The House I Built

Reflections on life,

healing, and things in between

Chris Settle

My journey in the wake of coming off a benzodiazepine
and the protracted symptoms that followed.

This book is a work of nonfiction. However, the names of some of the characters mentioned have been changed to protect their privacy.

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To Liam, David, and Ruby.

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Preface

What this is *not* is a self-help book intended to provide expertise and guidance on how to safely rid yourself of benzos or other psychoactive drugs; rather, this is my own account of coming off a drug that wracked my brain, and the emotional challenges I faced during a slow and at times frightening healing process. In fact, if you're thinking about transitioning off these types of medications or are in the throes of recovery yourself, you may want to save this read for another day.

I thought it was important to tell my story within the context of this healing experience, to better understand how this had impacted the full arc of my life. Having said that, people often asked, "How did you continue working, despite having to deal with the issues brought on by the quick cessation of alprazolam and the protracted withdrawal that followed?" The best answer I could come up with was, "I just did." And, having had more time to contemplate the question, I'm still at a loss for a concise response. But it did ignite my curiosity. What was it that kept me going throughout this difficult time? And who am I to have survived this process which wrecks so many lives? I became determined to put it all out there, along with my own broader life strokes, to try to better understand the answers to those questions for myself.

If you know anything about the effect benzodiazepines can have on your being, you know that they're highly addictive, potentially destructive, and most certainly can be a career killer when things don't work out as intended. Which in many cases is the least of people's concerns—the one-year mortality rate for someone struggling with the effects of coming off a benzo after long-term use is around 10 percent (the data is scattered and elusive, but that's the conservative ballpark). This is serious stuff.

I don't know if the events of seven years ago and how I feel today can be directly attributed to my experience with alprazolam. In fact, several medical professionals I have worked with do not believe this to be the case. But something happened to me that left its mark. Something that changed me from that day forward, which has been at the epicenter of a healing process ever since. Which, in turn, became a central motivation for me to write this book.

Introduction

I awoke one morning to a series of events that would play out over weeks, months, and even years and leave me to wonder whether my mental faculties would ever return to normal—at least to the extent of what "normal" felt like before all this happened. Basic activities that I had grown accustomed to had become more of a challenge. Things like how I tracked my thoughts, my sense of who I was, and my confidence were all suddenly knocked ajar. Or whether, at the age of forty-six, this marked the beginning of a slow decline in my mental health. I was desperate for answers and frightened as to what the future held.

Inspired by fear more than anything and the need to do something productive, I began to document my healing process. And felt compelled to record my more memorable life experiences. My dad's mom died in her mid-seventies of Alzheimer's, and if I were to succumb to a similar fate (although I do hold steadfast to the prodigious belief that this need not be the case), I wanted, at least, to get in my two cents while I still could.

I knew that the best way forward was simply to start putting words to paper and exercise my brain when all I really wanted to do was check out and bury my head under the covers. I realized that getting my thoughts down wouldn't be easy because writing isn't my strong suit, but I considered it an important enough topic to invest the time and energy and give it my best effort. I also wanted to provide my kids (and perhaps their families, one day) with an account of who I was and what I had endured during a very difficult period in my life. I wanted to leave something behind.

Before this, I had no ambition to journal my thoughts. But documenting my recovery became essential as I struggled to make sense of things. I began to record my progress in a diary, looking for

trendlines to indicate patterns of healing. But it was a slow, arduous, and at times frustrating process. I eventually realized that to feel better, to come out the other side whole, I'd need to take a deeper dive into myself and change how I was living my life.

The arrangement of this book reflects the dichotomy of having to deal with a highly personal health issue while forging ahead with everyday life. The diary entries provide a linear chronicle of what I was feeling and experiencing, which was at certain times in contrast to how I presented myself in my professional and family life, as I write about in the book's narrative. This juxtaposition was essential because while my life may have appeared fine from the outside (narrative), I was struggling daily to maintain some sense of normalcy on the inside (diary). I also felt that seeing these two perspectives side by side could perhaps illuminate a deeper understanding of the value gleaned from enduring this experience. I needed to examine how I got myself into this predicament to begin with, and what I've learned about myself throughout the healing process.

