

ROCKBOTTOM REDEMPTION

NICHOLAS INGEL WAS ONCE A DRUNK AT

DEATH'S DOOR.

FACED WITH AN ULTIMATUM OF CLEAN UP OR END
IT ALL, HE CONQUERED HIS CRIPPLING

ALCOHOL ADDICTION

WITH ONE SIMPLE RULE: SWEAT IT OUT.
THIS IS HIS STORY OF RELAPSE, RECOVERY, REHAB
AND RESURRECTION – AND HOW HE FOUND
SANCTUARY WHEN SUICIDE WAS ONCE HIS ONLY
WAY OUT. NOW, HE'S HELPING OTHER ADDICTS
SQUARE UP TO THEIR DEMONS, TEACHING THEM
HOW TO PUT NEGATIVE ENERGY TO POSITIVE USE.





TWO OPTIONS. THAT'S WHAT I HAD. IT WAS either admit I was an alcoholic or go home, rest the tip of the pistol on my lips and finally pull the trigger. "Do you have a drinking problem?" my boss asked again. I was sitting in his office, my giant frame barely fitting into the chair. My eyes were bloodshot and I was sweating. I could smell the pints I'd downed the night before wafting from me - the fumes were sweet, sickly, familiar. I looked up, and I had trouble meeting his eyes. To see the concern, to see the judgement, to admit that I was throwing it all away. And to know, that unless I said "yes" right now, I would end it all - a slow liquid suicide or the sharp leaden finality of gunfire. "I have a problem," I said. "Yes, I have a big problem."

► Ingal at work at Emat Gyms - named after the Hebrew word for truth.

REALITY

At that point my life, drinking wasn't just habitual; it was the only way I believed I could exist. Does that sound melodramatic? Maybe. But it was true. To understand that, hit rewind for a second. Hit rewind until you're watching a little boy, no older than four, sitting on the slatted stairs of his parents A-frame home in Hillcrest. Watch him playing with his toys, idly knocking wooden blocks between the gaps in the steps, pushing matchbox cars through imagined garages, and adding muffled sound effects. *Vroom. Pew. BANG!*

That's a gunshot from upstairs, from the office my stepfather disappears to after the chaotic, drug-fuelled screaming matches with his mother. And that sound, it sends a jolt through this little child - afterwards I sit there dumbstruck, frozen in time.

And the blocks, and plastic army men, lie there abandoned underneath shaking, tiny fingers. That was the day my stepfather killed himself. And the day my mother took command of our family unit and dragged us to Cape Town.

She was a drug addict. There's no other way to put it. There wasn't a moment that I can remember where she wasn't hopped up on prescription medication. It made her manic; it made her unpredictable. When you're a kid, that puts you on edge.

One day she'd plant kisses on our cheeks. The next she'd scream at us until her face was a violent red, and she'd storm out and disappear without another word.

I felt like I was doing something wrong, that I'd driven her into these crazed fits. That this gloom that hung over our family was on my shoulders, it was my design. It was why, when she dropped me off to spend the night with her friends and those same friends raped me, over and over again, I would tell myself: "You deserve this." I was seven when I hit breaking point. A skinny, bobble-headed kid standing by a moonlit window in a stranger's home. I think that was the day I decided I was dead inside.

RELAPSE

When my mother died - it only surfaced much later that she had killed herself - you would think I'd feel relieved. But instead I sunk deeper into my own malaise. I was 15, and had already dabbled with alcohol - a glass of red at a bar mitzvah, a rush of fluid that left me dizzy and distracted - and, more importantly, less sore.

I remember we were on holiday with my dad in Margate when he got the call. Driving home felt like a funeral march, the tarmac seemed to stretch hopelessly into the infinite gloom.

After the memorial, my grandparents rushed to come look after us, and we crammed ourselves into their holiday apartment in Cape Town. For the first time in my life there were rules; there was a routine, there were boundaries.

I focused on finishing school, working out and riding out those dark feelings. There was a certain degree of accountability, but none of it

made me happy. When I finished matric I opted to swap out the haunted corners of Cape Town for new terrain and headed back to Joburg. But instead of finding an escape, I discovered a new high and hit a new low.

I kickstarted a career in insurance and complemented it with copious drinking. Within weeks I was the definition of a functioning alcoholic - a hobby I had perfected in my final years of high school. And just as easily as I had alienated anything resembling a friend in those dog days, I slipped into the fold of committed boozers, the type of guys who clock into the bar at 6am and leave when the watering hole, or their wallet, has run dry.

