

## Chicago heroin scene [Article 'Utmost Bliss' - Chicago Tribune 2-26-2006]

### 'Utmost Bliss'

To troubled youths like Nate Korbal, heroin can seem like the perfect drug: cheap, plentiful and a sure way to tame their demons. Then it becomes a demon. Then they do.

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Nate Korbal wanted to die. Heavy drinking and pot smoking hadn't made him feel any better about being a 17-year-old misfit in Hinckley, a small town 50 miles west of Chicago. He was bored with school, angry with his parents, exhausted by life itself. Late one spring night in 2002, after leaving his dismal part-time job at a discount clothing store, he drunkenly confided his misery to a friend. The friend suggested a way out. "You can try this," he said, shaking an inch-long line of powder onto a CD case. "It's like dying."

The powder, white as flour and glinting with silvery specks, was heroin, a drug that over the last 10 years has grown from a novelty to a plague in suburban Chicago. The young especially are drawn to its cheap price, its easy availability and its reputation as the atom bomb of narcotics.

"It's a numbing drug but it makes you feel like a million dollars," says a 23-year-old addict from Bolingbrook, jittery and sweating, craving the bag of dope he drove to the West Side to buy. "You do it and you get a rush-you feel good, your body's numb, you get no aches and pains. You're in a state where nothing bothers you."

But the pleasure, he adds, comes at a price: "It basically turns you to do evil things. It turned me to do things I never thought I'd do."

Nate Korbal knew nothing of heroin's fearsome power when he leaned down for his first taste, but he would learn soon enough. As he tumbled from depressed teen to desperate junkie, he would see that his friend's nihilistic boast was the truth, as cold and hard as a tombstone: Getting hooked on heroin was like dying.

He just wouldn't be the only victim.

Not long after the Korbal family moved from Woodridge to Hinckley, seeking a tranquil life among the cornfields, Nate's father, Jim, ran an errand to the local hardware store. When he asked for help, the old-timer behind the counter eyed him warily.

“You live in town?” the man said.

That frosty greeting set the tone for the distance the Korbals would always feel in Hinckley. Nate seemed especially out of place, a punk-rock fan among sports-mad classmates. He was thin and pale, his head crowned with a shock of coarse brown hair, his eyes rimmed with dark half-moons. He often sat alone at lunchtime, and more than once saw his textbooks tossed into a urinal.

Home offered little relief. His father was an auto mechanic with a stern code of discipline, and he had high expectations of Nate and his younger sister Ashley. When they weren't met, he delivered high-volume tongue-lashings that could reduce the children to sobs.

Nate found one refuge in music, teaching himself to play guitar and drums. He found the other in his parents' garage one sunny summer day before the 8th grade.

Neither Jim nor his wife Kathy drank much, wary of the alcoholism that afflicted both sides of the family, so gifts of beer and wine were stored away and forgotten. Nate drained three dusty bottles of Killian's Irish Red and felt a merciful relaxation. He walked back into the house utterly changed.

By his junior year in high school, he was hanging with an older crowd, drinking on weekends and smoking marijuana every day. When the booze and the pot lost their punch, he started looking for something stronger, and the search led him to heroin.

Users of the drug experience its high differently. Some describe it as a deceptively subtle calm, so modest you don't realize you're hooked until the morning you wake up retching. Others say it is an orgasmic rush that surpasses all hyperbole.

“I just remember doing it on the kitchen table and being blown away,” says Kelley Capps, 21, an ex-user from Lemont who tried heroin after a high school boyfriend left her to chase the drug. “I never even knew a person could feel like that. Then I totally understood why he chose it over me.”

The first thing Nate felt upon snorting that late-night line was a strangely satisfying burn in his nasal passages. His eyes watered and a bitter taste perched in the back of his throat. Then slowly, a deep, deadening pleasure washed through him. It was euphoria far beyond anything he had ever experienced. It was exactly what he had been looking for.

