is back in hand, scribbling formulas on some homework, while I’m still reeling from the hurt of a story that I only felt second hand.

My scary situation that made me step back and look at my life was in November of 2009 or 2010. I was 17. We had just bought a bunch of pills because we wanted to roll. They were called pink pussies. I took one and I was feeling good for a while. Me and my friend wanted to sneak down and take the second one while we’re peaking. So I took the second pill and got more
fucked up. For some reason I couldn’t stop thinking of depressing shit. I was a miserable wreck. When you’re on ecstasy you should be really happy. I laid there in bed trying to sleep and I started crying. I couldn’t stop picturing my mom and what my dad would say if he was around and my teachers. It was really hard to breathe. I could breathe in but exhaling was really hard. I was like ‘I’m gonna die’. I started hanging with my friends and could not stop crying. It was fucking miserable. I kept asking people to talk my down and I couldn’t calm down. When I looked in the mirror my lips were fucking blue. I was like ‘This is the last day of my life’. I felt like shit. After that I went out and sat on the roof for hours just trying to breathe the air. It turns out those pills were mostly heroin. The sun came up and I turned out to be fine, but that was just a day of self-reflection. Why did I decide to do that? What could I have lost for making that decision. I could have lost my life just because I wanted to be more fucked up. I changed my life after that. No one in that friend group wanted me to do it anymore because they thought I might actually die. I reached out to my more sober friends. I stopped rolling. I stopped caring so much about being fucked up and found more things to be happy about.

We ordered a pizza and started eating, my half chicken (which she doesn’t eat because she’s vegetarian) her half a mix of vegetables (most of which I don’t eat because I like food that tastes good) and talk some more about high school. I’m not surprised when she tells me her small charter school couldn’t keep her interested and that school was too easy even while juggling schoolwork, playing on the soccer team, and doing drugs in her spare time. I don’t know how much could still surprise me at this point. It struck me how so much of what she regretted was alienating her classmates and not building relationships. I might have three friends from a close-knit football team in high school I still talk to on a regular basis, but what she wanted to change was not caring more about the people that she didn’t at the time.
Molly winced more than usual when we talked about the process she went through quitting drugs. After almost killing herself with an overdose she stayed away from drugs for a while before slowly relapsing back into them. She bemoans how she didn’t really stop rolling on her own; she just didn’t have time for it once she got to Duke. I couldn’t help holding back laughter at that. To me it just seemed like she quit so easily she didn’t realize what an accomplishment it was to not let a drug habit interfere with school.

I didn’t just quit immediately, I didn’t do drugs for a while after I almost died, but once summer came I wanted to party with my friends before I went back to school. When some of my friends started saying I looked like I was losing weight, I wasn’t exactly big so I got pretty worried and finally toned it down. At Duke I was just away from it all and I didn’t have time to do drugs anymore. I still do weed on occasion but weed isn’t going to kill me.

Molly will be the first to tell you she isn’t perfect, and though I agree with her I still think she’s too hard on herself. If someone’s going to be completely irresponsible in high school, they can do a lot worse than ending up at Duke University studying neuroscience. If you ask her, she’s just another girl, but to a guy from the outskirts of a suburb in Oregon who spent the majority of his high school days on a field playing baseball her story is nothing short of extraordinary.