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“THIS IS NOT THE WAY WE THOUGHT OUR LIVES WOULD BE”

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Sometimes, Joanne and Guy Sinclair think the future will turn out fine.

Their 26-year-old daughter, Annie, will stay off drugs when she gets out of prison later this year. She'll find a job, go back to school, and build a career. Most important, she'll be the mother her little girl, Adriana, deserves.

But sometimes, Joanne, 59, and Guy, 64, fear the worst.

Annie will start using heroin again. She'll end up back in prison or dead. And Adriana will grow up motherless and heartbroken.

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Heroin doesn't just torture addicts. It tortures their families, too.

Mainly, though, Joanne and Guy, who've been raising Adriana by themselves since Annie was arrested last July, just focus on getting through each day.

Most mornings, Joanne leaves at 4 a.m. for her job in the bakery department of a supermarket near their home in southern Maine, so Guy, who manufactures awnings, wakes up five-year-old Adriana and gets her ready for school.

In the afternoon, Joanne finishes work in time to meet Adriana at the school bus and cook an early dinner for the family. Later, she gives Adriana a bath, does her hair, and reads her a story.

Around 6 p.m., she lets Adriana climb into bed with her, and she falls asleep to the sound of her make-believe play. Eventually, Guy scoops her up and takes her to her room.

“It's all about Adriana, and that's the way we want it to be,” says Joanne. “I'm not saying, ‘Oh my God, it's all about Adriana!’ It's all about Adriana because that's the way we want it to be and that's the way it needs to be, and as far as we're concerned she's just another one of our kids.”

At the same time, says Joanne, “the whole thing has been very surreal to me.”

“I never in a million years thought this was going to happen.”

A soccer star who lost her way

As a girl, Annie Sinclair had big dreams.

She was always the best player on her soccer team, and she thought that if she worked hard, she might someday make it to the pros.

“She was always the goal scorer, just the most dominant person on the field whenever she played,” says her older brother, Michael, who’s now a schoolteacher in Texas. He also played competitively, and they’d practice hard together in their backyard in Kittery, Maine.

“I wouldn’t take it easy on her. I would push her around, so she was tough and strong and just better and more aggressive than anyone else she played with.”

The kids also played basketball and spent long days at the beach. When they were little, Joanne stayed home with them; later, she worked in the lunchroom of their elementary school. Guy owned his own auto interiors shop, which he ran out of the first floor of their home.

“My kids were so normal; they had the most normal childhood,” Joanne says. “They were both good athletes, both pretty smart ... The kids all lived down the street from each other, and we had lots of friends, and all the parties were family parties.”

“They got read to every night and they got bathed every night and they always looked nice when they went to school and they had good food. Just really a normal, normal childhood.”

By all accounts, Annie flourished until her early teens, when her downward spiral began.

In the summer of 2003, just before she started high school and her brother left for college, her father took a job in Bath, Maine, about an hour and a half up the coast, and the family moved there.

“All I knew was Kittery,” says Annie, speaking on the phone from prison. “I had always lived in the same house, always known the same people, always gone to the same school.”

“And then we moved to Bath, and at first it was cool because I was moving and all that, but then nobody was happy in Bath. My parents weren’t; I wasn’t.” After eight months, they moved again, this time to Wells, Maine, where they stayed.

“So then I kind of started all over again,” Annie says. “And I tried; I got back into soccer and all that, but it wasn’t the same for me.”

She was also struggling with her schoolwork. She read the books she was assigned, but she had trouble remembering and understanding them.

Joanne tried reading aloud to her, but that didn’t help.

“She’d stop me and say ‘Okay, read that again.’”

Annie doesn’t remember exactly when, where, or why she first tried drugs. But by the time she was 16, she was regularly popping OxyContin with her friends. She was also skipping a lot of school, and during eleventh grade, she asked her parents if she could drop out.

“It was either she was going to drop out or she was not going to go, and we were going to live through her not going and my getting phone calls at work saying, ‘Annie didn’t show up to school,’” Joanne says.

So they let her quit.

“Sometimes I kick myself for that, except there was nothing I could have done. She was 16 years old and people forget that they can do whatever they please when it comes to school when they’re 16.”

