



## FREE AT LAST: MOMENTS OF CLARITY

*As a member of the Kennedy clan, Christopher Kennedy Lawford had it all – including a full-blown addiction to alcohol and drugs. Here he talks to fellow recovering writer Barry McIlheney about how he finally managed to stop, and stay stopped for the past 23 years.*

“I looked out my window onto Boston’s Commonwealth Avenue, described by Winston Churchill as one of the most beautiful avenues in the whole world, and all I could see was desolation and despair.”

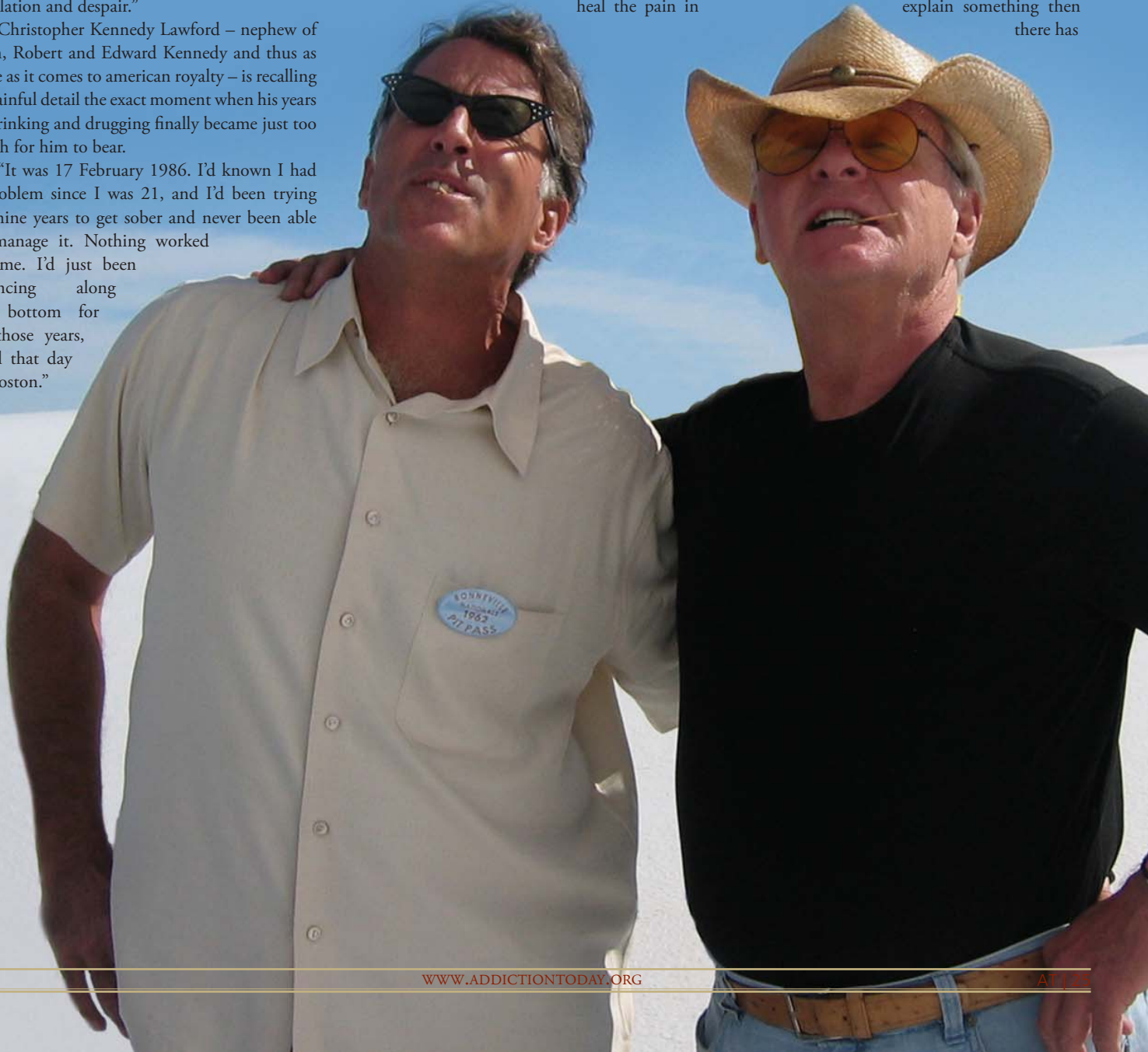
Christopher Kennedy Lawford – nephew of John, Robert and Edward Kennedy and thus as close as it comes to American royalty – is recalling in painful detail the exact moment when his years of drinking and drugging finally became just too much for him to bear.

