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Article: Kierran Legg: Photo Credits: Paul Samuels



He stood in the blue glow of the ATM, as a ceremony of beeps and flashing letters announced the inevitable: YOU HAVE INSUFFICIENT FUNDS.

Shit.

Costa Carastavrakis didn't know it then, but he was at the end of

a chapter. One that had started with cigs and alcohol, advanced to cocaine and khat, and was now ending – after a three-month crystal-meth bender – with the bleeping bell toll of bankruptcy.

He needed a fix. But scoring another gram would involve begging for cash from his friends and family; and despite his unravelling emotional state, he wasn't ready to lift the lid on his real lifestyle, to tell the world that he wasn't just a "party animal" – he was living from fix to fix.

"That was my last day of using," he says. "I was sort of handed this gift of desperation."

That moment – and the unforgettable, crushing, ten-tonne downer that followed – led Costa to twelve-step meetings, to recovery, and ultimately to a new way of life. But it also set him on a path he didn't expect: becoming an Ironman.

FITTING IN

"They'd call me toothpick," he laughs.

He was always the skinniest, the shortest, the tiniest: a little bobble-headed boy, with a foreign name and alien mannerisms.

From the moment he started school he was singled out and teased relentlessly. As a kid, he retreated back into himself. He was quiet, introverted; but somehow, he still stuck out like a sore thumb.

"I was really bad at sport," he admits. "I had no hand-eye coordination. And they latched onto that too."

Looking back, Costa still remembers feeling different, an interloper, trespassing on "normality". That the other kids had all read, memorised and internalised the script on how to fit in, but he'd never received the memo. Instead, he was grappling with his sexuality: he'd known from a young age that he was gay. His thoughts seemed to run riot, a cocktail of self-loathing and emotional claustrophobia that tanked his confidence.

That all changed with his first bottle of champagne. He was 12, at a bar mitzvah, with a bottle of celebratory bubbly in his hands. He took his first sip, pressing the glass up to his lips and swallowing the sour, fizzy liquid. The first gulp dialled down the chaos in his head just a little bit. He sipped again. The thoughts began to slow down, the sharp, critical feelings were suddenly blunted.

Costa ended up polishing off the whole bottle. All he could think at the time was: "Finally, I'm wiped out. This is amazing."

The next day he carried his hangover with junkie pride. And why not? He was the first kid in his class to have completed this dangerous, enticing rite of passage. It bought him infamy and acceptance, and finally cracked his crippling imposter syndrome.

He soon started smoking; Costa calls cigarettes "mini-fixes". Not

only did the nicotine temper his anxiety, the other kids thought he was rebellious and “cool”. With the help of his vices, Costa was coming out his shell; he was making friends, he was socialising, building up a reputation as a kid you wanted to hang out with.

By the end of school, Costa was drinking every weekend. When he left, to attend the University of Cape Town, he was introduced to an unfettered party lifestyle.

“I drank four days a week,” he says. “And I just ate whatever. I got away with it, because I was skinny and I was social.

“I was always up for a party. I was the head of every social society, and I’d never say no to a drink.”

He still managed to keep his grades up, and as he neared his graduation he was at the top of the “most likely to succeed” list. He was going to ace his final exams, secure a steady job, and live the life; but...

“Then I got hijacked.”

At that time it was almost unheard of – hijackings were still rare.

Two armed men, one brandishing a knife, the other a gun, took Costa on a joyride and then dropped him off just outside Khayelitsha. In the aftermath, he didn’t know what to do about it. He felt bewildered and vulnerable, but there was no support structure.

“I hit a major depression,” he says.

By the time he scored a job in Durban, he was in the throes of a severe drinking problem. One day, he showed up to work still drunk, wearing his clothes from the night before. Intoxicated, dizzy and nauseous, he fell out of his office chair – right in front of his manager. But his boss knew he was struggling. And instead of firing him, he gave Costa time off to seek therapy.

“That therapist brought up the fact that I had a drinking problem,” he says. “It didn’t register with me at all. I think I went out and drank again right afterwards. It helps that we living in a drinking culture, where you can drink all the time and nobody notices, as long as you have enough groups of friends you can circle round and blend into the crowd every single night.”

Costa ended up giving up his job, but not the drinking. He began mastering the art of functional alcoholism; cordoning off his binges and benders to just a few nights a week, and playing the part of the model employee (and later, businessman) for the rest. This is when his life split in two: there was a Costa who was bright, driven and talented; and then there was a Costa who was social, energetic, but

always drunk. “I could murder half a bottle of whisky and six beers in just a couple of hours,” he says.

It was a habit he kept up, even while backpacking around London, living in Miami, and after he returned to South Africa to start his own business. Being a functional alcoholic helped him blend in. But it also funded his benders, and kept his head – at least financially – above water. But even then, he never thought of trying hard drugs.

FLYING OFF

“Addiction works in so many ways,” he says. “For some it might be a chemical, a drug, a drink, or it could even be a co-dependent relationship.”

