



'I learned to be a sex addict – from my mother'

IN JUNE 2005, I WENT TO MY FIRST EVER MEETING FOR LOVE AND SEX ADDICTS. I reassured myself that I didn't belong there – on the outside, I was an academic with a successful career and a lovely home. But I was also 41, single and desperate to change my life. I sat and listened, trying not to associate myself with the woman talking about having sex in an alleyway with a stranger. One man described how he crept away from his fiancée's bed at night to cruise porn sites. His voice crumbled as he said he was terrified he'd lose her. As I sat there, I started to shake. I belonged here after all.

Like me, these people couldn't stop what they were doing, even when it hurt them. They'd lost jobs, homes, marriages. So had I. Forget everything you'd imagine about a sex addict: I was a straight-A student and only lost my virginity at university. Back then, I was just like any other student, experimenting. But in my final year, I fell hard for a man for the first time. We dated, slept together, and then he told me he didn't want to see me. That was the moment I fell in love, and it took me months to get over it. My friends begged me to forget about him, but most women can empathise: the moment a man pushes us away, we cling on harder.

My twenties were a whirl of one-night-stands. As a freelance journalist, my life lent itself to crazy nights out and lost weekends. Ladette culture was at its zenith – we were liberated, we were feminists, we could break the mould. I already knew that I had a taste for danger. My friend Stasia was my partner in crime, but we never went for the same guys. She called my taste in men "shiny penny syndrome" – it was danger and drama that turned me on. I just thought I was adventurous,

flying the flag for independent women, striving against the conventions of settling down. My childhood had been anything but traditional: my dad left when I was four, and my mum was a party girl. I spent years travelling around with her, as her drinking spiralled out of control.

That's when it hit me. I knew someone else belonged in this room: my mother. She was the original love junkie. She'd pick up men in bars then bring them home. First I would hear whispers, then laughter. A bed creaking. I tried to drown out the sounds with my radio. She'd pick up men easily, but spend months getting over them – addicted to the highs and lows. I don't know if she ever got over my father and I never got to ask her. She hung herself in 1977, on New Year's Eve.

When I was younger, she would take me to bars and leave me doodling on beer mats while she flirted with men. She had a penchant for men who treated her badly. It's hard to believe, but Mum was a blue-blood Boston debutante, educated and beautiful. She lost custody of me when I was 12, and I was taken into care. But ▶

For years, writer **Rachel Resnick** (right) thought her wild love life just proved how carefree and bohemian she was. It was only recently that she realised she'd been in the grips of a serious sex addiction for her entire life – and that her mother may have been to blame...

MAIN PHOTO: DARCY HEMPLEY





Top left: Rachel with three different lovers in the '80s. Clockwise from above left: with one of her many exes; at her school prom; another ex; getting a tattoo in Tahiti; with a friend in LA; with more exes





Rachel's mum (left) was the 'original love junkie'. Right: a young Rachel with her dad. Far right: Rachel's friends have helped her recover from her sex addiction



far from seeing this as tragic, I always assumed it had been the making of me. I seemed to thrive on change: at each different school I went to, I made my mark in a different way. Little did I know that those years with Mum would become a destructive blueprint for the next 20 years.

'As an adult, I was certain I was in control. After all, I didn't get wasted on drugs or drink. But I never went home alone – flirting with men was what raised my heart rate. What I hadn't noticed was that my pulling buddies were vanishing – they were meeting Mr Right and settling down, while I was still going for men who were patently not husband material. When I was 31, I met Eddie. He was the archetypal "tortured artist", a painter with a drug habit who lived with his ex and daughter, because it was "convenient". My friends would have run a mile from such an unsuitable, unavailable man. But this is what reeled me in. Our two-year relationship was as destructive as it was passionate, from having threesomes to letting men watch us have sex. I was desperate to live up to his image of me as a free spirit and did anything to keep him.

'When things with Eddie came to an end, I numbed the pain with a string of sexual encounters. Falling in "love" gave me a jolt. Arousal became my chemical fix. I've lost count of how many men I had sex with – it was in the hundreds. I was in an altered state, drugged on "love" and hooked on arousal. There was a woman, Ivana, who I met at a yoga class and had a three-way relationship with. There was Winchester, a gorgeous dancer who wrote me poetry but forgot my birthday. And there are the ones whose names I can't remember – many are simply "boy on the hill after party" or "man at bar". Amazingly, I didn't see anything unusual about it. I relished the fact that I was "the wild one". I told myself that my friends got a thrill from hearing my crazy stories, as they'd turned "square"

and had settled into a sexless existence with some dull man. But things changed when I turned 40 – the friends who cared weren't laughing any more. They dared to wonder out loud how I could be so independent, and yet put up with so many controlling and abusive men. I'd bemoan the fact that I hadn't met Mr Right yet – I really thought it was just bad luck that I hadn't found him at 3am in a late-night drinking den.

'The turning point came when I was 41. I got pregnant by Spencer, who I'd met on a dating website and fallen for (despite the fact that his nickname for me was "Tits" and he'd sent me a list of flaws to work on if our relationship was to work). I realised that this was my last chance to have a baby and decided Spencer was The One. But at six weeks, I miscarried. I was devastated – it finally dawned on me that I *did* want all that stuff, a home, a family. Spencer reacted by breaking up with me. I reacted by offering blow jobs to strangers at night, and constantly calling Spencer by day. One afternoon I was on the motorway, dialing his number, when I nearly smashed into a car and veered off the road. I phoned a friend, crying, "I could have killed someone." She said, "This isn't normal, something's wrong." It was the first time I really heard those words. She explained that there are 12-step programs for people who have problems with sex and love.

'Listening to the people in that room, I realised how much I'd missed out on because of this addiction. For decades, I'd avoided getting married and having a family by choosing men who were unavailable, cold, critical, degrading. Sweet men asked me out, I turned them down, thinking they were boring. I'd lost the chance to have children, I had no savings, no partner. I had spent years trying to avoid dealing with issues surrounding my mum's death, and also her life, and had been using the thrill of sex to blot it all out. After that first meeting for love addicts, I swore off

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any contact with men and got a sponsor, someone to call in my weaker moments. Then a brutal physical withdrawal kicked in. I experienced all the symptoms of cold turkey: extreme anxiety, nausea, insomnia, sexual dreams, severe depression. It was one of the toughest times of my life, but for the next two and half years, I threw myself into work and, by being celibate, managed to examine my life in a way I'd never done before. I learnt that I was addicted to a process, shooting up on the high that each new encounter gave me. This was Mum's pattern, and I was repeating it. I wondered whether, towards the end, she was trying to figure out her struggles with men. She had started coming to terms with the fact that her behaviour had probably affected me. Before she died, Mum phoned me to ask how I was. I said, "I'm fine. I won the spelling competition, I have great friends, I'm doing well at school." She said, "That's wonderful, Rachel," adding, "But I know you're messed up inside."

'Today, I'm finally ready to date again – looking for the sort of man I would have dismissed as "safe" and "boring" just a few years ago. Sadly, I now know I won't have my own children. It's because of my own mother that I've remained childless but, in a way, I'm glad I didn't have children at a time when I could have passed on a dangerous legacy like Mum did to me.' ■ *Love Junkie by Rachel Resnick (£10.99, Bloomsbury) is out now*