From then on, Annie worked, but not in great jobs, and her parents were wary of the kids she was meeting.

“We knew she was doing stuff that she shouldn’t be doing, but she was also hanging around with people she shouldn’t have been hanging around with,” Guy says. “She just wasn’t grown up.”

Though she still lived at home, she kept her parents at a distance, which they tried unsuccessfully to bridge.

“You can ask questions until you’re blue in the face and , ‘No, there’s nothing wrong’; ‘No, nothing happened’; ‘No, no, no, no,’” says Joanne. “And the more you ask, the more stubborn she gets.”

Guy says, “We thought at the time, ‘You’ll work your way through this. Some people grow up a little harder than others; they learn things the hard way.’”

But by her late teenage years, Annie’s life revolved around pills, pot, and a boyfriend who was also into drugs.

Then, at 20, she found out she was pregnant.

“I was really excited because you think having a baby kind of saves things,” Annie says. “Unfortunately, that’s how I thought about it.”

“Like, ‘Okay, things are going to get better now; I’m not going to do drugs anymore; I’m going to grow up; he’s going to grow up; we’re going to be a happy family.’”

Annie got clean, but her boyfriend didn’t, so three months before her due date, she broke up with him.

“The things that were acceptable before I was pregnant weren’t acceptable to me anymore,” she says. She had a job at Dunkin’ Donuts, and she devoted the end of her pregnancy to racking up overtime.

Adriana was born healthy and beautiful on October 14, 2010, not long before Annie turned 21, and for a while, everything went great.

Annie showered her with love and attention, which delighted Joanne and Guy. When it was time for her to go back to work, they helped out by babysitting and footing the daycare bill. Eventually, she also started dating again, and they thought her new boyfriends were great.

“We thought, ‘Oh my God, it’s over,’” Joanne says.

Little by little, Annie saved up money, and in the spring of 2012, when Adriana was about a year and a half, she decided they should move out.

“She said, ‘I don’t want Adriana thinking you guys are raising her,’” Joanne remembers.

They found an apartment a few minutes away.

“And that’s when it went downhill dramatically fast,” Guy says.

“It was the most unbelievable thing I had ever heard”

Once she was on her own, Annie fell in with her old crowd again, and, as it turned out, they’d moved on to a stronger drug.

OxyContin wasn’t what it used to be. Its manufacturer had tinkered with it to make it less intoxicating, and it was harder to get and pricier than before.

Heroin, on the other hand, had grown plentiful and cheap. In no time, Annie was hooked.

She usually kept it together enough to get Adriana to daycare, but the girl’s teachers noticed that she wasn’t being tended to. Her face was sometimes dirty, her clothes unwashed.

“I had food in her house, because I bought it, but I think that toward the end they might have been living in squalor,” says Joanne. “I don’t even know. It makes me sick.”

In early 2013, Annie lost both her job and the apartment.

She and Adriana moved back in with Joanne and Guy, who quickly realized that something was wrong. Annie took Adriana out at odd hours and sometimes disappeared with her overnight. At home, she was sour and aimless.

One day, Joanne yelled at her because she wasn't out looking for a job.

"Don't worry about it!" Annie snapped, as Joanne recalls.

"I said, 'Stop saying that!' and I looked at her, and I said, 'You're high.'"

A day or two later, when Annie was in the shower, Guy decided to search her things. Inside her purse, there were needles.

"As soon as I found them, I knew this was really bad," he says.

He confronted her, but she wouldn't talk. Instead, she grabbed Adriana and drove off.

That night, they didn't come home. "I was calling the police, and I called everybody I knew," Guy says.

The next morning, a Saturday, Joanne got a call at work from the head teacher at Adriana's daycare. She'd just been to Wal-Mart and seen Annie outside panhandling. She wasn't sure if Adriana was with her or not.

"It was the most unbelievable thing I had ever heard," Joanne says, "and all I could think of was this little baby—because she was two, but still to me she was still a little baby—with her mother panhandling."

"I'm screaming. I'm screaming 'Oh my God, I can't believe this is happening to me.'"

Joanne called Guy, who got right in his car. Annie and Adriana were no longer at Wal-Mart, but, on a hunch, he drove to the trailer where Adriana's father and his brother lived. Adriana's dad had been in jail for a while, but Annie had been hanging out with his brother and his brother's girlfriend, who were both addicts.

