

# Living Within

Riley Place was an ordinary street, with regular families and run of the mill houses. I had lived there for nearly four years and had little to do with the neighbours. I kept my doors shut and the blinds drawn hoping to maintain my privacy.

Growing up I was programmed to never do or say anything that would embarrass the family name. I was taught to be fearful of my neighbours' opinion of me and so if I shut people out I wouldn't have to worry about what they thought of me.

I maintained this stance until one cold winter night when a stranger came to my door asking for help.

I was feeling rather drained that day from working at the nursing home. After finishing dinner, I settled in front of the open fire looking forward to a quiet nights reading.

The ringing of the phone broke the peaceful state of tranquility and I answered it with tones of annoyance. I was too tired, cold and miserable to be in a sociable mood.

'I need to see you,' stated a rather fearful voice. I responded hesitantly, unaware of who was on the other end. 'Are you alone?' enquired the voice on the other end of the phone. I demanded to know who was calling. 'It's me, Mandy, from down the road.'

I had been introduced to Mandy about 12 months prior and had spoken to her on on very few occasions since then.

There was silence while I collected my thoughts.

'Can I come up and see you, please?' her voice sounded desperate.

I could hear a woman's voice screaming in the background, at first it sounded muffled, then I heard the words clearly. 'Tell her to come here – you are not leaving the house!'

Fear was beginning to rise up in me. 'Is everything okay?' I asked. 'Can I come and see you,' she pleaded. I said yes.

Minutes later came the anticipated knock on the door. I opened it expecting to see Mandy but instead a distraught middle aged woman was standing at my door with a look of humiliation and shame.

She introduced herself as being Mandy's mother. She apologized for the intrusion and told me that Mandy was withdrawing from heroin.

She explained that Mandy was accusing them of keeping her a prisoner and that they didn't



care about her. I could see her speech was painful for her to give and in between sentences she took deep breaths.

She told me that Mandy had already taken off that night and they had to chase her up the street.

She pleaded with me to come to her home and talk with Mandy. Her eyes were filled with tears and her voice with sadness. I didn't know what I could do for Mandy but I agreed to go.

As I was getting out of my PJs and into warm casual clothes my mind was ablaze. I knew a little about heroin addiction but I had no idea what to expect that night.

I was now wide awake and my body no longer felt fatigued.

After being invited inside by her parents, I was ushered into Mandy's bedroom. Mandy was sitting on her bed facing a blank wall. She stubbed out a cigarette into an overflowing ashtray.

I barely recognized her, she looked thin, drawn and several years older. I sat down next to her not knowing what else to do.

She thanked me for coming to visit her. She told me her parents were keeping her a prisoner and she needed to talk to someone and that's why she called me.

For a little while we talked about impersonal, unimportant things. She seemed distracted and uncomfortable, lighting up a new cigarette as soon as the previous one had finished. She did not look at me while we talked and her body kept shaking.

I asked her how long she had been using heroin. She told me she first tried it two years prior but recently had developed a raging habit.

I asked how much money it was costing her. When she said \$300 a day I was shocked. I asked how she could afford that sort of money. She responded by saying she owed a few people a lot of money.

I wanted to know why she got involved with heroin in the first place. I wanted to understand why someone like her, with caring parents and a seemingly good upbringing, became an addict.

She told me she first used it because a guy she was keen on was an addict and he gave her a few hits.