I climbed the job ladder and spent my downtime chilling on the lowest rung. And yeah, I was able to hide my drinking, for a while. It's not that I really cared what people thought, but in the few sober moments I had I was wracked by guilt.

I would still work hard, I would still train hard - and then I managed to sink even lower.

ROCK BOTTOM

In 1995 I decided to get clean. I was dating an amazing woman, honestly, she was perfect - and she came from a great family. But she had asked me to stop drinking, and in a day I had cut out the liquor. We got engaged, and then I was hit with a stark realisation that I couldn't do this - that I was going to cave and drag her down with me. And I ended it. I walked straight into the cheapest bar I could find and placed my first order for the evening.

Because, when you're sitting on that stool, alone, with a drink in your hands - there's no one else you can hurt but yourself.

That was the moment I dropped all pretence. From there, that moment I could grab my first drink, take a sip and wipe the foam off of my top lip, and feel that flood of relief, I saw that with razor-sharp focus.

I would schedule meetings at places I know I could order a brew or two. I would clock off early to get an early start on the only real passion I had. On 9/11, after everyone cancelled their meetings and turned on the news, I celebrated, because I could get drunk without worrying about coming back to the office.

I was seriously stuffed.

Day in and day out, it was my creativity, my instinct for survival, that kept me in a job. Subconsciously I knew that my boss and my colleagues were talking about me. I would come in with bloodshot eyes and stinking of stale alcohol - you know, the kind of smell you can never wash off, even if you spend a day in a sauna.

I had put on so much weight that I struggled to heave myself around. I was obese, I was washed out, but in my mind I was still coping. I think I blocked out those nights twirling my gun around in my hands in a drunken haze, or the moments I considered swinging my car into oncoming traffic and ending it all.

I blocked it out because if I killed myself, well, I wouldn't be able to have another drink.



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RECOVERY

"Do you have a drinking problem?" That's what my boss asked me, and I said yes.

Because I knew I did, and the guilty part of me could not cope with the concern in his eyes, or the stern commanding finality of his question. There was only one right answer here, and for the first time in my life I didn't pick the option marked "abject misery".

That was 2006, the year I started turning things around. Here's where we stop hitting rewind, and I start hitting fast-forward, because my recovery was easy. Well, easy compared to what I've seen other guys go through. Once I'd admitted that I had a problem, and surrendered myself to the staff and experts at the outpatient facility, everything fell into place.

For the first time in my life, I had a rulebook.

But it's what followed that truly tested me. Because for my whole life I had sacrificed who I was, and I had to rediscover that while carrying the burden of a mountain of debt and a backlog of painful memories.

I returned to my old insurance company and my job led me to Cape Town in the midst of the financial crisis. Long story short: that didn't work out. I wasn't earning a single cent, and the bills were piling up. I was forced to leave behind my two-bedroom home for a one-room rental, scrounging expired food items from the local Spar.

The fat melted off of me, but I was losing focus. And I became fearful that the machine of anxiety would swallow me up and dump me back into a solitary bar stool. I borrowed R2 000, threw all my meagre belongings into my over-priced BMW and high-tailed it for Joburg.

In those dark days, of finding my feet and dealing with the world's hazards stone-cold sober, I survived because of the amazing people who rallied around me. One friend lent me an apartment to call home. I slept on the floor, in an empty room devoid of furniture, but it left me with cash to spare to feed myself. And another mate found set me up with a job.

But life isn't just about survival, it's about finding something that fuels your passion, and for me that became fitness.

REDEMPTION

You know that you can fight your cravings with a push-up? Just hold the most difficult position in that move and that beer or burger won't look as good anymore. A big part of my recovery was filling the giant void left behind by my shackled drinking problem.

I started working out every day. Without a cent to my name, I was limited to bodyweight training, using whatever debris - whether it was a rock or a sandbag - that I could find lying around to bolster my routines.

Soon, I was training the older ladies in my block of flats. They paid about fifty bucks for a session, but back then the money didn't matter - it felt good to help them improve. I was imparting knowledge I'd picked up in my anxious, bored moments - where the only distraction

"LIFE ISN'T ABOUT SURVIVING. IT'S ABOUT FINDING SOMETHING THAT FUELS YOUR PASSION - AND FOR ME, THAT BECAME FITNESS."

was a magazine, like this one. Those bulletins, those little tidbits of info, I memorised them and they my mantra: take the stairs, not the escalator, boost your happiness with a quick 10-minute sprint.

And you know what? It worked.