I was willing to try most anything when my doctor of nearly twenty years suggested that alprazolam was the best remedy to help quiet the "mind-chatter" I was experiencing at night. It worked initially but became less effective the longer I took it. When I went back to the doctor, he added even more prescriptions and recommendations to the mix. After a few months, I realized not only were the medications he was pushing my way not working, but they were making me feel worse.

Married, with two sons and a daughter, my life had become progressively demanding. I was working at an advertising agency in a stressful role, and the company had become increasingly precarious. The adverse reactions I was now having to my medications

made the prospect of losing my job that much more real. I knew I had a challenging road ahead if I wanted to remain employed.

Unfortunately, things got worse as I began to wean myself off alprazolam, and pretty much imploded when I stopped taking it altogether. I recall, the day after my last dose, a sense that something had been altered, a switch flipped. I immediately began experiencing tunnel vision, my depth perception was off, and paranoia and confusion began to creep in. A loud hissing sensation took hold in my head, and I flushed with anxiety. My focus was fuzzy, and sleep was all but impossible. My brain needed something that was no longer there.

Over time, simple tasks became overwhelming, and I struggled to get myself out the door most mornings. I was exhausted and unmotivated, and any sense of normalcy had all but left. I was now vulnerable, feeling alone and scared, and wanted to connect with someone who was going through a similar experience. I soon discovered an anonymous online chat room where people congregated in the thousands to seek answers and guidance as to why their lives had suddenly taken a turn for the worse.

As the months passed, other symptoms began to emerge. Symptoms that cast doubt on who I was as a spouse, as a father, and as an employee. I was struggling with my ability to be proactive and resolve simple life issues. It had become difficult to recall everyday things, such as what I had for breakfast and what happened the previous day, and I found it harder to engage in simple conversation. I felt disconnected from the people around me. It was like I was viewing the world through a prism, feeling spaced out as if high on paint fumes—a state of consciousness that would continue, to varying degrees, twenty-four-seven for several years.

This trial was to be a journey that—for the most part—I would have to keep to myself. To reveal too much would be to give in to its power. Insomnia and heightened anxiety, hallucinations, and many other physical and psychological indicators would conspire to derail me and keep me from living my complete self. My will and

determination would be my guide as I confronted this new reality, fueled by the hope that one day I'd be well and thrive once again.

Though highly distracted and living with a considerable amount of emotional discomfort, I forged ahead, trying to remain productive and engaged with family, friends, and colleagues as best I could. My central nervous system had been jolted due to the rapid cessation of a medication that was intended to bring calm into my life. But instead, released my worst insecurities to wreak havoc on my being. I was a changed person. But, knowing I was walking a line between giving in and making the best of things, I believed my primary course of action was to roll with it until I felt better—fake it until I make it. I knew that if I gave in to this muted reality, the quality of my relationships would erode, and I wouldn't stand a chance at work.

October 1, 2013

Over the past few years, I've worked with a naturopathic doctor to help rebalance my sleep cycle. I've shown some progress lately but suspected more was going on. A reputable clinic conducted a sleep study, which determined that I had sleep apnea due to a narrow airway. Over the course of a few months, I tried various treatments—a CPAP [continuous positive airway pressure] machine and a mouth devise only increased my anxiety around sleep, leading to episodes of insomnia—if I wasn't stressed about sleep before, I had certainly become so now.

It was at about this time that my GP prescribed .5 mg of alprazolam twice a day to help take the edge off the anxiety that I was experiencing at night. Initially, I took half of the prescribed dose. Job circumstances and life issues progressively elevated my stress, culminating, in May of 2012, with the passing of my mother, at which point I increased the dose to 1 mg a night.

Over the ensuing months, it occurred to me that the drugs were having an adverse effect on my wellbeing. This became abundantly clear while attending a family gathering in early July of 2013. I was unable to take my prescription that evening, having left it back at the house, several hours' drive away. I was awakened in the early morning by a distinct hissing noise in my head and mounting anxiety. This was the first indication that something in my brain had indeed been altered to the point that it needed the medication to function properly.

Alprazolam is classified as a psychoactive drug and is part of a broader family of medications called benzodiazepines, which, unknown to me then, are very addictive and potentially detrimental to the brain. And for this reason, experts generally do not prescribe them for more than a few weeks outside of a hospital setting. Medical professionals will admit that they're not entirely sure how they work nor understand the full impact on a person's long-term health. But my doctor prescribed daily doses for about three years: long enough for my brain to adapt to its effects, rendering the medication no longer effective—and causing all sorts of adverse reactions. Not feeling well and intent on stopping the medication altogether, he and I worked up a five-week plan to rid the drug from my system. In hindsight, we grossly underestimated the time I needed to wean off safely. We should have allowed at least a year. My wife warned me of the potential effects when first prescribed, but we could not have foreseen the challenges to come.