He left his friend's place and came home to a silent house. He went to his bedroom and picked at the strings of his guitar, watching the TV Guide channel scroll mutely past as he wrote a song:

Sick to my stomach,  
aching with no pain ... what is this? Utmost Bliss, utmost bliss  
Like walking through the

black hole, if it was there why wouldn't I go, finding all I want to see, What's deep inside of me

Within a month he was using every day.

Officials with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration say that, until the mid-1980s, heroin in the Chicago area was almost exclusively a city problem. A South Side crime family brought it in from Mexico, selling it at such a low strength that the only way to feel its effects was to shoot up.

When federal prosecutors put the family out of business in 1986, criminal organizations from Colombia and Nigeria filled the smuggling void and street gangs took over retail sales. The new competition caused purity levels to soar from 2 percent to more than 20 percent.

Suddenly, you didn't need a hypodermic needle to sample heroin's fabled blast-snorting worked just fine. For suburban kids bored with pot, acid and Ecstasy, it seemed a risk-free way to test-drive the ultimate rock 'n' roll drug.

Plus, it was cheap-a single dose cost \$10 and could keep a novice user high all day-and it was easy to get. Dozens of dealers offered curbside service just off Interstate 290.

The trickle of suburban users became a surge: Nearly 6,000 were hospitalized because of the drug in 2004, a three-fold increase since 1995. Over the last five years, Chicago police have nearly doubled their arrests of heroin buyers coming from suburban Cook and the collar counties.

Nate's friend introduced him to the dope spots of the West Side, and soon he was going on his own, sprinting to his car after his last class to beat the afternoon traffic. He left the expressway at Cicero Avenue, drove past storefront churches and fish joints, hung a left onto his favored side street and circled the block, checking for cops. Then he rolled slowly past the hard-eyed kids on the corner, listening for the shout:

“Yo, yo, yo-rocks and blows!”

Nate handed over his cash and got his blows-crumpled tinfoil packets half the size of matchbooks with a thimbleful of powder inside. Still on the lookout for police, he spent a nervous five minutes getting back to the interstate, inhaling a bag the instant he arrived. He felt himself melt into a honeyed dreamland and steered lazily back home.

AT THE START of Nate's senior year, a girl in study hall noticed him sweating and trembling and asked what was wrong. He flipped open the book he was reading to a section on opiate withdrawal. “That's what I'm going through,” he said.

Heroin mimics the brain's endorphins, naturally occurring chemicals that crank up pleasure and block pain, and over time brain cells come to depend on this artificial

stimulation. Take it away and the neural circuitry goes haywire, causing muscle and bone pain, vomiting and diarrhea, insomnia, cold flashes and other torments for days until the brain can readjust. Many addicts say they keep using just to avoid the crash.

Withdrawal is the clearest possible sign that a person is hooked, and Nate was there after four months. He was snorting \$50 worth of heroin a day, and pushing clothing racks at Marshalls wasn't paying enough to cover his habit. So he emptied his bank account of \$1,700. Then he began to steal.

He found the combination to his parents' safe and took money reserved for his grandfather's nursing home care, telling himself he would pay it back. He sold the family's CDs and DVDs at a used-record store in Naperville. He pawned the old stereo equipment his dad had stored in a crawl space.

His parents didn't notice the thefts at first, but they knew something was wrong. Nate had become more sullen and withdrawn than ever, spending endless, blank-faced hours in the basement playing video games. A mild rebuke could send him into a rage.

Yet for every strange sign, Nate had an excuse. When he seemed unusually sleepy, he said he was tired from working late. When he habitually rubbed his eyes, he blamed allergies. When he put 3,000 miles on his car in a month, he said he had been driving his buddies around.

