

We lost Charismatic a year ago today.

It feels like longer than that, in some ways. In the fast-paced, chaos-filled psychosis that has been the news cycle this past year, it feels like his death happened sometime in a previous century. Instead, today marks the anniversary of a tragic end to what had become a wonderful comeback story.

It seemed, in the early days of 2017, that Charismatic had finally put everything together. He had returned to the US from Japan in December and had settled beautifully into retirement at Old Friends Farm near Lexington. "Everything about this place is wonderful," he said in an interview after his arrival. "It's just so nice to be back in the US again, too. There are more positives here than I could ever begin to list. I'm looking forward to it."

Two months later, he was gone. We'll never know exactly how the internal bleeding started, but the medical consensus is that he never knew what hit him. He died at peace, thinking only of the bright future ahead of him, and not of his cloudy and troubled past.

Charismatic was a classic "problem colt." A foalhood reputation for being a troublemaker followed him into his racing career, and he became far better known for his off-track antics than his on-track success. "I was terrible," he reflected. "I feel bad for the trainers and other colts that had to put up with me. No prank was too wild, no rule was unbreakable for me. I spent as much time getting yelled at as I did training, which is probably why I never won anything." His lack of on-track success dropped him down into the claiming ranks, where he finally gained some traction—and some confidence. "I think finally winning a race was the light bulb moment; like, if I actually tried to win, I could do it. And that changed my attitude towards racing."

His newfound motivation was met with moderate success, including a couple of small-time victories and an off-the-board but respectable run in the Santa Anita Derby. It wasn't much, but it was enough to earn Charismatic a ticket to the Kentucky Derby. "Realistically, I didn't think I had any chance of winning," he recalled. "I was just there to have a good time, maybe collect some second or third place money, and get laid. And hey, I did all that and more." Charismatic's victory at Churchill Downs put him on top of the world but didn't slow down his partying. "If I was going to win the Triple Crown, I was going to do it my way. And that wasn't going to be going to bed at 9:30 and saying please and thank you. It was gonna be hangovers during morning workouts and a different filly every night." His wave of success continued with a resounding victory in the Preakness, setting him up for a date with destiny at Belmont Park.

"No matter how hard I try, I'll never forget that Saturday at Belmont. And trust me, I've tried everything." A chance to become the first Triple Crown winner in 22 years awaited Charismatic on that fateful day in June 1999, and as the race bore on, it looked like it was going to happen. "Everything was going right. It was the right pace, I was in the right spot, I waited for the right moment to make my move, I broke clear of the field. Nothing but dirt between me and the finish." His voice cracked. "And then it all went to hell."

Pain shot through Charismatic's leg. He attempted to fight his way to the finish but was easily passed by Lemon Drop Kid and Vision And Verse, crossing the wire in third place. The full extent of the injury was revealed that night; multiple fractures of the cannon and sesamoid bones required emergency surgery and guaranteed he would never race again. "I think the way it ended had more of an impact on me than the injury itself," he said. "I was less than a furlong from having the world at my hooves, and my own body failed me. Laying in that hospital bed, I remember thinking 'It can't get any worse than this.'" He paused. "I sure showed me, didn't I?"

The recovery from the injury took several months, and that meant lots of painkillers. "I'd always been a heavy drinker, but drugs were a no-go when I was racing because of testing. With the injury, though, racing was out of the picture. I had plenty of access to them, too. Before I realized they could be trouble, I couldn't stop." The continuation of his wild lifestyle from before the injury coupled with the new addictions brought on a downward spiral that cost Charismatic his breeding contract with Lane's End Farm. "I would've kicked me out too," he admitted. "There really wasn't much time where I wasn't drunk, high or both, and it was reflecting badly on the farm. When they fired me, they presented me with a bunch of bad reviews that mares had left me. We all get copies of all the reviews. I had stacks of them sitting on my desk. I'd never read a single one of them. I'd just stopped caring."

Unable to secure a new contract in the US, Charismatic was sent to Japan, a period which he sarcastically referred to as "The Exile," where he continued to deteriorate. "The idea, I think, was that taking me away from the alcoholics and drug dealers I knew in Kentucky would get me to straighten out. I guess it just didn't occur to them that the Japanese drink and do drugs too. I was just doing them alone now."

Isolated from the American racing world, Charismatic drifted into anonymity, surfacing only at the 2004 Kentucky Derby, the fifth anniversary of his biggest triumph. Visibly drunk, he stumbled his way through a speech commemorating his victory. "It was rough," recalled Menifee, his biggest rival on the Triple Crown trail. "It was one thing to see it when you talked to him face to face, but on stage like that it was embarrassing. You felt bad for him." An attempted intervention later that year had no effect. There was open speculation that he may not live to the tenth anniversary Derby.

It was the prospect of returning to the stage at Churchill in 2009 that helped Charismatic turn the corner. "I got a couple phone calls from reporters who wanted to interview me for the tenth anniversary of the win, and I took a good look at myself in the mirror. I decided there was no way I was going to walk out there as messed up as I had become. So I changed." He started weaning himself off drugs and cutting back on alcohol, though the habits continued. "I tried going every other day instead of every day. Then to challenge myself, I tried going two or three days without. I'd still fall back on it, but the gaps were getting bigger. It was like I was race training again. I had a goal."

On the day of the 2009 Kentucky Derby, a healthier, thinner Charismatic surprised media, friends, and even his stablemates. "I was shocked," recalled Silver Charm. "He'd done it all on his own. No treatment, no rehab, no nothing. He always more or less kept to himself, so we didn't even know he was going clean. I asked him what he'd been doing, and he winked and said, 'It's more like what I haven't been doing, if you catch my drift.' It was the first time I'd really seen him act normal in ten years."

By the beginning of 2010 Charismatic was completely drug and alcohol free ("except for a mint julep at the Derby. That's just the law.") and becoming increasingly active in diplomatic circles in Japan. After Silver Charm's retirement, he was offered a spot at the head of the American equine contingent, a role which he begrudgingly accepted. "I never wanted it, but they needed someone to handle the transition from Silver Charm to I'll Have Another, and I had the most experience. It wasn't the most fun job in the world, but I'm glad I took the opportunity. It was one of very few things I can say I accomplished in Japan."

Despite the leading diplomatic role, Charismatic continued to push for a return to the US. "Japan was never a very happy place for me. It carried too much baggage. It got better after I cleaned up, but I still can't say I ever really enjoyed it there. I'd vacation in the US every chance I got. I wanted to come back permanently." Old Friends finally gave him the opportunity in October of 2016, and he jumped at the chance. "I'd written my resignation within five minutes of getting off the phone with them," he laughed. "I couldn't wait. I was finally going home."

Though his return home was short lived, his lifelong impact will be felt for years to come. His openness about his battles with addiction encouraged Smarty Jones to seek treatment for depression. The two also teamed up to form The Carnation League, a support group for thoroughbreds whose Triple Crown bids faltered in the Belmont Stakes. Though he never went to rehab himself, Charismatic donated large sums of money to organizations that aid in addiction recovery, and reportedly left a sizeable portion of his estate to help battle prescription drug addiction in racers recovering from injuries.

Much like his racing career, Charismatic's life was taken from us too soon, at what seemed to be its most promising moments. But he will forever be remembered for the moments he shined the brightest, as a champion on and off the track.