Far too often, prescription drugs, intended to bring "calm" into our lives, suddenly backfire as we discover they don't work as expected or do more harm than good. We think we are getting the treatment we seek when we are only masking the problem, albeit

temporarily. We tend to place so much faith in our care providers that we do not second guess their expertise as much as we probably should. Even something as trivial as addressing sleep, as in my case, we are putting our lives into their hands. And then, when things do not go as planned, we have little recourse to rectify the damage incurred. And, if things do go sideways after deciding to go off these medications, it's nothing to be ashamed of—except for those responsible for unleashing them into our lives in the first place, ignorant of the protocols necessary to accommodate each person's unique circumstances and sensitivities.

Footnote. It's come to my attention that the phrase "Slept with Camille," present in several diary entries throughout, can mean different things. So, not to confuse the reader, I thought it helpful to clarify its meaning within the context as I intended—to be in a state of sleep. During much of my post-benzo recovery period, my anxiety levels were so high that I could not tolerate sharing my bed with another person, notably my wife.

ONE

The Formative Years

I was born in a sanitarium in Hinsdale, Illinois on January 18, 1967, just outside of my hometown of Western Springs (fig. 1, p. 188).

November 2, Day One

Today marks the beginning of my new self. I had been experiencing manageable issues with sleep, anxiety, and a lack of focus. But on this day, things have taken a turn for the worse. I will track the healing progress following the cessation of alprazolam and record everything that happens.

Not that a sanitarium was medically necessary; it just happened to have the closest birthing facility to our home. It was the back-up plan if I came out sooner than expected, and fortunately, was converted into a hospital years earlier. I'd done a fair amount of lounging around in the breech position and decided one evening to "right" myself, which mom took as a sign to pack her bags. A couple of spoonfuls of castor oil, and I was out in a few hours.

The youngest of three, I grew up in a tight-knit community about twenty miles west of Chicago. My nearest sibling, Scott, was about three and half years older than me, and Kent was eighteen

months his senior (fig. 2, p. 188). Since I was a few years younger than them, I tended to be more of a tagalong. However, Scott and I did enjoy many of the same things, such as playing with Matchbox cars, Legos, and Lincoln Logs. He and I had more things in common than I did with Kent (probably because we were closer in age), who generally kept to himself—he was more reserved and soft-spoken. Scott was a big kid; according to our mom overtook Kent in size around the age of three. As he neared his teens, Scott got more temperamental, and sometimes the consequences weren't to my advantage. But fortunately, he never punched above the neckline, and although tumultuous at times, we did get along often and somehow survived those formative years intact.

Western Springs was a township landlocked by forest reserves, urban sprawl, and a tangled network of freeways and railroad tracks. It was a safe and picturesque town with lots to do in a relatively compact space. It had a community swimming pool, a few spacious parks, and a five-and-dime all within a convenient stroll from home. Aside from the train whistles and the blast of an occasional weather siren, it was a quiet town. An oasis comprised of mostly White, middle-class conservatives, living out their lives, indifferent to the inequities just twenty minutes to the east. At one point we had dozens of kids living on our block, which made for endless hours of outdoor fun. Around every corner, in every backyard or alley, there was always something to do: an adventure waiting to be discovered. Western Springs was the perfect place to be a kid.

When I was little, I was very active and had a hard time sitting still. This is ironic because I turned out to be a low-key person—less outspoken, more introspective, and thoughtful. Which is what my future wife would apparently find interesting in me one day (go figure). I also had an early knack for painting and drawing, showing my artwork at the local library by the age of seven, earning notoriety from my classmates and teachers as the "artistic kid" (fig. 3, p. 188). The contemplative side I got from my dad, my "determination" from my mom, and my creative sensibilities from both, with a

whole lot of me sprinkled in to fill the rest.

