

1. OUT OF THE WOODS

The director announces the philosophy of the center to all the novices.

“In the heart of every sinner is a saint.”

I wonder how can I know sainthood if I’m not really good at sinning.

I have decided to check myself into the clinic. Strictly speaking this is not a medical facility even though they have a number of resident psychiatrists on duty. They actually make no claims about being able to cure any diseases or right any psychological disorders. Instead, they promise a general feelings of well being. They are almost like gurus who profess to share a world view with their confirmed believers. I am ready to take the plunge.

I have been urged by friends and family to do something drastic to clean my life up. Their greatest fear is that I will do something to embarrass rather than the fact that I am messing up my own life. But I am willing to listen to their guidance no matter how off the mark it might be.

I have to admit that things have been spiraling out of control in recent months. Maybe I am just losing my touch. Whatever it is, I am no longer the wonder boy who once graced this fair city with my mad skills and elegant charm. If I have surrendered my title to other lesser lights, so be it.

I know that it will only be a little while before they are beset with the same troubles as me. After all, success does bring with its rich spoils, and it doesn’t take long before the hangover does a number on the most hardy of constitutions.

It was only a month of so ago, that a night of heavy partying left my crew and me in a desperate funk. Our best lines weren’t working on each other, much less any of the women in the club. None of us were obnoxiously drunk. We just seemed out of place.

“I’m getting nothing tonight!”

“Little Willy needs a friend.”

“Maybe Little Willy needs to stay friendless for the night.”

I hardly knew what held us together at a moment like this. Self-destructiveness is a flaw that should never be shared among friends. Together, we were the Titanic looking for that damn iceberg.

“What are we going to do now?”

“The place is about to close?”

“We could invite some girls back for a party to Jay’s house.”

“That seems as likely to happen as a miracle from heaven.”

“I don’t want to go home now!”

“I feel too lonely to be alone.”

We were terminally screwed without any immediate hope for recovery.

“Is there a doctor in the house?”

“I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we pay for a stripper?”

“At this hour of night.”

“I know a girl who could use some extra work.”

Jay can’t get his friend on the phone. This has only confirmed an eternity of desperation. In the morning, none of this would matter. But at this moment, we seemed hopeless.

Woody drove as we made our way through Midtown. All the bars were letting out around us.

“There’s a cute girl. Let me call her over.

“Jay, this is not the red light district. We want to avoid the blue lights rolling up on us at this time of the night.”

Woody reassures us, “I am not drunk. At least, not like you guys.”

I chuckled.

“What is it?”

“I could call my sister’s baby sitter. She puts out.”

“Randy, you are an asshole.”

We are beyond redemption.

“Maybe we could all watch as one of us bled out. That could score us a few points towards salvation.”

“Like offing a vampire!”

“I need to get off so badly.”

“Quit being a little bitch, Randy!”

“Jay, you’re pretty horny. Why don’t you suck him off!”

“I knew that it was going to come to this.

The four of us all lined up in front of a massage parlor off of Cheshire Bridge Rd.”

“Are they still open?”

“This ain’t a bar. They don’t have to close at four.”

I checked my watch.

“Doesn’t Saturday service start in two hours? The Lord is willing to forgive shit like this.”

“Forgiven but not forgotten!”

The crew slid in the door. We were all pretty noisy.

“If you guys don’t keep it down, I’m going to have to call the police.”

Her face was gaunt. Her hair very stringy. So skinny.

“Do you run the place?”

“You take credit cards.”

Woody and Jay were still pretty boisterous. Jay knocked Woody into the wall. This biker dude came out of the back.

“Is there a problem?”

Mick was trying to restrain himself, “We weren’t looking for a guy!”

“Oh shit!”

I was ready for the dude just to plaster one of us on the ground to give an example for the rest.

“Can I help you, boys? If you’re not going to pay, you’ll have to leave.”

Under his breath, Jay asked, “Is she your girl?”

Fortunately, Easy Rider didn’t hear a thing.

I stupidly said, “Do you have something here to get me off?”

“I’ve got a can of Drano?”

“He’s being an asshole.”

I wasn’t sure if Woody meant me or Easy. This was beyond out of control. And I just wanted something to get me off.

I was ready for punches to start flying. I imagined Easy pulling out a knife or a gun.

“You gentleman will have to leave. Maybe you can come back on a night when you’re not so rowdy. We run a respectable business. We don’t want the cops closing us down.”

“We’ve got money”

“Lots of it!”

“Sorry!”

We didn’t want to risk more of an incident. We had even been rejected at a massage parlor.

Woody imitated the frail girl’s voice, “I’ll suck any of you off.”

