

LOVE CONQUERS HATE

One woman's struggle to come in from a cocaine blizzard to the shelter of recovery. By **Harry Shapiro**

Grace (not her real name) sits in one of the rooms of the Gateway Project run by Addaction in Liverpool city centre. In her early thirties with a strong accent that betrays her deep roots in the city, she is pleased to be given the chance to tell her story. She is calm and relaxed, at peace with the world. It's been a long time coming.

On a day to day basis, Grace was brought up by her grandmother; her mother was out working and she never knew her dad as a child. But her experiences of growing up in a tough, working class Liverpool family were not that unusual.

Then around the age of seven, she suffered sustained sexual abuse at the hands of neighbours that, Grace is convinced, was the root of all her problems. "I know that I told somebody, but it was never dealt with, swept under the carpet," she says. "It was never spoken about and that's how it was. I remember that there was a change in me as a person. As a little child, I became very angry, very into myself. I felt it was all my fault. I tried to make believe that it had never happened.

"When I was ten, my mum had a new relationship. He was a heavy drinker with a gambling addiction and was

violent and abusive towards my mum. So she had her problems, trying to bring up my little sister as well. I couldn't put all this onto my grandmother because she was an old woman. So I never felt I had anybody to talk to. I couldn't talk to my mum about certain things because I'd just get a belt. I was petrified. So I had a lot of issues that were never dealt with."

By the age of 12, Grace was drinking and smoking cannabis with many of the other kids on the estate where she lived; by the time she was fifteen, she had snorted her first line of coke. "I was just trying to wash it all away, trying to deal with it, but not really knowing what it was I was trying to deal with. A lot of confusion." She already had a boyfriend, much to the disapproval of her mum, so that pushed her even further away from her family, "but I was just looking for somebody to love me. I came from a very disciplined, old fashioned family. We don't do hugs. I saw other people getting hugs, but I never understood why I didn't."

Grace went to an all-girls Catholic school, but was expelled. "I was just really cheeky, had too much to say. I didn't like the discipline. If they said black, I'd say white." Yet while she was condemned in her school reports for

being 'out of control', even so the reports acknowledged that Grace was a very intelligent girl and at 17, she found her way to college to study fashion design. However, life at home was increasingly difficult. Her boyfriend was never accepted. "One day, my mum said get out of my house and that was that. I just walked out and had to survive. That was when things turned, the beginning of the end so to speak. I did get my qualifications from college, but I was like little orphan Annie floating around, eventually getting faster and faster until I was bouncing off the walls of the city."

Grace moved into a flat with her boyfriend, earning some money from cleaning jobs. Cocaine was gaining an attraction. "If I got drunk, I would just pass out. But I wanted an escapism that would take me to a different level, to be able to escape what was going on in my own mind but still be aware." Her boyfriend, who wasn't working, started selling cannabis, "but slowly it all started to get much heavier and then he was selling cocaine. It didn't really bother me at the time because we were just trying to survive and I had nowhere to go anyway. I couldn't go home. So in a different way, I was still pretending that things weren't happening. Even then I



knew I was living a lie, that deep down I was asking myself, 'what am I doing here?'"

Once her boyfriend started selling coke, Grace's own consumption soared. "It was just there. I never had to pay for it. By the time I was 19, I was a heavy coke user, two and three day binges. All that pain about not feeling good about yourself was taken away. Nothing had been real for a long time. I was scared of reality, but I wasn't scared of what was happening. I was confident, I was out there in that using world, that rat race and the people we were involved with on the dealing side went right to the very top."

Grace put her intelligence and confidence in the service of drug dealing: "I used my head and would tell my boyfriend what to do. I fronted it. People liked me more, people trusted me more, maybe because I was a girl as well. But as we moved up the dealing scale, there were times when you felt in real physical danger, we got into bad situations, in mad places with people we didn't know, people who would go all the way for anything – nasty people. But this was my world. This was normal. I did what everyone else did to belong here, but I knew I was just passing through.

I WENT THROUGH
LIVERPOOL LIKE THE
TASMANIAN DEVIL. PUT
MORE ALE DOWN MY
THROAT, MORE VODKA,
MORE COKE, TOOK
PILLS, ATE SOMETHING,
THREW IT UP. I DON'T
THINK I EVER GOT A
DECENT NIGHT'S SLEEP

"I had shit loads of stuff – clothes, cars, money, jewellery, if I liked a pair of shoes, I'd buy a pair in every colour. On top of that, I never had to buy drugs, never bought a drink in a bar. We bought a house and it was chaos, just carnage. Everyone knew where we lived, there was partying all the time. But in all this mayhem, I got a job as a carer. I always loved work. It was my own money, because all the rest of it just wasn't real. So I had my fingers in all sorts of pies."

Then after six years in the house, at the age of 25, Grace's life took yet

another downturn. Her boyfriend left her and was involved in a serious road accident with his new partner. This sent Grace into even more chaotic drink and drug use – a five star bender that went on for seven months. "Before we were just using mainly with friends. Now I just hit the party scene. I went through Liverpool like the Tasmanian Devil. Put more ale down my throat, more vodka, more coke, took pills, ate something, threw it up. I don't think I ever got a decent night's sleep. I had a mental breakdown and couldn't remember whole nights out. Wild beyond belief."