Mom was one of the hardest-working people I've known. She would put 100 percent into everything she touched, always busy with projects around the house: repairing, updating, sprucing, and arranging. She also loved to entertain family and friends with fancy meals, spending all day in the kitchen planning, cooking, chopping, and basting. Checking off those projects one by one, burning herself down to the wick, she pushed herself to her limits. Somehow, she found the energy to maintain the house, raise three boys, experiment with art, and hold down a job later in life to see her kids through their respective colleges.

She was driven to do twice the work so that others would benefit. It was not enough for her to paint a room; she'd take on an entire house, floor to ceiling, meticulously updating the color scheme and furnishings to satisfy that sense of home that she envisioned for her family. She liked things to look a certain way—almost dreamlike. She infused a bit of herself into everything through color choice and design. She'd do the work often relegated to a hired hand, adding to the family coffers through hard-earned sweat-equity. It makes sense to me now that her children have a similar need to take on projects many might consider too daunting to do themselves—landscaping a yard, putting up a fence, or building a house. But this was instilled in us as part of our early training. It would be our cross to bear.

Mom is the reason we had joy in our lives. She had a positive energy about her, and it was felt by everyone. In her presence, you were captivated by her empathetic and authentic nature. And it made no difference whether they were family, friends, or strangers; she was welcoming to everyone. She cared about what you had to say and could talk endlessly and substantively about most anything, punctuated by an effortless laugh that resonated from the center of her being. Her aura was magical. It made you feel safe and believe that the world was a much better place than it was when in her presence.

I cherish the memories of how she would pick me up and rock

me in her arms and her gentle words of comfort. And the way she would tend to my bumps and bruises with such kindness (fig. 4, p. 188). And, as I got older, she'd be there for me as well, to see me through the rough patches. She could illuminate the gloomier days with her smile and infectious optimism and lighten whatever burden may have befallen me. She was a warrior and a worrier, and she epitomized what it meant to be there for someone when they needed it most.

My dad wasn't around much. He traveled a lot for his job domestically. Even though we lived in the Midwest, he worked for the New York Times as a photojournalist (fig. 5, p. 188). This centrally located post enabled him to cover important stories throughout the Midwestern states: events that were happening in and around the region during the late sixties and seventies—the Vietnam war protests, human rights demonstrations, political upheaval, and other defining moments of the era. I didn't really miss him at the time—it was just the way things were—and yet his absence created distance between us, and no doubt, must have taken a toll on the marriage. Raising three boys was more than enough of a task for two, and much of that responsibility fell to Mom.

Dad was a sensitive, introverted artist who saw the world differently than most. He was an only child, and his parents put a lot of emphasis on image and discipline over nurturing and wellbeing. He was the son of an accountant and a housewife, raised with conservative values in a small, middle-class town in the heart of Kansas. His childhood was somewhat sheltered, and he kept to himself a lot. This solitary upbringing and quiet nature made it more difficult for him to connect with people and express his feelings.

He could be critical too, and I think that left an imprint on me. Being the youngest, with a three-and-a-half-year gap between my nearest sibling, I could be a handful for sure. And I suspect some of those marital tensions may have bled my way as well, especially after I began to walk and talk and push back.

Maybe it was because of how I reacted to things, but I felt like a

bit of an outcast. Dad responded angrily to lots of the little things I'd do, with a "don't do that … get off this … stop touching that!" along with a look of disdain, followed by the occasional slap or, more often, a well-earned spanking. He was loving in many ways but not very patient when his kids acted out. However, it was this critical feedback that left me feeling frustrated. And wondering whether I would ever measure up or be good enough. Kent and Scott didn't seem to experience the same reactions as often, nor do I believe did they internalize dad's irritation as I did. But I'm sure they felt it in other ways.

Luckily, I realized at an early age that dads' reactions toward me were more out of frustration than how he felt deep down. More so, I perceived his behavior to reflect the way his father must have treated him. I think this wisdom was my saving grace and one of the dividends of my intuitive side.

Nevertheless, later in life, this conditioning began to reemerge as self-doubt. I found myself second-guessing my talents and abilities, more averse to taking on new things. Eventually, I found the work I did to be less and less fulfilling. That inner voice nullified my sense of purpose, questioning my self-worth, discrediting my efforts, and distracting me from life's invitations to grow. I became my own worst critic. Was this a direct result of those early influences? It's hard to say. Maybe it's just a part of who I am. But it begs the question of how much impact we have on our kids as we bring them along.