Just as we pulled away from the parking lot, this police cruiser moved in on us and turned on his lights.

“Oh fuck!”

“I haven’t had that much to drink.”

The cop asks Woody to get out of the car.

“We are fucked.”

He led him to his car where none of us could see him.

“What is he doing?”

I need to take a piss. And it is taking forever.

“They’re going to arrest us all.”

“Maybe we should get out of the car. He’s beating Woody.”

“He’s got a gun. And he’s looking for an excuse to use it.”

“He’s not going to shoot us in a parking lot.”

A few minutes later, Woody walked back arm in arm with the cop. They were both laughing hysterically.

“What happened to you? Were you two making out?”

“No, he’s the cop that’s worked some of our parties at Tech. We’re old friends.”

“I thought that they were going to take us all down to jail.”

“It sure put a scare into all of you.”

“You knew all the time. Why didn’t you let on?”

“It’s been such a shitty night. I just wanted a little fun.”

“Woody, you gotta stop somewhere. I need to take a piss.”

When I reached home, I was thoroughly exhausted. Could things have been any worse? Another night like that, and I’d be checking into the hospital.

“Maybe I need to take some time off.”

“What are you talking about? After a few drinks, you’ll forget that any of that happened.”

Jay was trying to coax me to come out. I felt that I was at the end of my rope. I couldn’t let anything like that happen to me again.

“Have you ever thought about taking some time off?”

“Where’s the Randy that everyone knows? If you don’t use it, you’ll lose it.”

I was already losing it. I didn’t need to be reminded of that.

“You’re a dog. You’ve picked up the scent!”

Jay was right. The partying had always been the thing that helped me out before. But I had struck out so badly that I was in such a funk. It would be hopeless to start over where we had

left off.

“Rehab is for quitters!”

I wasn’t thinking about rehab. But I knew that I needed something. I could feel a hollow in the pit of my stomach.

When I stayed in for a week or so, everyone thought that something was up with me. The boys first begged to get me out of the house. Then they realized that it was beyond that.

“It wouldn’t hurt to talk to someone.”

I closed my eyes.

“You know what they say here: either you check out, or you check in. I guess you’re in.”

I am now listening to one of the other inmates. I remind myself why I am here.

“Who were you running away from?”

“A bad marriage. Although I’d have to say that I did my best to make it worse.”

It sounded as she had a story to tell.”

“I want to hear more!”

“So does every other guy. It’s pretty good foreplay.”

“What do they think of you here?”

“Everything that you do, you do just to get fucked.”

I feel as if she is begging me to get more involved in her treatment. It is reminding me why I came here in the first place.

“I better get back to my room before I say something that I am going to regret.”

“What’s your name?”

“Kate!”

As she walks back to her room, my true love gives me the eye!

Michelle is one of the employees here. She is my ray of sunshine in an otherwise drab facility. She is the rabbit who makes this captive greyhound run.

“If you hate it so much here, you could just leave.”

“This is just my way to coping with things.”

I feel that as my condition improves, I become closer to Michelle. I am measuring my progress just in this way.

“You no that I can’t date guests.”

“Michelle, I believe that it would only be true justice. After all, you know everything about me. And I know so little about you.”

“I know a great deal about everyone else in the complex. It’s not as if they’re lining up to harass me.”

“You’re crushing me dear. I thought that we had something going. Now you’re telling me that I’m just a nuisance.”

“Randy, I’m not being so affronting to you. There are rules here. You’re supposed to be here to get well. To have a new outlook on life and love. Not to manifest the same kind of acquisitive nature that brought you in here.”

“Acquisitive nature? I thought that we were getting along.”

“We do get along. But you can’t get past the fact when it’s all said and done, I’m just one of your conquests.”

“I’m trying to turn over a new leaf, and you’re my first step in that process.”

“I’m sympathetic towards your progress, but I really have nothing to do with personal life.”

“I’ve opened myself like a book, and you’re going to watch me shrivel and die.”

“I can hardly take delight in your misery. But you’re really exaggerating your suffering.”

“Is that a professional opinion?”

“Maybe I mis-spoke. But you only set yourself up for disappointment when you pursue someone who’s unavailable.”

“That sounds as if you’re flirting with me, Michelle.”

“You can’t turn every negative into a positive just to benefit your delusion.”

“Even the doctors haven’t called it a delusion.”

“I’m sorry if I’m being a little harsh.”

“A little harsh?”

“I’m sorry for being harsh at all.”

“Thanks you.”

“Now, look at what you’re doing. You’re trying to make me the submissive in one of your seduction games.”

