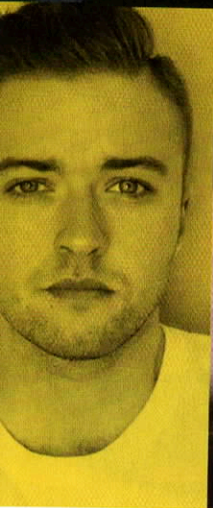


# Life



## My First Year

...after getting sober.  
Or losing 210 pounds.  
Or leaving an abusive  
husband. Five women  
(and one man!) tell  
**Kimberly Bonnell** their  
roller-coaster stories.

### ...After I Lost My Job

*Natasha Nyanin, 31, worked as a health scientist in Atlanta—until July 9, 2015, when she got a call: “Your contract is terminated.”*

The lady on the other end of the phone said, “Don’t come in tomorrow.” I asked her to repeat herself I was so shocked. Later I cried, out of fear, frustration, worry, abandonment. I had worked there for seven years and was surprised at how dispensable I was, even if I had suspected I might be dismissed—people had been let go over the years.

At the beginning I had days when I felt deep down that everything would work out; then I had moments when my soul felt as though it had been injected with lead, and I could not get out of bed. My visa was running out—I’m from Ghana—and I had an apartment I could no longer afford.

I checked LinkedIn constantly and contacted friends to circulate my résumé, but I had to postpone my job search while my green card was being processed. I picked up odd jobs, like being an extra on a TV set and dog sitting.

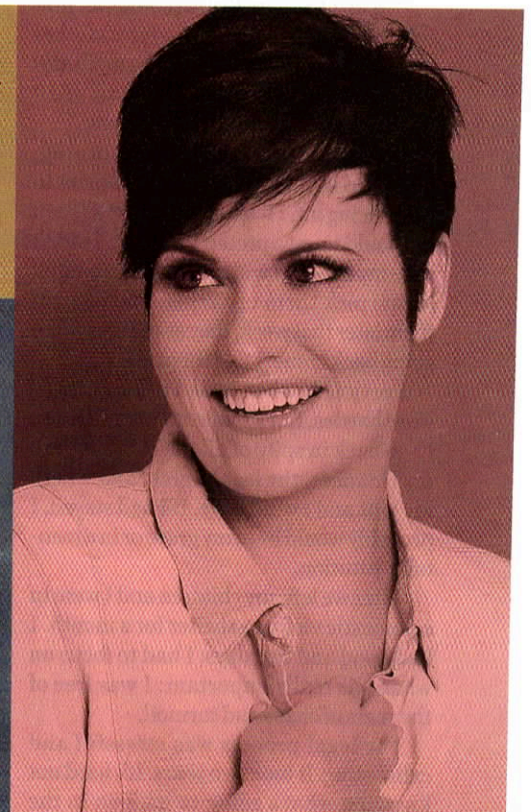
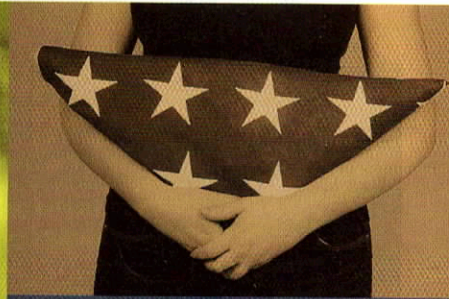
For my thirtieth birthday my friends threw me a black-tie party. It was a glorious evening. I was surrounded by people who loved and believed in me, celebrating in the midst of a shit storm! That night I felt pure exhilaration and gratitude.

Their support helped me take a gamble on a whim: I moved to New York City. The first month was hard—I was sleeping on a friend’s air mattress. For two months after that, I subleased a room in Brooklyn while I searched endlessly for a job. And



## A Year in the Life

From left: Poulson, Hash, Hash on her wedding day, Nyanin, and Max-Dixon



NYANIN: COLBY BLOUNT; MAX-DIXON: NICOLE LEBRIS; PLANT: MICHELA RAVASIO/STOCKSY; POULSON: COURTESY OF CHARLES POULSON; WEDDING: JACK LOONEY; HASH: COURTESY OF EMILY HASH; FLAG: DREW CLINE

somehow, despite all the rejections, I felt my creative impulses spark. I started to write: a blog, poems, essays. With no luck finding a full-time job, I became convinced that I needed to make a freelance career work. To build the world I want for myself rather than bang on perpetually closed doors.

I never imagined I could survive without a regular job. Now, a little more than a year later, I have more conviction than ever that losing my job was one of the better things to happen in my life. It has put me on a creative path I might never have had the courage to fully jump into. And I don't say this from a place of success—I'm still couch surfing! But I have learned so much: how to become my own PR, how to pitch new projects. I'm in preproduction for a podcast and a travel show.