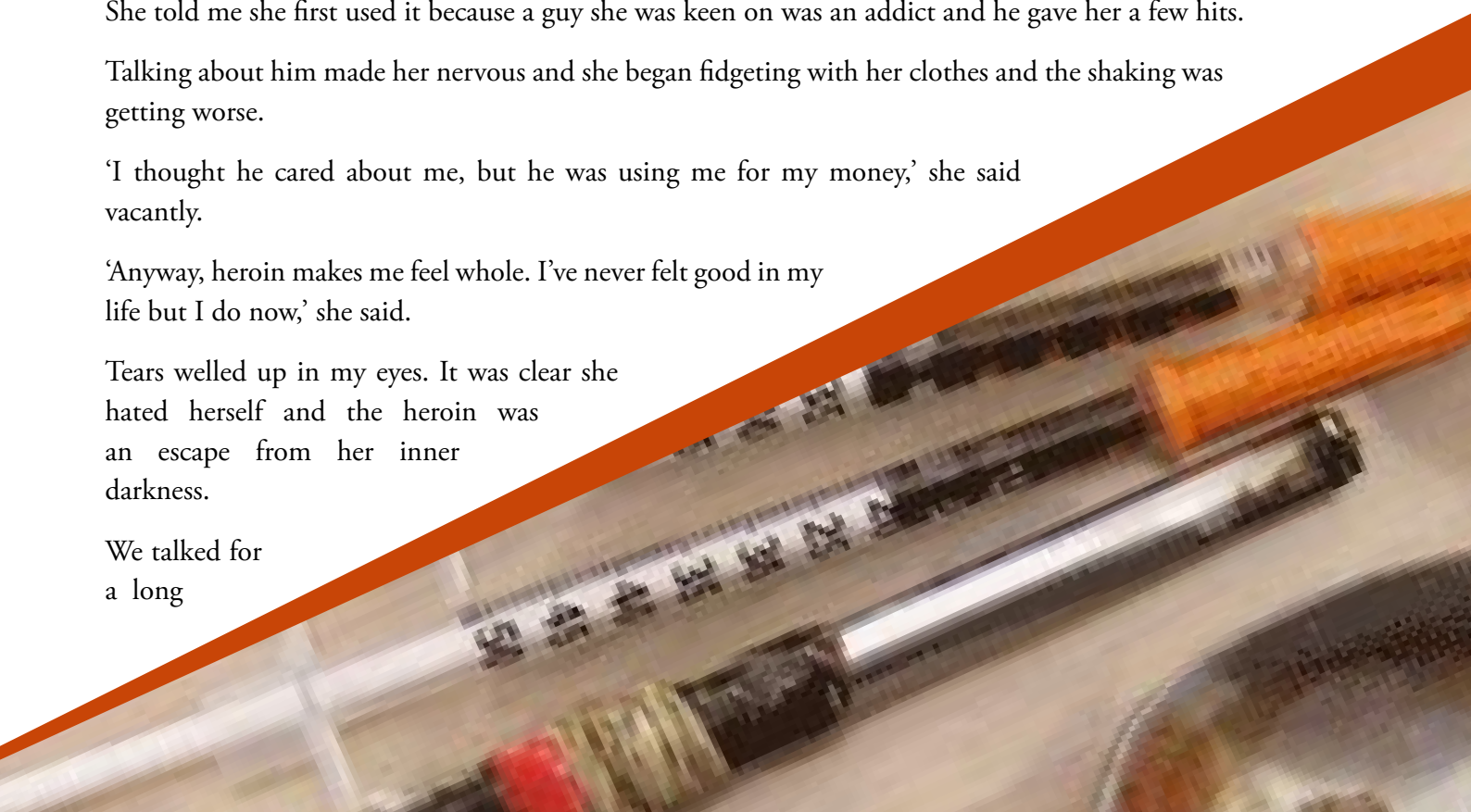
Talking about him made her nervous and she began fidgeting with her clothes and the shaking was getting worse.

'I thought he cared about me, but he was using me for my money,' she said vacantly.

'Anyway, heroin makes me feel whole. I've never felt good in my life but I do now,' she said.

Tears welled up in my eyes. It was clear she hated herself and the heroin was an escape from her inner darkness.

We talked for a long



time. I asked many questions and she answered, although at times the conversation was hard to comprehend. She would forget what we were talking about and her thoughts would wonder off. Sometimes she would just sit and stare until I broke the silence by asking another question.

She told me she had overdosed and died ten days previously. She said they had to get a doctor to revive her. Her dealer had sold her a higher grade heroin but forgot to tell her. She seemed annoyed that he had been so careless.

She remembered having the fatal hit in her bedroom but couldn't remember anything else until two days later when she woke up in hospital.

'I still had the needle in my arm when Mum found me. She freaked and called an ambulance.'

'Apparently I died when I reached hospital but they brought me back to life,' she said with tones of regret.

'I wish I had died,' she stated. With that she began to cry.

'I know how much I'm hurting them. My parents are the only ones who really love me and they think I don't care about them, but I do. I'm a nobody and a nothing and I wish the bastard doctor hadn't saved me.'

She became hysterical.

I noticed dark circles under her pain filled eyes. I felt inadequate – I sat there not knowing how to comfort her.

She asked me to do her a favour. She gave me a small piece of paper with a phone number on it. She wanted me call the number and get her dealer to deliver a foil to my place. She said she had the money.

I then realized why she had called me that night.

I knew she was going through withdrawal from heroin, I could see her physical discomfort, but I wasn't going to get any drugs for her.

For nearly an hour she tried desperately to talk me into phoning her dealer. It was an emotional time and her behavior changed constantly.