“Methinks the sweet lady doth protest too much.”

“How could I not? Randy, you are incorrigible.”

“Michelle, you are smiling.”

“I admit it. There is a little humor in everything.”

“Now, you’re laughing at my problems.”

“You have a way of twisting my words against me.”

She had a way of turning me on and then denying every minute of it.

“I’ll be thinking about you when my head hits the pillow. You’ll be a part of my dreams.”

“Randy, you love to tease.”

If Michelle is the reward for my treatment, I will do everything that they tell me. Her angelic face is enough to rehabilitate even the most hardened felon. I confess my guilt before her altar, and I sacrifice my being just for our brief moments together. If her professional ethics require that we remain apart, then that is only further proof of the true nature of my malady.

“Randy, you’ve been here for over a month, and you are continuing to put roadblocks in your path to recovery. Michelle is an employee here. She tells me that you spend all your time flirting with her.”

“I confess that I engage in some lively banter with her. But all the time? No way. She’s the one who’s infatuated with me. Listen to how she exaggerates.”

“We can’t have you fraternizing with the employees.”

“Are you jealous, Rachel?”

“You came here to help you deal with your problems. But you’re placing all the onus on us. If you aren’t going to make an effort, nothing is going to change in your life.”

“I’m an eager listener, Rachel. If you have some suggestions for me, I’m ready to take your advice.”

“You have to stop this kind of talk with Michelle and any of the other employees in her.”

“I thought that I was being very mature with Michelle. I haven’t propositioned her. I’ve

just tried to be her friend.”

“You can’t even be that. She has a job here. You shouldn’t interfere with that.”

“Is it really such a big deal?”

“Randy, do you know what you’re doing.”

I shook my head and stared straight ahead like a child about to be punished.

“You are resisting change. You’re just putting all your efforts into trying to seduce Michelle. She’s just a prize like all the other women in your life. This is not about curing anything. You’re only perfecting your method.”

“I didn’t realize that. I’ve just been trying to be a model prisoner.”

“Is that a slip of the tongue?”

“Sorry, I guess that I’m a little bored here.”

“We’ve talked about that. You’ve putting all your efforts into the pursuit of women as if it’s some big game. Everything in your life has been a temporary respite from that one passion.”

“Aren’t you validating that passion by talking about it with such interest?”

“You shouldn’t be trying to seduce me as well.”

“I’m only listening to you, Rachel.”

“You never step up to the plate for you actions.”

“Are you trying to engage me, Rachel?”

“I want to help you, Randy. You have to be willing to change. To step back and take a look at your actions. Not react to everything automatically.”

“I’m listening to everything that you tell me. I’m making mental notes about what I have to do to make things differently.”

“You’re going to quit trying hook up with Michelle.”

“I’m sorry.”

“This is about making an apology.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“You have to figure that out for yourself.”

“You’re going to leave me on my own.”

“I’m not here to tell you what to do. I’m trying to guide you in your choices.”

“So it’s all up to me? Is it OK to like Michelle?”

“You have to exercise caution in your actions. If you don’t draw some kind of boundaries, you’re not going to change.”

I’m not sure if she really knows what it means to draw boundaries. All that I can figure out is that she is a little jealous of Michelle.

Rachel is doing her best to make a real person out of me. All my life has been focused on pleasure for its own sake. I am like a machine.

“Your only hope is to transform desire into real affection. You have to learn how to love.”

“That sounds reasonable.”

“If you want to learn how to love someone else, you have to learn to love yourself”

“That’s a little corny. How do I love myself: stare at myself in the mirror all day?”

“I’m not telling you to be narcissistic. I’m only advising you to accept your shortcomings.”

“What do I do? Make a list?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

“I don’t really like to think about things that much. It gets in the way of my vibe.”

“You have no vibe if that’s what you call it. That’s why you’re here.”

“And you’re going to help me get my groove back.”

“I’m advising you that you need to change the direction in your life.”

“How do I do that? I don’t have enough of a life anymore to offer me the foundation to change.”

“So you admit that things have gone too far.”

“I’m not really admitting to much of anything.”

“No one forced you to come here. There had to be some reason why you decided to get away from all the distractions in your life.”

“I needed someone to tell me that I was loveable.”

“You’re not playing with me now.”

“I don’t have much left to play with.”

“What are you asking for?”

“Something to perk me up. Isn’t that what you’re here for?”

“I’m trying to help you understand what got you on the wrong path. “

”That’s a moral judgement.”

Rachel is challenging me. I am getting a little aroused thinking about the possibilities.

“You’re not supposed to be in my room.”

“Kate, you as much as propositioned me. Now, you’re getting all moral on me.”