As my training methods advanced, so did interest in my fledgling business. Within months I was teaching a class inside a friend's private dojo. From there, my bodyweight fitness programme lined me up with corporate training gigs, and today, that's still where I earn most of my keep. But there was still something missing: I believed I could make a real difference, help out other guys like myself.

You see, I believe that staying active, throwing your body at training, can save an addict's life. It worked for me - it filled those dark, existentially ambiguous hours with an instantly tangible method of improving myself.

That's how Emet Gyms was born. It's named after the Hebrew word for *truth*, which resonated with me. I was able to turn myself around - to not only grow emotionally, and psychologically stronger, but to harness that addictive personality, that side of me that would do anything for a fix, and push myself to test my body and improve my strength.

In this new space, I work with a lot of addicts. There are guys who will relapse, there are guys who have stuffed up their lives even worse than I did. But I want to show them they can turn it around. When they're struggling through a workout, I turn to them and say: "Think of the effort you put into your last binge, think of how far you went to get that fix, now push yourself that hard, right here, right now, with this."

I'm still processing the aftermath of a life spent in a drunken haze. I'm still working through the pain and deciphering suppressed memories. Every day there is a new discovery, a shadow of myself that I have to stand up against. But having this outlet, being able to go into a room and just work myself into a sweat, until my legs and arms burn under the weight of a barbell - that's where I find sanctuary. That's where I find my redemption.

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KILL YOUR CRAVINGS

The secret to ditching the cigs or cutting out junk food? Next time the urge hits, assume these positions

Forward Leaning Rest

Nic Ingel says this is the toughest of his gym's recovery holds (that also means it's the most effective). It's basically the apex of the push-up position. Keep your feet close together, your body in a straight line from your heels through to your hips to the shoulders, and your hands shoulder-width apart. "Now you're engaging every part of your body," he says. "Focus all your concentration on maintaining good form." The benefits: you're swapping out that moaning voice in your head - that

always seems to be begging for another chocolate bar from the vending machine - with a whole lot of "healthy noise".

Squat Parallel Hold

Stand with your feet just over shoulder-width apart and your toes pointing slightly outwards. Start squatting by dipping your hips back, and keep moving your butt down until it's parallel with the ground. Hold this position until you start shaking, then stand up for a breather. Still craving a smoke? Hunker down until the craving is gone, says Ingel.

Seated Leg Extension

This is the "easiest" of the three holds, but it will require you to be somewhere you can sit with your legs extended, says Ingel. Sit flat on your butt with your legs stretched in front of you and your body perpendicular to the ground. Now, lean back very slightly and place your hands on the ground behind you, arms straight and elbows locked. Part your feet and angle your toes towards your knees. Raise your legs just off the ground and hold this position.

Your Total-Body Rehab

Neglected your fitness? All you need to get back into fighting shape is your body, a few minutes and trainer Nic Ingel's ultimate routine

A. THE WARM-UP

These moves will warm up every part of your body and start building a stronger core and durable spine. Do three sets of this circuit, with a 60-second rest between each set.

- 1 Push-Ups x10
- 2 Squats x10
- 3 Hip Extensions x10
- 4 Leg Extensions x10

B. THE GET DOWN

The keyword in this part of the workout is "ladder". If you see it, that means you keep adding reps until failure. Then take a two-minute breather between each set.



5 Mountain Climber & Push-Up Ladder

Begin with 10 Mountain Climber reps followed by a single push-up, then repeat, adding an extra push-up each time until you have to drop your knees. Well done, that's one set. Complete three sets.



6 Squat & Parallel Hold Breathing Ladder

Drop into the squat position, with your thighs parallel to the ground and hold the position for one breath. Now do two squats and hold the position for two breaths. Continue until you can no longer hold the position. Set done. Do two more.



7 Seated Scissor Kicks & Leg Extension Ladder

Sit with your legs out straight in front of you and sit slightly back. Now, with your hands on the ground and your arms locked do 10 scissor kicks followed by one leg extension. Keep going, adding an extra extension each round until failure. That's a set, rest for two minutes and do two more.

C. THE FINISHER

Don't lose focus, here's where the real hardwork begins.

LEAVE NOTHING IN THE TANK:

Wind down your workout with three rounds of Planks and Supermans, holding both positions until failure. Get up, stretch and go cool off.



8 Elbow Ups & Burpee Ladder

Do 10 elbow ups followed by a single burpee, adding a burpee each round until you've completed 100 elbow ups and 55 burpees.



9 Split Jumps & Squat Ladder

Do 10 split jumps followed by a single squat, adding a squat each round until you've completed 100 split jumps and 10 squats.