November 6, Year One

I developed a dependency on alprazolam due to long-term use. .5mg for about three years taken periodically and 1 mg nightly for the past year or so. In addition, I have been prescribed 10 mg of zaleplon nightly for the past three months and 100mg of valerian root nightly for nine weeks. All recommended and prescribed by my doctor.

I began a drawdown of all three medications in early October. I achieved initial success omitting valerian and zaleplon within three weeks. I completed the alprazolam drawdown under the supervision of my doctor on November 2, last dose of .25mg, according to the following schedule: .5mg for two weeks, .375 for seven days, .25mg for another week, and stopping dosage altogether at the end of that time frame. In hindsight, this was too rapid and was consequently harmful to my nervous system.

I'm currently experiencing extreme rebound insomnia with no sleep the first two nights and two- or three-hours' sleep on the third night. Tracking daily mood and sleep performance—cognitive function improving despite lack of sleep. Coping with anxiety and mood swings including mild depression.

Showing day-over-day incremental improvement, overall feeling optimistic. Eating well, drinking plenty of fluids, sticking to an exercise program, and sleep schedule as best I can. Maintaining a full-time workweek thus far and relatively normal home life. Sleeping separately from Camille for now, receiving her full support. Research says that this kind of reaction after ceasing the drug is not uncommon and improvement should follow within three to four days as the GABA center [the main inhibitory neurotransmitter in the brain] begins to regain its natural function and progressively improve over a few weeks or longer. The immediate plan is to stay the course.

Coincidentally, I just finished a two-month program on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and enlisted the help of a therapist.

I feel a palpable inner tension when creating art. Sometimes I'll catch myself wondering whether the result will be satisfactory and getting frustrated when I think it should be better. These feelings and my reactions to them are most likely a carry-over from those early interactions; highlighting mistakes over successes, telling me to "stop" more than to "do," vocalizing dissatisfaction over reward.

Part of the responsibility of being a parent is to cultivate enough awareness to understand the power our reactive side can have over our children and have the maturity to reel it in when it matters most. Admittedly, this is a work in progress for me. I've never lashed out physically, but my tongue has been prone to leave the barn on occasion.

With age and earned perspective, I now better understand the benefits of refocusing my intentions towards the act of doing, rather than on the result—because … can it ever really be good enough? I have freed myself of the perception that it is the outcome that matters most, which is stoked by an upbringing and culture that places such high regard on achievement. To become "worthy" means you must be the "best" at something or don't even bother trying. Sure, it's nice to be proficient, but it's not everything.

November 11, Year One, Email

Hi Dr. Ng, I'm coming up on ten days since my final dose of alprazolam. Experiencing intermittent bouts of anxiety throughout the day, more pronounced in the evenings, makes sleep very difficult. I'm struggling and want to know what's next.

While growing up in Western Springs, summer brought our family together in exceptionally close proximity. Every year, like clockwork, the five of us would pack ourselves into our little yellow camper, intent on crisscrossing the continent in pursuit of some National Park, monument, or long-lost relative.

I recall mile after mile, the drone of the road reverberating from beneath the tires. And the sound of the snapping and popping of the curtains as the wind rattled through the screens. I also remember the smell of our musty old canvas tent (fig. 6, p. 188) and being told to put that stick back in the fire a hundred times. Those hot, muggy nights, lying awake on a bone-crushing air mattress. The mosquitoes buzzing around my ears; long walks schlepping to landmarks I could have cared less about. And the countless steps and backtracking to take the perfect family photo.

After a day frolicking on the beach and a sleepless night tossing and turning, trying to avoid patches of sunburn, we headed off to the Kennedy Space Center in our trusty camper to witness the launch of the last of the great Saturn V rockets. My family and I, along with thousands of onlookers, filed onto a slim strip of land to stake a claim. We set up our blankets and camping chairs and settled in for the long wait. After a couple of hours enduring the sweltering heat, an announcement came over the loudspeakers: "All systems go … T minus ten, nine …" Tensions were high, and everyone fell silent. Within moments, a puff of blue smoke appeared across the bay but no sound; how odd, I thought. Then, the spectacle of an explosion: a plume quickly formed, followed seconds later by a thunderous rumble. The ground pounded as if a tree had been felled right next to us. The vibrations were so strong, I thought my body was going to shake apart. I could see people screaming jubilantly but heard nothing coming out of their mouths. The giant cloud then began to lift the lipstick-shaped container arduously up