“It was 17 February 1986. I’d known I had a problem since I was 21, and I’d been trying for nine years to get sober and never been able to manage it. Nothing worked for me. I’d just been bouncing along the bottom for all those years, until that day in Boston.”

More than 20 years on, Lawford still finds it hard to explain exactly what happened to him on that fateful day in 1986.

“At first, the only answer that I felt would heal the pain in

my gut was to put a gun in my mouth. But I didn’t have a gun, so instead I simply surrendered, and on such a profound level too. I can’t really explain it, and I believe that when you can’t explain something then there has



to be some other force at work there. Call it spiritual, call it God, all I know is that something came into me that day and changed me so much that I was able to get sober, and then stay sober for what's now more than 23 years. Which truly is a miracle."

Now 53 years old, Christopher Kennedy Lawford was born into a remarkable family, one whose very name still conjures up memories of both a magical and tragic time in American history. As the son of legendary Rat Pack actor Peter Lawford and JFK's sister Patricia, it presumably was a rather strange childhood?

"For me, it didn't actually seem that strange," he says, talking to me from Los Angeles where he is currently promoting his new book, *Moments Of Clarity*, which hit the *New York Times* bestseller the same month it was launched.

"I guess you always adjust to whatever situation you find yourself in, so I never really thought about my circumstances being that unique.

"I mean, I understood that lots of people seemed to be paying lots of attention to certain members of my family, and that always filled me with pride. I had a great deal of respect for my uncles (the late John and Robert and the now very ill Senator Ted Kennedy) and the work they did and the courage they showed, and I was also very engaged by my own father's life. He always seemed very exciting and charismatic to me when I was growing up. So it's fair to say that I always appreciated what I

was born into." Unfortunately, along with the courage

and the high-profile, the young Christopher also inherited the addictive gene from his parents, both of whom had their own well-documented battles with drink and drugs.

#### FAMILY INHERITANCE.

"I had the genetics," he sighs. "So when I first picked up drink and drugs at 12 years old, I never really looked back. And at first it answered a lot of questions for me, as it does for a lot of people. Then, of course, by the time it stops answering those questions it's all a bit too late.

"But you have to remember that this was also a very different time in America, a totally different ethos. This was the era of sex and drugs and rock and roll and when cocaine wasn't even meant to be addictive! All very different to America today."

Does he also think that he was perhaps running away from your childhood?

"I think all addicts are running away from something. We just use different-coloured sneakers and I was the Imelda Marcos of sneakers! Every colour in the closet! I would literally take anything back then that would get me out of the moment.

So when I first discovered drink and drugs, they took me out of my life – which is exactly what I wanted them to do.

"You have to remember that, by my teens, I had witnessed two of my uncles being assassinated and my parents get divorced. So I was this traumatised kid who just didn't want to be here. And drink and drugs were therefore the perfect solution."

#### LIFE-CHANGING MOMENTS.

So began almost 20 years of using alcohol and narcotics before the big clean-up, a period relived in full colour in Lawford's first book, the bestselling *Symptoms Of Withdrawal*. It was while promoting this book that he stumbled across the idea for its current follow-up, the equally compelling *Moments Of Clarity*.

"After the first book, I had no real interest in doing another one about recovery. Then while I was touring the country talking about the first book, it just amazed me that there seemed such a need out there for a message of hope and transformation. And on such a scale, too. I learned that it is estimated that, in the US, about 26million people suffer from some sort of substance-abuse disorder. That's one in 10 of the population.

"So expand that out to the families and loved ones and friends affected by it, and you've probably got four or five times that original figure. That's an awful lot of people and an awful lot of suffering.

"And as I went around the country these people kept asking me what had happened to me on 17 February 17 1986, and they seemed desperate to know if what had happened to me could happen to them or to the people they loved. So I started to think that a book about those moments that had allowed people to move from addiction to recovery would be a useful thing to do."

Hence his publishing the stories of 45 people who have made just such a journey, ranging

from Hollywood A-list stars to total unknowns. “A moment of clarity is what Carl Jung called a psychic change or what Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, called a change of heart or a spiritual epiphany – basically a moment that allows someone to change the spiritual trajectory of his or her life.