Annie's car was parked outside.

"I just said, 'I'm not leaving this house until the baby is with me,'" Guy recalls. "And I wanted her to come too, but she refused."

Guy brought Adriana home.

"just wants to see her grandma, and she wants to take a bath," he told Joanne.

The next week, they filed for guardianship.

“We weren’t coping very well”

For the next two years, Joanne and Guy were in “a constant state of stress,” Joanne says.

There was no tug-of-war over Adriana; Annie admitted that she wasn’t fit to care for her, and she was with Joanne and Guy in probate court when they were appointed her legal guardians.

“She was totally on board because she loves Adriana,” Joanne says. “She didn’t want to put her in any danger.”

Eventually, Annie also admitted that heroin was poison, but even so, she could never quit for long.

She tried confiding in an uncle who’d had a drinking problem. She tried a 12-step group. She even tried an intensive rehab program.

Her parents supported her every step of the way, and when she was clean, she lived at home and was part of the family.

But time after time, she slid back.

“She’s such a good mother when she’s a good mother,” Joanne says. “She was very present when she was present but when she wasn’t—when she was using—it was heartbreaking.”

Guy and Joanne felt increasingly hopeless, and, increasingly, they doubted that anything they did for her even mattered.

“Annie was making her own decisions,” Guy says. “It’s kind of difficult once it’s an adult. It’s your daughter, but she’s an adult. We are literally powerless over her.”

“We can’t deal with the medical issues; we can’t deal with the legal issues; we can’t intervene in any way. We can only get custody of the child and make sure the child is okay.”

But was Adriana really okay?

Joanne agonized over whether the answer might be no, and she berated herself for not stepping in sooner.

"I would just obsess about what went on in that apartment," Joanne says. "What did she see? Was she ever hungry? Which I don't think she ever was, but I couldn't get it out of my head."

She and Guy both knew that what Adriana needed was stability, and they both did everything possible to provide it. But it was hard to maintain a routine for her when her mother kept coming and going.

Besides, childrearing was even more tiring than it had been when they were young, and back then, Joanne didn't work.

Since she had to be up so early for her bakery job, Guy took charge of Adriana at night.

"I told her at the very first, 'If you wake up and you need anything, just call me,'" Guy says. "The bedroom doors are open; she's just down the hall. She calls me and I go in and say, 'What do you need?'"

He was often in charge of her on the weekends, too, since Joanne worked then and daycare was closed.

By the summer of 2013, however, he was spent.

"I'm saying to myself, 'I'm 62 years old, I'm supposed to be slowing down and taking it easy, and I'm going the wrong way here.'" So he went part-time at the shop where he worked and started taking Social Security.

That meant, of course, that his income declined, which became a source of stress in itself—especially since there were new bills to pay.

"For a long time, we couldn't live within our means," Guy says. "We were taking money out of our savings to support our decisions."

"My savings and my IRAs and the retirement stuff that we had, that was for us to live on, not to support a child."

Early on, they were told that as the guardians of a kid who wasn't theirs, they could claim \$90 a month in federal benefits. But, says Joanne, the forms they were given proved so onerous that in the end, they just threw them out.

"I was crying," she says. "I was sitting in my nice warm house with tons of food, two nice cars to drive, and a full-time job, crying over these forms I had to fill out. And I said to Guy, 'How in God's name does anybody do this?'"

Meanwhile, the ordeal strained their marriage.

“We weren’t coping very well,” Joanne says. “I was angry, angry, angry, angry. I was angry at the whole situation, and of course I would lash out at . I’m not going to lash out at a baby because I wasn’t angry at her; I was guilt-ridden.”

They both ended up feeling alone, and there wasn’t anywhere to turn. Joanne heard about a support group for grandparents raising grandkids, but when she showed up for a meeting, no one was there.

Around town, she felt self-conscious and uncomfortable.

“I felt like people were looking at us, like they knew.”

For ages, she says, everything was bleak.

And then, in 2015, something good finally happened: Annie ended up in jail.

Getting clean, getting clear

One day in early July, Annie told her parents she was giving a friend a ride to Biddeford, a city about 20 minutes away. But by nighttime, she still wasn’t home.