At 30 years old, Costa was in a toxic relationship. He was being abused, manipulated and taken advantage of. And that holy trinity was invaluable to the addict.

“I wanted that,” he says. “Can you believe that I really *wanted* that?”

He eventually ended the relationship. But as he put down one addiction, he picked up another. A few days later he was offered khat at a party, a proposal that came at time when he felt like he was stranded at sea – no rudder, and no way home.

“I said, screw it,” he says. Trying the drug was an epiphany:

“Where have you been all my life?” he remembers thinking.

During a trip to Mexico he tried cocaine for the first time, and his fate was sealed. Alcohol couldn’t compare; these drugs wiped him out, muting his emotions and distracting him from the depression. When he returned to South Africa, khat and coke fuelled his weekly binges, which grew from three-day wormholes to five. “I once didn’t sleep for five days,” he says, “I’d just keep using and using.” Three months before he finally got clean, he discovered crystal meth. “That was crazy. It just switched off my feelings.” It was the drug he had always wanted. Scoring a gram would set him back R600, but it wasn’t the powder that finally sank his finances. He laughs: “It’s a popular misconception that addicts lose all their money buying drugs. No, what’s expensive is losing your wallet because you’re so high, you leave it a restaurant. You break your window because you’re doing something stupid. You become irresponsible and lose control of your whole life, leaving a behind a trail of destruction and lost shit.”

Three months later, he was flat broke. He stood staring at the ATM, a blinking signal, a call to action: this double life had to end.

COMING HOME

On the 9th of April 2006, Costa went to his first twelve-step meeting, and it immediately resonated with him. In a small room, he found himself seated next to and opposite people who were all searching for the same thing as him: a way to live a better life. “They all feel like they fucked up their lives and they all wanted to stop using. To be in that space just felt right.

Those meetings became my beehive.” Costa treated the twelve steps like a manual. He believed in the message: if you follow these steps, and you live by these steps, you will never use drugs again.

He did everything he was told to do. The party animal became Captain Recovery overnight, “seriously, they still call me that,” he laughs. He discovered a life outside of the once instinctive and disordered pattern of drug abuse. But his real rebirth wouldn’t take place in a small hall or reappropriated room at the local church. For a guy who had never run a kilometre or more in his life, who recoiled at the idea of exercise and ate whatever he wanted for thirty-plus years, true redemption would be found running the toughest races of them all.

Coaxed by his running-fanatic partner at the time, Costa begrudgingly agreed to go for a jog. He made it round a single block and limped back home – sweating, out of breath and exhausted. But he was proud. He treated the achievement like an Olympic feat, even running himself a recovery bath. Every day he added another block. By the time he was able to run 5km, uninterrupted, he knew he was hooked. For Costa, those short runs were a gateway to longer distances, and eventually triathlons. But he didn’t know how to swim.

“Oh, and I had never ridden a road bike.”

He trained for six months for a sprint triathlon (600m swim, 20km bike ride, and 5km run), only to be brutalised on the day.

“It took me just over two and a half hours,” he says, laughing.

By the time he crossed the finish line, the organisers were already packing up for the day. “I didn’t care, I was ecstatic just to finish.”

Those six months of training were a healthy outlet for the addict.

They allowed him to turn his attention away from the torment of his emotions, and distil life down to a single focus. But he wanted to get serious. He signed up for De Bruin Train, a high-altitude training camp for triathletes led by a veteran of the sport, Gerhard de Bruin.

“I arrive there, and I’m surrounded by guys who training for the Olympics,” he says. “And here I am, barely able to swim.”

At the training camp, there are no distractions. You train, you recover, you eat, you sleep, and you do it all over again.

“And I loved it: I’m here in my early 40s hanging out with some serious world-champion-level wannabes.”

Over the following years, Costa finished ten stints at the training camp. He’s finished 11 half-Ironman distances, and three full-distance events. He’s never cracked the top 30, or even the top third; but he’s seen himself grow and improve (all while running his own businesses). And while he doesn’t perform like a pro athlete, he lives his life like one.

“And that’s important,” he says. “Because in everything I do, I now want to be the best version of myself. I tell myself: I am an athlete because I train like one, and I live like one. It becomes that much easier to say ‘no’ to bad decisions. Would an athlete sacrifice a full night’s sleep and harm their recovery to camp out at the bar? No. Would they give into their cravings and wolf down nothing but chocolate for dinner? No. I behave like I saw them behaving, and it’s become non-negotiable.”

While he’s now taking a break from triathlons, Costa doesn’t miss a day of gym. Maintaining that athlete’s mentality is at the core of how he wants to live his life. He knows that using is always an option, but he also knows that taking that wrong turn will derail what he has built for himself now. He doesn’t look back. For a man who’s been sober for 12 years, and used those crystal-clear minutes, hours and days to run marathons, dabble in stand-up comedy and even work on writing a book... there’s a lot to look forward to.