It can be unsettling to no longer have a steady paycheck, but I am a more compassionate person having suffered this upheaval, and that means I can be a better friend, a better daughter, and a better person. I am more fearless.

## ...Dating as a Trans Man

*Charlie Poulson, 25, is the founder and director of a Los Angeles design studio. About a year ago he started dating with his newly expressed identity.*

I'd already had top surgery and spent three years taking testosterone before I felt ready to date as a passing trans man. (That means when people first see me, they *think* of me as a man.) My first date was with a woman I met through friends. (I made us gluten-free macaroni and cheese, and I could tell she was probably into me when she suggested we "*Lady-and-the-Tramp* this mac and cheese.") When I drove her home, I came out to her as trans, in a panic. I can't be totally comfortable unless I'm being true to myself. She was really sweet about it, but we didn't last.

Most of the women I've dated, I've met through something transition-related, an event or a group, so I usually don't even have to tell them I'm trans. When I do, a

lot of women don't bat an eyelash, which is probably my favorite reaction. A few have seemed surprised and said things like, "You look so manly!" They mean well, but they make me feel like I'm supposed to be or look a certain way. A better reaction? "Tell me about your experiences around that," which could lead to more meaningful conversations. A few women have been totally inappropriate; they ask, "Do you have a penis?" "Do you still have a vagina?" "How big were your boobs?"

Then there's been the whole issue of sexuality: Early on I feared that if I dated a lesbian, she would still see me as a woman (albeit an incredibly butch one). But I also worried that if I went to a straight bar to talk to a (presumably) straight girl, I'd feel like I had this taboo secret—even though I wasn't keeping being trans a secret! This was all exhausting. I thought about it more, and I began to understand that I don't care what someone's sexual orientation is. If we're mutually into each other and the relationship is healthy, then everything else is just secondary. ➡



## ...After Leaving an Abusive Marriage

*In 2014 Shacre Bennett, now 35, pre-stocked her car with spare clothes and documents, planning to finally leave her abusive husband of 12 years for good. She lives in Delaware.*

It was early on a weekend morning, and I fled in the middle of an argument to avoid being hit. I had to go to court as soon as I could to get a protection order. I didn't have my children with me, and he wouldn't let me pick them up. When I finally got them later that week, they asked if we were going back home. I told them no.

Previously when I tried to leave, there were battles, but I made up my mind not to go back in spite of all the barriers, like my finances, the legal fights, and where my kids and I would live. If I had stayed, I probably would be in my grave or in a mental institution.

After we left, my children and I were in a domestic violence shelter for a month. I had good and bad days. I had to focus on what was really important: I was free of the years of chaos and turmoil.

The legal process was stressful and exhausting. It took two years. It's hard not knowing what's going to happen in the court system with your children and not knowing if you'll have the finances to care for them. All I wanted was to be divorced.

I've overcome so much, by the grace of God. I was in church, I started therapy, and I went to support groups; peer-to-peer groups helped my kids. I took financial classes with the Allstate Foundation. All this gave me strength when I felt like life was too tough.

I've found my voice over this year: The more I spoke out, the more it helped me heal. Leaving the marriage, I didn't know who I was; I was lost, angry, confused, and

### Moving On

"I walked away without guilt or any regrets," says Bennett.



depressed, and just downright felt like nothing. For so many years all that negativity resonated in my spirit. I had to train myself to release those thoughts. Now I know who I am: I am not a victim, but I'm a survivor. I have the victory. To anyone in an abusive situation: Don't wait. Go get help. There is life after domestic violence.

*more than five years because of the health risks associated with her weight.*

I've been plus-size since I was 10 years old. Food was like breathing air for me. I couldn't get enough of the good feeling that came from eating.

So when my husband and I found out that our son, Ayden, had autism, food was my comfort. You have all these hopes for your child, and to find out he has autism—well, that diagnosis hits you.

I gained so much weight that I was almost bedridden. When I hit 440 pounds, the doctor told me I possibly had only five years to live. I realized, I can't keep eating this way; Ayden is going to need me for a really long time. He was my motivator.

The surgery was scary, but not compared with what came next: For six weeks

## ...After Weight-Loss Surgery

*Ashley Max-Dixon, 31, a model and mother of four in Columbus, Ohio, had gastric bypass surgery after her doctor told her she might not live*

## "8 things I learned in my first year of being sober"

by **Kristi Coulter**, a writer in Seattle. She has been sober since June 2013 and chronicling all about it at [offdry.com](http://offdry.com).

**1** I'm not incurably tired. That fried feeling I had for years? It wasn't fatigue. It was a chronic low-grade hangover.