At midnight, Guy finally got a text from her: She hoped he wouldn’t be mad, she wrote, but she’d actually driven to New York.

“We said, ‘The only reason she could possibly be in New York is to pick up drugs,’” Joanne recalls.

So they decided to turn her in.

“Guy said, ‘I’ve had it, I’ve had enough. She’s got to be taken off the road.’”

Guy gave the Maine State Police the license plate number of the car, which belonged to him, and told them it was being used to run drugs. Not long afterwards, Annie was pulled over, charged with trafficking, and locked up in a county jail near home.

Guy and Joanne could have bailed her out, but they decided not to. In jail, at least, she’d be sober and safe.

Over the next few weeks, she went through hell.

The first several days were the worst, Annie says, because her body was in withdrawal.

"I was throwing up. I couldn't eat. I was real, real dehydrated, so my body was cramping up. I couldn't move my arms and my legs, and my stomach was cramping up real bad, and I ended up passing out."

She was taken to a nearby hospital, where she was treated with intravenous fluids and blood pressure patches.

Soon, she was feeling better physically, but mentally, she was a wreck.

"It was terrible," she says. "My life was terrible; my life was over. I didn't have much hope."

The jail didn't have a consistent counseling program, so she was left to sort things out on her own. Once she felt up to it, she started keeping a journal, and she tried to write a page a day. For the first time in years, she read some books—mostly memoirs by people who'd beaten adversity—and was surprised to find herself enjoying them.

By fall, her head was "much clearer," she says, and she'd started to think she might have a future. As far as drugs were concerned, she resolved, she was done.

In December, she accepted a plea deal: In return for admitting she was guilty, she was sentenced to one year behind bars rather than four. Upon her release, she'll do three years of probation.

Around Christmas, she was transferred to a state prison in Windham, about 40 minutes from home, where she'll likely serve out the rest of her sentence. With good behavior, she could be home by Memorial Day.

The big question is what will happen next.

Hope and fear for tomorrow

In general, Adriana is thriving these days.

In the fall, she started pre-kindergarten at the local elementary school. She loves it, and her cognitive, social, and motor skills are developing wonderfully, her teacher has said.

Every Saturday, Guy takes her to dance class, and soon she'll start soccer, too. At home, she likes to draw, color, and make up stories about her dolls and stuffed animals.

"She plays school with them and she gets them ready to go to daycare and she gets them ready to go to Texas," Joanne says. "Everybody gets dressed up and everybody goes to school, no matter whether they're a dog or a frog or a baby."

"She is perceptive and she's smart and she's funny and she's just amazing, and we just want her to stay that way."

But of course, she misses her mother, who's never stayed away this long. She wants to know where she is, and she wants to know when she'll be back.

Again and again, Joanne and Guy tell her that Annie is "someplace learning how to make good decisions and right choices," and that as soon as they know when she'll be home, they'll say so.

But she often tries to find out more. "Where did you say you are?" she sometimes asks Annie during their regular Sunday phone call. "Because I didn't get that."

Recently, her feelings bubbled over. For an entire week in January, she sobbed from the moment she got off the school bus until it was time to get ready for bed.

"I miss my mommy!" she'd cry over and over. "I don't remember what my mommy's face looks like! I don't remember what my mommy's body looks like!"

By evening, she'd be so tired she could barely climb the stairs.

"We were just in tears all the time," says Joanne. "It was awful."

Then, "all of a sudden, it left just as soon as it came," and Adriana was her usual self.

Joanne and Guy are heartsick whenever Adriana is, and they miss Annie, too, but in many ways, their lives have improved in the eight months since she was arrested.

Not long before Annie went to jail, Joanne started taking Celexa, an antidepressant, and it has lightened her moods and her thoughts.

"It's a miracle," she says. "You will start to think about something, and you'll say, 'I'm not thinking about that right now,' and you'll actually be able not to think about it; you'll actually be able to push things out of your mind."

Besides, there's less to be anxious about now that Annie can't get ahold of drugs.

“You sleep way better at night knowing she’s in jail, which is kind of weird. I think people think that’s kind of strange unless they’ve been in the position.”