“Some of the people who talk about their moments in the book are famous, like Martin Sheen or Alec Baldwin or Jamie Lee Curtis, and some of them are regular folk. Because these moments of clarity happen to all human beings, famous and non-famous – and, in fact, addicts and non-addicts alike. It’s just that we addicts have to pay close attention to them, because our very lives depend on them.”

#### MAINTAINING RECOVERY.

So do these life-changing moments always have to be followed thereafter by a lifetime’s adherence to a traditional 12-step regime?

“None of the people in *Moments Of Clarity* say whether or not they are in a 12-step group because, as you know, all of these groups are by their very nature anonymous. So even if I did happen to be a member of one of those groups, I would not talk about it.

“What I will say about the 12-step movement – without, you understand, claiming any association with it – is that I agree with the head of the American Psychiatrists’ society who said back in the 1950s that it was the most significant social invention since Christ. I am a huge supporter of the 12-step movement and the various fellowships, but I also believe that you can get sober in lots of different ways. Whatever is working for you is what you ought to be doing.”

#### ADDICTION IS AN ILLNESS.

And is all this drinking and all this drugging a moral issue or really a genuine illness?

“It is an illness. We now know from scientific tests that the alcoholic and addictive brain is different from others, backing up the anecdotal

evidence from many years before that. There are, basically, about 10% of people in the world who simply cannot leave half a glass of wine on the table and they are fundamentally, physiologically, different from those who can.

“Any idea that the alcoholic or addict is just weak-willed is simply not true.

“The problem is that the only way someone can really understand that is for them to walk in the shoes of the addict. Otherwise, there is no way someone can understand what is unleashed within me when I put any drugs or alcohol inside my system.”

Finally, nearly a quarter of a century on from his last drink, does Christopher Kennedy Lawford ever dream about the next one?

“People often say to me that it must be so hard to have stayed sober for so long, and the amazing thing is that it hasn’t been hard at all. That is the real miracle of the whole story for me.

“Before I had that moment of clarity in 1986, I used to have to lock myself in my own house for weeks on end so as not to drink or use drugs. Locked up in my own house! And now it just simply isn’t an issue for me.

“Sure, there are occasions, sometimes on a daily basis, when I think I would quite like a vacation from my life. And drink and drugs gave me that for a very long time. So now that I no longer do that, I have to find other things for relief, things like exercise and meditation.

“But no, I am under no illusions whatsoever about what would happen if I had that drink or that drug ever again.”

#### HEALING HEPATITIS C.

Lawford’s story is all the more remarkable in that he has successfully recovered from hepatitis C, and has written a book, with Dr Diana Sylvestre, to raise awareness and give hope to others. It will be launched in May, the same month as the 6th UK/European Symposium on Addictive Disorders in London where he is a keynote speaker

“Even though about 200million people

worldwide are affected by hepatitis C, it is still hard to get straightforward answers. We hope to change that here,” he says.

#### DON’T MISS THE OPPORTUNITY TO CATCH UP WITH CHRISTOPHER KENNEDY LAWFORD IN PERSON.

The actor, advocate and author is a keynote speaker at this year’s UK/European Symposium on Addictive Disorders held in London from 14-16 May 2009. Booking forms are available online at [www.ukesad.org](http://www.ukesad.org) or by calling Melissa Gordon and Suzanne Gooch on 020-7233 5333.



**CHRISTOPHER KENNEDY LAWFORD** holds a Bachelor of Arts from Tufts University, a Juris Doctor from Boston College Law School and a Masters Certification

in Clinical Psychology from Harvard Medical School. He has worked extensively in Hollywood as an actor, lawyer, executive, and producer, and his book, *Symptoms of Withdrawal*, was a *New York Times* bestseller. His latest book, *Moments of Clarity*, was released in January 2009. His book on *Healing Hepatitis C* will be launched in May 2009.

Lawford is a public advocacy consultant with Caron Treatment Centers. In his role, he raises awareness about addiction and long-term recovery by sharing his experience, strength and hope with clinicians, educators, families and professionals. He lives in California.



**BARRY McILHENEY** is an award-winning journalist and recovering addict. He has edited magazines in the UK and around the world, and is currently writing a book about his

experiences.

*Cover image: Christopher Kennedy Lawford with Anthony Hopkins on the set of The Fastest Indian.*