Jim and Kathy believed their son, thinking his bad behavior was just teenage rebellion. Maybe he was drinking, or at worst smoking pot. But one night in November 2002, as Jim was storming about his son's lousy attitude, he asked his 15-year-old daughter, Ashley, what was wrong with Nate, not really expecting an answer. Months earlier, when Nate had just begun using heroin, Ashley had heard snorting sounds coming from behind his door. She knew her brother was into drugs—she frequently smoked pot with him—and she pestered him for an explanation until he came clean.

Ashley was disturbed but agreed to guard Nate's secret, keeping her promise even when he stole from her, even when she stayed up nights to make sure he kept breathing. She was growing angrier and more worried, though, so with the opening provided by her father, she murmured: "I think he's doing drugs."

Jim flew to his son's bedroom and tore it apart, unearthing empty wine and liquor bottles—Nate drank to ease withdrawal pains—along with receipts from Chicago pawnshops, cut-up drinking straws and bits of tinfoil. He was still scouring the clutter when Nate appeared in the doorway.

The shouting that followed roused Kathy from the basement, and when she came upstairs, Nate made his terrible confession: "Mom, I've been using heroin."

Kathy's heart dropped to her stomach. She had seen addicts firsthand when she was growing up in Franklin Park, and she had always considered them pitiful, suicidal fools. How could her son be one of them?

The moment was even worse for Jim, whose fear and humiliation mixed with total helplessness. He was a mechanic, trained to solve problems. Now he faced a crisis he didn't understand—and couldn't begin to fix.

IT'S A CENTRAL AXIOM in recovery that an addict must “hit bottom”—become so disgusted with his own behavior that he summons the will to seek help. When his parents discovered his heroin use, Nate hadn't found the bottom. He wasn't even looking.

He quit work, blew off treatment arranged by his mother and continued to steal. In May 2003, after his parents gave him an ultimatum to get clean or get out, he left, marking the departure with a single word scrawled in red on his bedroom calendar: “Liberation!”

He slept at the homes of friends and relatives, even in a girlfriend's car. Despite losing weight and wearing filthy clothes for a week at a time, the thrills of the drug culture tingled in his blood. As his friend Adam Abell would observe: “He looked like he was getting sucked into it, and it didn't seem like he minded.”

Nate, however, wasn't eager to rough it during the winter, so he returned home in November 2003, telling his parents he was serious about recovery. They believed him. Jim even bought Nate an ancient Buick Century so he could get a job delivering pizzas.

The homecoming lasted for only six weeks, until Nate was pulled over during an after-work drug run. He frantically tried to swallow three bags of heroin but coughed up the last one. Police towed the Buick and put Nate in jail overnight.

He had been gone a few days when an impound notice arrived in the Korbals' mailbox. Jim paid \$1,200 to get the car back, more than it was worth. Then he changed the locks on the house and hardened his heart. He didn't feel like a parent anymore—he felt like a chump. He vowed never to be suckered again.

Realizing he couldn't go home after his arrest, Nate found a place to stay just down the road from Hinckley Elementary School. It was a battered white home nicknamed “the Trainspotting House,” a reference to a film about hard-bitten drug addicts. It was there, living with three fellow users, that Nate began to shoot up.

The addicts pursued money and drugs with a single-minded recklessness. They cheated college kids by cutting paper plates into tiny squares and passing them off as tabs of LSD. They charmed their way into the bathrooms of strangers to ransack their medicine cabinets. They even ripped off dealers with fake money produced on a computer.

It got so crazy that from time to time Nate attempted to quit, getting through withdrawal with pot and alcohol. On Father's Day 2004, he had been off heroin for 20 days when he paid an unexpected visit to his family, appearing on the deck as Jim stoked the barbecue grill. It was a clumsy first attempt at an apology.

“Hey Daddy-O,” Nate said, smiling. “I just wanted to say hello.”

Jim had not seen Nate since the arrest, but the months had not softened his sense of betrayal. He took his son's sudden appearance as a provocation. Was he supposed to just forget everything Nate had done?