"One day I was one the phone to a friend in Amsterdam and he asked me how I felt – and he was the first person to ask me how I was feeling. I was sitting in this big house all by myself. And I just broke down, fell to pieces there and then. I couldn't stop crying. He just tripped something. Up to then it was all the drama and the jangle of the life. I never came up for air. I was suffocated by things and people. I looked in the mirror and I didn't know who I was looking at. I just didn't know who I was. I was so lost – I'd lost so much that was me – and I wanted me back."

Grace made a decision to come off coke. "I'd had enough. I couldn't do it

anymore.” She had always taken lots of foreign holidays – Spain, Holland, Thailand, Greece – as part of the running away, of not dealing with the problems. But this time, she was a more positive frame of mind when she booked a trip to Egypt. “I missed the plane at Manchester, took a taxi to East Midlands airport and turned up looking like a dog’s dinner. I met this woman Fiona. We just clicked and she looked after me all the way there. She was 34, a PR consultant and had gone through pretty much the same as me and she was a real inspiration. I was in the pool at the hotel and I decided I would really strip my life back. I had this plan, bought a diary. I started writing my feelings and thoughts. I found I could free my mind of all the clutter and madness. When I got home, I covered the mirrors on my wardrobes with post-its and wrote on them on all the things I was going to do, like get rid of all the possessions, stop using coke, eat healthier, get a driving test, get back to college.

IT TOOK NEARLY A YEAR BEFORE SHE COULD START TALKING ABOUT THE SEXUAL ABUSE

“I wanted to change the way I spoke to people. I was that angry, I was horrible. I was taking all my anger out on other people. I wanted to do this, not just to prove it to myself, but other people were wanting to knock me down. They only understood the old me. The more I changed, the more people felt bad about themselves and that’s when the claws come out, “look at her. Who does she think she is?”

“I did go back to college to do 3-D design. But trying to get off the coke was hell psychologically. I had to lock myself away to do it. I just went to college, went to work and came home. I had to step out of that circle and out of that life and

that was the hardest part. But I knew that none of it really meant anything to me. For everything that I had, I was never, ever happy and I had to let it all go. It was so lonely, but I thought if I can get through this loneliness, then I’ll never be lonely again.”

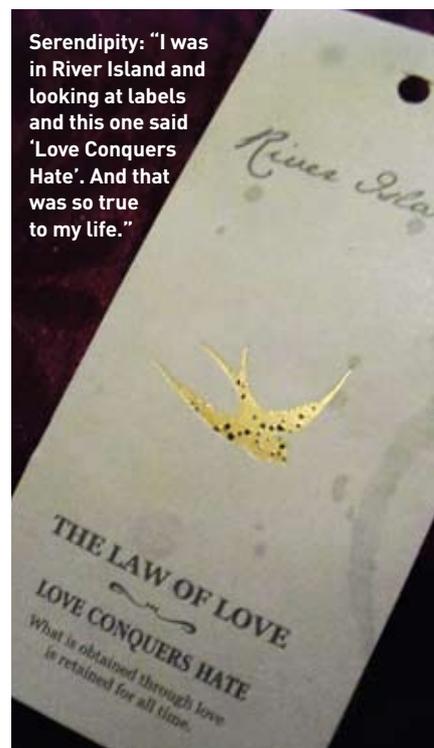
Grace lasted five months without using coke, although she was still drinking and smoking cannabis. In the meantime, she gave most of her possessions away and asked somebody to post £600 through her mum’s door. She sold her house, but after paying off her debts (the house had been re-mortgaged), as she puts it, “all the rest went up my nose”.

None of the issues she was struggling with had been dealt with and she was desperately lonely. “I knew I needed help, but I had no idea what to do. I thought you needed to go to the doctor, but I was too scared to do that.

“I started seeing a fella who wasn’t really a boyfriend, just somebody to use with. We got into a very volatile relationship and he started being violent towards me. It turned out that his brother’s girlfriend knew about The Lighthouse (since closed and divided up between Addaction and CRI). And once I was introduced to it I thought, ‘yes this is it’, I just knew.

“Finally I had support, someone to talk to, to show me the way. I knew what I had done to myself, but I didn’t have all the pieces of the jigsaw. I had bits, I had the corners. But I needed someone to help me fill in the spaces.”

Grace saw her key worker once a week and over several months, she began to work through all the problems she had, although it took nearly a year before she could start talking about the sexual abuse. “But then it was like, ‘oh my God, finally’ – and it all became so much easier to talk about everything. The genie was out the bottle and I just cried and cried. I just needed somebody to sit with me, to understand me, somebody who knew what they were talking about, to help me with all the thoughts



I was having about the life I was living. Because of the way I felt inside, I created all these problems externally.”

It’s been three years since Grace first sought help and at the time of writing, she has been completely off drink and drugs for 13 months. She is about to start the third year of an architectural design course, works as a part-time carer and has her own flat, “my own little sanctuary” well away from all the people she used to hang with.

She doesn’t have any more one-to-one sessions – “I’ve taken the armbands off and stand on my own two feet” – but still comes into the group sessions every fortnight, “really just to keep myself sharpened, to see how everybody is getting on, share a bit. It’s always good to keep your eye on the ball.

“The first eighteen months in recovery you can be very high on life or very low until you get on an even keel. I was in River Island and looking at labels and this one said ‘Love Conquers Hate’. And that was so true to my life. I had so much hate, I felt the world owed me something for robbing me of my innocence.

“But I’m not angry anymore. I like the life I have, I’m not a victim, I’m a survivor. And I just appreciate all the things that most people take for granted. Like I have my Sunday roast, *EastEnders*, washing machine going in the background. Just those little things in life make me so happy now.”