**2** Alcohol is a depressant. I knew this from health class; I just didn't think it applied to me personally. Turns out, when I stop putting a depressant in my body, it gradually stops being depressed. Who knew?

**3** My favorite ice cream flavor is banana. I have tried *thousands* of flavors at this point—and somehow I still wonder why I'm not losing weight from cutting out all those wine calories.

**4** I deserve that ice cream, damn it. In the past I had tried to quit drinking by berating myself for any slipup. This time I give myself prizes: manicures, magazines, shoes. Rewards work.

CAR: AMANDA MARSALIS/TRUNK ARCHIVE





encing these emotions. Not everything feels good, but at least it's real.

I was most nervous about how the surgery would affect my husband and me. When I was 440 pounds, I'd think, He probably thinks I am awful to look at; he can't love me. But he told me, "I have always loved you. Your weight has never been an issue."

Three years after the surgery, I became a plus-size fit model. It's now my job *not* to lose! I weigh 230 pounds, and I'm healthy; I'm active. Last May I walked in the Christian Siriano/Lane Bryant runway show. Because of my surgery I am accomplishing my dreams—and being there for my son. I once mourned the child I thought I lost, but I never lost him: He has always been there, leading me.

---

## ...After a Loved One's Suicide

---

*Emily Hash was 28 when her husband, Marine Sergeant Mitchell D. Hash, died by suicide in their Charlottesville, Virginia, home in 2015.*

From the moment I met Mitch, he made me laugh. He was fiercely funny and a little bit odd, brilliant, with such a big heart. We'd been married two years when he died. I had been learning how to be a wife—suddenly I had to learn how to be a widow.

That first night, my parents took me home with them, and I never went back to my house. I stayed there for nine months, and my brother moved in too. Friends from all walks of life showed up soon after with nothing but love to give.

The first week, my mom made sure I did not sleep in my bed alone: She had my girlfriends rotate nights with me and hold me while I cried. I was having a hard time

eating, so when my dad found out that I'd drink smoothies, there was one in my hand every day for a month. Simple gestures like that mattered a lot.

One day I picked up from my house a bag of things someone had packed for me. They didn't notice it had blood spattered on the side. From then on I was terrified of anything that had been in my bedroom.

I was also afraid of life without Mitch. I witnessed Mitch's death, so fear came in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder. Everything was a trigger—noises, the dark. I was afraid I would see his ghost when the lights were out. C.S. Lewis said, "No one ever told me grief felt so like fear."

At times it felt like I'd imagined being married, as if Mitch wasn't even real.

Many months later a form of anger settled in and hasn't left. It's easier to be mad than to let real pain and hurt exist, so it's become a protective layer. I'll work it out, but I'm just not there yet.

Grief isn't predictable, and a loss like this never goes away. You don't "get over it"; you learn how to manage it in your life. I'm trying not to rush myself. I write a lot—it lets me process things in a way that speaking out loud just can't.

One of the hardest parts, which I still struggle with, is dealing with people speculating about why this happened. They want a cause ("He was in the military") or a diagnosis ("She was bipolar"), but suicide is not so easily understood. I think Mitch kept his pain to himself partly because he didn't want to be a burden.

Since Mitch died, I've been humbled by experiencing unconditional love. Mitch's fellow soldiers were by my side within days; even now their tragedy assistance program for survivors, TAPS, has been an irreplaceable support. I cling to that relentless love of my family and friends. It gives me peace and hope that there is a lot of beautiful love in this world to go around. **G**

I was on a liquid diet. It felt like forever, especially when I was making spaghetti for my family, then drinking a protein shake. But I lost 50 pounds that first month. In six months I was down 100 pounds. Every time I looked in the mirror, I was like, "I want to buy something! I look great!" I got new clothes for every 10 pounds I lost. What fit one week didn't fit the next!

Through it all I had to learn how to deal with life without using eating as a crutch. Relationships that were food-focused revealed themselves—those people aren't in my life anymore, but that's OK.

I can't eat for comfort now; it makes me ill. I'm still learning coping methods for dealing with my feelings, but I don't muffle them with food. It's scary experi-

5

When in doubt, slow down. When I want to drink, I think, Whoa, Nellie, and play a mental movie of what actually happens, always happens, after that first glass. The movie starts as a rom com and ends as a tragedy.

6

Sober vacations feel twice as blissfully long as drinking ones. How is this possible? I still don't know. I assume a wonderful wormhole is involved.

7

Life is not always easy. Year one of my sobriety included family troubles, canceled flights, a job change, and swine flu (yes, *the* swine flu). We all have common human troubles...

8

...but alcohol never makes them easier. At one especially tough moment, when broaching the topic of end-of-life planning with my parents, I caught myself saying "Thank God I'm sober" out loud. Me? Yes. Because sober is the only way I can tackle my human troubles. And I do.