"You know what, don't even bother," Jim snapped. "Do me a favor and get the . . . out of here."

Nate turned and left. "The hell with this," he thought, and caught a ride into the city. A month later, his habit was raging as hotly as ever. After he consumed four bags of heroin and a dozen drinks during a party, his friend Ryan Hummell found him in the bathroom vomiting uncontrollably, his skin scalding to the touch.

He recovered, but Hummell, who had allowed Nate to live with him, ordered him to seek help. Nate half-heartedly inquired at a few local recovery centers, but when he learned that it would take six months or longer to get in, he stopped calling.

It's a common setback for addicts. They often need halfway houses or residential treatment where they can get round-the-clock support. Yet because demand is far larger than supply, even the affluent can have trouble finding an open bed.

Dennis Sanello, a 19-year-old from Geneva whose heroin-fueled thievery had gotten him kicked out of his home, applied for a spot at an Elgin halfway house last September, only to find himself at the end of a long waiting list. He had no choice but to return to his rented room in Maywood, not far from the dope spots he had patronized since the age of 15.

"It's discouraging," he said, shrunken with defeat inside his baggy jeans and hooded sweatshirt. "I was looking forward to not having to live where I'm living because it's not fun. I'm not going to give up, but you get excited and then it falls apart."

Some leave the state in search of treatment, and that is what Nate's mother, Kathy, finally decided to try. Her aunt, who lives in Georgia, offered to pick up the \$15,000 tab for a facility there, so Kathy tracked down her son, took him to an Arby's and laid out the proposal.

Kathy had taken pity on Nate during his exiles, buying him an occasional lunch or pack of cigarettes, washing his clothes when Jim wasn't home. She labeled his addiction The Beast and thought of him as its near-helpless prisoner. But as Kathy and her son ate roast beef sandwiches in the parking lot, she told him he had reached his last chance.

Two years of junkie life had left Nate in awful shape. An infected track mark on his arm was festering into a crater. His scalp was laced with bloody scabs from constant scratching. Hummell was throwing him out of his place. Another friend was threatening to beat his addiction out of him.

Nate had finally found the bottom. He agreed to enter treatment. But before he left he inhaled one final line, and as the drug seeped into his brain he felt an unexpected sadness.

It was just like saying goodbye to a friend.

JAMIN THIRY, AN EX-HEROIN user who has been clean for four years, saw Nate the day he moved into the Atlanta apartment that would be his home during treatment. Nate was skeletally thin, his eyes sunken into his head, his body reeling from withdrawal. He looked, Thiry thought, like someone who wasn't going to make it.

Nate entered the live-in program at Metro Atlanta Recovery Residences unable to keep up with its demanding regimen. He went to counseling, group sessions and 12-step meetings for up to eight hours a day, sitting-and sometimes nodding off-in classrooms where massive posters admonished patients about lying, playing the victim or shifting blame.

It took three months for Nate to emerge from his addict's cocoon. When a roommate confronted him about a minor housekeeping lapse, he stormed out of a meeting. But the anger cracked his passivity and he soon returned, volunteering for the first time to read from his journal. From then on, said Ewell Hardman, MARR's clinical director, "Nate wore groups out."

"I just got sick of it. Everything just sucked," Nate says. "I used to live and lived to use. There was nothing else in my life."

The turnaround was well underway in January 2005 when his parents arrived for a family weekend at the center. His mother was hopeful, his father skeptical, but when they surprised him at his job in a supermarket bakery, Nate gleefully ran around the counter to greet them.

Jim Korbal was astounded. His son had gained weight and seemed happy, joking without bitterness, offering hearty thanks for favors as simple as a ride. The weekend passed like a joyful dream, and when Jim and Kathy got on the plane back to Chicago, they allowed themselves the cautious hope that heroin would hurt their family no more.

They were wrong. The Beast was still alive, waiting for them to come home.