She’s less angry than she used to be, which is helping her and Guy get along better, they both say.

And she’s no longer embarrassed about the situation they’re in, because she’s realized how common it’s become. Around the country, heroin use is soaring, particularly among young people. In New England, it’s a major epidemic.

“It’s so nice to just hear you’re not alone, that we’re not freaks, that Annie’s not a freak; she’s got a problem.”

Still, Joanne says, they’re exhausted, and it’s been years since they’ve had time for themselves.

“This is not the way we thought our lives would be when I was 59 and he was 64.”

They view the future with a mix of hope and fear.

If Annie stays sober, Adriana will have a mother again. If she doesn’t, they could all lose her for good.

Guy visits her weekly, and Joanne talks to her a few times a week. Slowly, they say, the “old Annie” has resurfaced.

“I’m like, ‘Oh my God, she’s coming back,’” Joanne says.

Even though she still hasn’t had access to counseling, she’s thinking through her past, present, and future in a careful, mature way, Joanne says. She’s asking herself and her parents, “How did I end up like this?” “Why did this happen to me and not Michael?” “How can I learn to say no?”

“As far as she’s concerned right now, this is never happening again. She’s done; this is not the life for her; these people are animals ... and she just wants to get out and be normal.”

For the first time in more than a decade, she’s interested in building a career, and, with Guy, she’s been brainstorming about what it might look like.

Recently, Guy heard about a yearlong program at their local community college that prepares its students to be bakers and pastry chefs, and when he told Annie about it, she got really excited.

“That’s something that I think that she will just be good at,” Joanne says. “Guy said, ‘Just don’t worry about it; when you get out we’re going to help you, you’re going to have a free place to live and you’ve just got to get your life together.’”

And this time around, her parents won’t be the only ones trying to keep her on track. Probation, Joanne says, could be Annie’s “saving grace.”

She’ll have to report weekly to an officer for a meeting and a drug test, and she’ll also likely be ordered into counseling. “It’s really pretty strict, and I think she’s a little relieved .”

“She can’t screw up, because as soon as she screws up she’s right in jail.”

But Joanne and Guy know that everything could fall apart again. Once you’re an addict, you have a chronic brain disease, and no matter how hard Annie tries to stay clean, she could fail.

“Because it’s heroin, because it’s addiction, because of what it is, I can’t live my life saying, ‘With any luck, things will be better;’” Guy says. “I have to say what is the reality of it.”

“I don’t know of a heroin addict who lives a normal life.”

“I just have high, high hopes,” Joanne says. “ I kind of hate to because every time I think everything is going well, I get kicked in the stomach.”

I published this story on February 19, 2016. In early 2018, I got back in touch with the Sinclairs to find out how they were doing. Here’s what I learned:

Annie was released from prison in May 2016. Though she relapsed in the fall and was sent to jail for violating her probation, in early 2017 she was freed again on the condition that she enter an intensive outpatient treatment program run by the York County Superior Court.

She returned home and has been clean ever since, she says.

She met a nice single dad in the program, John, and soon, they were in a serious relationship. In the summer of 2017, John and his young son moved to an apartment down the road from the Sinclairs’ house.

By this time, Annie and John were expecting a baby together. On February 15, 2018, she gave birth to a daughter, Gemma.

With Joanne and Guy's support, Annie, who's now 28, will seek to regain custody of Adriana sometime in the next few months, once she's graduated from the treatment program. Later, after they've saved up some money, Annie and John will set up a household for their family of five.

Since 2011, about 100 of Annie's friends and acquaintances have died from overdosing on heroin and other opiates, she says. Some of them were people she used with; others were folks she met in prison; still others were classmates of hers in the treatment program who, by all appearances, had been doing just fine.

She credits her parents with her success.

"I was lucky because I had parents that never gave up. I'm sure there were tons of times when they were just wanting to give up and let what was going to happen, happen. But they never did."

"And they had Adriana, and they took care of Adriana. There's a lot of people like me whose parents never would have done that, and their kids end up in the foster system, and they never see their kids again."

If Annie had lost Adriana to foster care, she might not have had the will to get clean, she says.

"Because I always had that to look forward to. And I always knew that my kid was at home in her bed, safe, with my parents, who loved her."

"I was lucky."