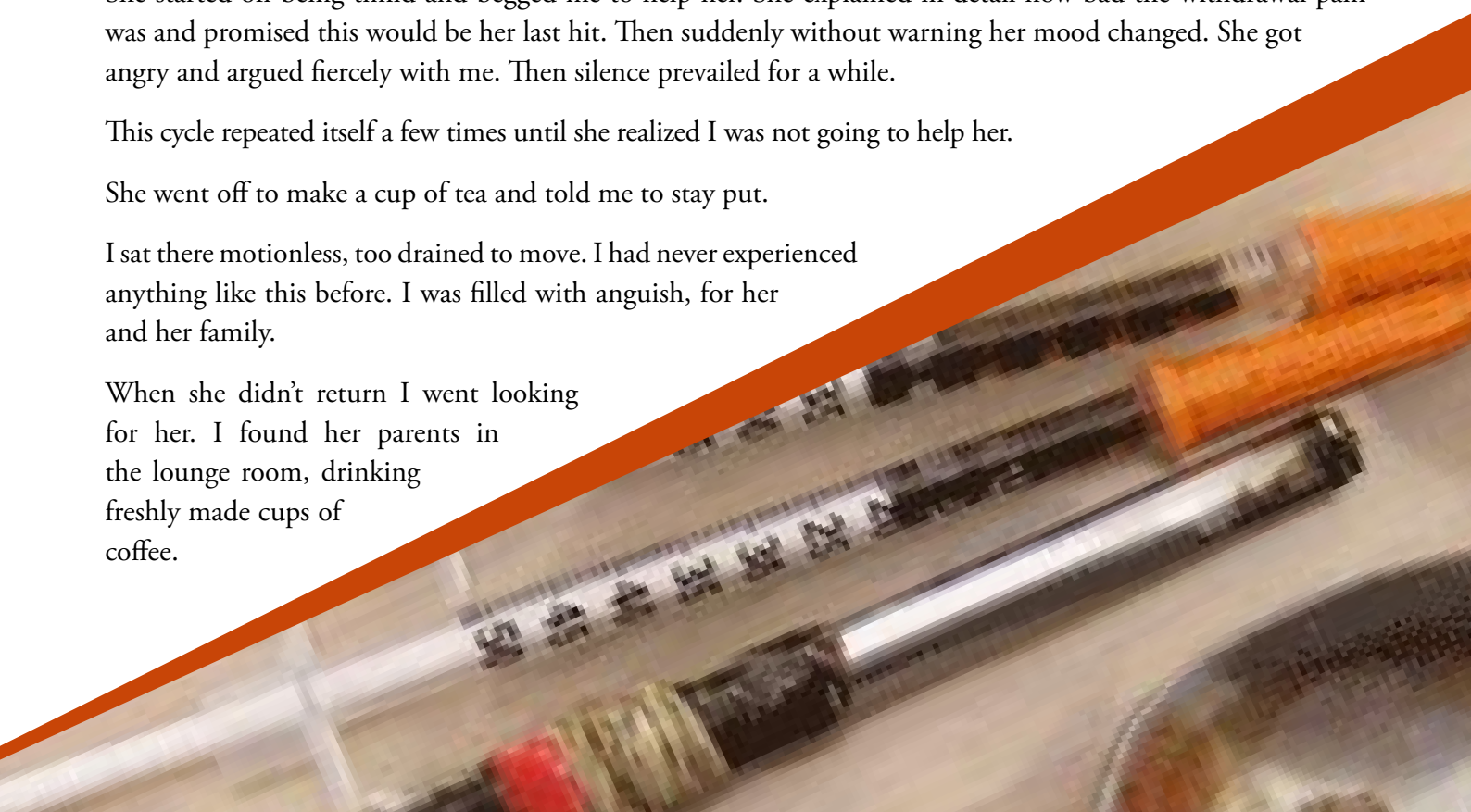
She started off being timid and begged me to help her. She explained in detail how bad the withdrawal pain was and promised this would be her last hit. Then suddenly without warning her mood changed. She got angry and argued fiercely with me. Then silence prevailed for a while.

This cycle repeated itself a few times until she realized I was not going to help her.

She went off to make a cup of tea and told me to stay put.

I sat there motionless, too drained to move. I had never experienced anything like this before. I was filled with anguish, for her and her family.

When she didn't return I went looking for her. I found her parents in the lounge room, drinking freshly made cups of coffee.





Her father asked me how she was. I turned my gaze to the kitchen, trying to find out where she was. Her mother noticed the panic in my eyes. They got up immediately and searched the house.

She had been gone about 10 minutes. The father rushed outside and yelled to the mother that he would drive around the streets looking for his daughter.

I looked into the grief stricken eyes of her mother and apologized for what happened. I told her that Mandy wanted me to phone her dealer to get heroin but I wouldn't do it.

Her mother told me that Mandy was going to court the next day on robbery charges. She told me they were going to ask the magistrate to hold their daughter in custody until the final hearing. She fell silent as she tried to hold back the tears.

'We love her dearly, but we can't take it anymore.' She began to weep. She tried desperately to contain her hysteria. I could see she was embarrassed but she couldn't stop – her anguish pouring out like a raging river.

We stood in united silence under the winter moonlight unaware of the cold winds beating at our bodies.

A short while later Mandy was brought home by her father – he found her in a phone box near the local shops.

Her parents thanked me for visiting their daughter and told me they would stay awake all night to make sure she didn't escape again.

The fire that was blazing fiercely at my house before I visited Mandy was now a smouldering heap of ashes.

I stoked up the fire and sat there motionless for a long time. Darkness surrounded me.

I thought about how comfortable and secure my world was compared to someone like Mandy. I believed if I shut the doors to my home I would be shutting out the world and all its misery. I realized that I had only been fooling myself.

Mandy ended up in prison but I didn't hear the news from her parents – we never spoke again after that night, but I often thought of them.