EARLY IN HIS ADDICTION, Nate developed a junkie's cunning. He realized that if someone close to him also used heroin, he would have another person from whom he could beg, borrow or steal the drug.

So one day, he gave his little sister her first line. It wasn't a hard sell. Petite and punky, Ashley Korbal was already an enthusiastic pot smoker at the age of 15. Her boyfriend was using heroin too, and her initial shock had grown into curiosity. She was going to try it, Nate reasoned, so she might as well try it with him. At least he would make sure she didn't overdose. A FEW MONTHS LATER Ashley was hooked, too. But she was a quiet

kid, and despite her addiction she worked steadily and kept herself presentable. As Nate's problems consumed the family, her own remained hidden.

Only an accident exposed her. A day after returning from Atlanta, Jim noticed his I-PASS mounted off center on his truck's windshield. He asked Ashley if she had borrowed it, and her halting denials roused his suspicion. He bombarded her with question after question until the truth came out: She had been going into the city to buy dope.

The confession reignited all the anger and panic that had died to a smolder, yet Jim and Kathy accepted Ashley's story that her use wasn't heavy, and that she was trying to quit. Compared with her brother, she just didn't seem that bad.

So aided by lies and stealth, she kept going.

"How was the movie?" her parents would ask.

"Good," she'd say, drugs coursing through her bloodstream.

But like her brother, Ashley gradually grew revolted by how low she had fallen. When she learned last summer that Nate, by then a zealous convert to the straight life, was coming home for a visit, the thought of his disapproval was even worse than her fear of withdrawal.

On July 17, after three years of use, she quit. She moved to Atlanta to be with her brother, and today the two share an apartment. Ashley works at a grocery store to pay her share of the rent, and she goes to nightly 12-step meetings to beat back the still-potent cravings.

"A bad day at work is a trigger," she says. "When I get frustrated or angry or upset, I just want to use to relieve the feeling. I see people who I know are on it and it makes me think, 'Maybe I can just use this one time.' But that's addictive thinking."

Nate is helping Ashley with her recovery as he manages his own, attending meetings and mentoring another ex-user. He's holding down a job retrieving grocery carts and plans to attend a community college, hoping someday to become a musician or a writer.

Though he has tried to make amends to those he hurt during his years of drug abuse, he doesn't brood over what he did. That's part of his history now, inescapable and unchangeable. What matters most is what lies ahead.

"I feel bad, but it's in the past," he says. "I should try to do better today. I don't want to dwell on it. [In rehab] they tell you to work on yourself and not try to think about it. You try to get yourself better so you can deal with it in a better way . . . just staying sober and doing the next right thing. If I don't go back to using, I'm not gonna cause too much more havoc."



It's a sound philosophy for those in recovery. But for Nate's parents, escaping the past is not so easy.

IN THE BASEMENT of a Geneva office building is a room that resembles a snug parlor, filled with scented candles, still-life prints and a comfortable couch. It's the meeting place for Hearts of Hope, a support group for the families of addicts.

Kathy Korbal is a fixture at the bi-weekly gatherings. Here, she can talk about the complicated feelings that lingered after the crisis, about the terror of relapse that continues to haunt her. She can try to help those whose children remain heroin's captives and those who have lost their loved ones to the drug, leaving them to rebuild their broken families.

It's no different for the Korbals. Kathy still falls into a bleak mood when cataloguing her children's deceptions—"There are days I could punch a wall that I was so stupid"—but she has a forgiving nature. When the kids were about to leave after a recent visit, she gave each a crushing hug.

"I'm gonna miss you guys," she said. "Stay out of trouble, OK?"

Jim has tried to reach out to the children in his own way, hauling a truckload of their belongings from Hinckley to Atlanta. But his scars are still tender. When Kathy traveled to the kids' apartment for Thanksgiving dinner, he stayed home. Celebrating the holiday that epitomizes family togetherness just felt phony.

The dying might be over. But the healing has only begun.