“I’m trying to apply what I’ve learned here.”

“The only thing that they’ve taught us is that we need to feel guilty when we have sex.”

“I’ve never thought of guilt as an aphrodisiac.”

I try to kiss her. But she pushes me away.

“We really can’t be friends.”

“Why did you invite me here?”

“I’m coming out of my skin. I just need a fix.”

I tell myself that I am not cheating on my true love, Michelle.

“Are you telling me that this is a desperation fuck?”

“I didn’t realize that you were some kind of celebrity.”

I try to catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Is this what it means to love myself?

“I didn’t think that I was that bad.”

“Bad is being a little charitable, unless you call trying to get yourself off at my expense some kind of gift.”

“I thought that this was supposed to be just physical.”

“I thought the same thing. But I didn’t get much in the way of physical contact. Is that why you’re in here? To repair yourself.”

“It’s not as if you’re turning me on. I was really turned on when I first saw you. Now I see you for what you are. A sad little girl.”

“You’re a fucking twat.”

“I thought that was my line.”

“If it was, you haven’t done that much to get the twat going!”

“I’m trying to learn how to replace pure desire with affection.”

“Rachel told you that!”

“She tells everybody that?”

“Don’t tell me that you think that you’re special. We’re all in here for the same reason.”

“I didn’t think that I was special. I just thought that I was good. Where am I supposed to go now? I came here for the miracle cure.”

Would Michelle be so brutal to me? I could get this kind of abuse for free on the outside.

“Maybe a good drink would have tamed me a little more?”

“A good stiff one?”

I only stare into space. I caress her shoulder. She pushes me away.

“A little late for that.”

“We could try again another time.”

“I’ve seen everything about you that I want to see.”

It would be a mistake to relate my adventure to Rachel. She would only penalize me for breaking the rules of the facility.

“You can only find a cure if you want to find a cure.”

“You’re not calling it a cure, are you doctor?”

“You must have misheard me.”

“I guess that I did.”

“You believe that these meaningless couplings are going to offer you a feeling of being complete. You’re trying to make up for a sense of loss due to something that happened in your past. You’re only worsening your own estrangement from other people.”

“I do it because I’m good at it. And I like how it makes me feel. There is no big mystery.”

“Why does it feel that much better than anything else in your life: having a meal, seeing a movie, or reading a good book?”

“It’s sex. It’s there to get us off. To make us feel really good. There’s nothing tricky about it.”

“You have a way of trying to make it mean so much more. As if it’s going to redeem your from a shitty life.”

“Are you telling me that my life is shit?”

“You are telling me that. I am just listening. You are saying that there’s really nothing of meaning besides sex.”

“It’s a blast. I’m sure that you’ve tried it.”

“This is not about me.

“Of course it’s not. You’ve got it so together. That’s why you’re treating me.”

Rachel won’t play along. She is so dour.

“Why is Rachel such a bitch?”

“That’s not a nice way to talk about someone who cares that much for you.”

Michelle is being equivocal.

“Michelle, why don’t you tell it like it is? Rachel doesn’t know how to care about other people. So she tries to make it miserable for all her patients.”

“Rachel has a life separate from this place. And I do too. I don’t think that you realize that.”

“I know that you have a separate life. It just isn’t enough for you. That’s why you have to flirt with all the patients.”

“I’m not flirting with you. I just want to be sympathetic.”

“Is that all you call it?”

“I could call it way more than that. I just don’t feel it. You’re not my type. You’re just a cocky asshole. If I slept with you, you’d only fuck me up!”

“So you’ve thought about it.”

“Thought about it long enough to totally put it out of my mind.”

“So now you can put it back in your mind.”

“Dream on, loverboy.”

I want to tell myself that I am making some headway. Maybe I can follow up when I’m out of this place.

“When you leave this place, you won’t care a lick for me. I just give you a challenge because you’re here.”

“It is a real challenge.”

“But that’s the whole point. Once you have me, you won’t care.

My battle with Michelle encourages me when I get another crack at Rachel. I just want her to tell me something about myself. Her language is getting in the way.

“You don’t care about the women that you’re with. They’re all like numbers that you enter into a spreadsheet.”

“What do you want me to do? To cry my eyes out? I’m not a fucking basket case.”

“Why are you afraid to care?”

“What am I supposed to do? Poor my heart out.”

“Be a little more real. Care!”

“I’m not a love-sick high schooler. It’s not as if I believe that I’m in love with every girl that I sleep with.”

“So you hold back physically so that you don’t have to give of yourself completely.”

“Do I have a choice? If I’m on a roll, I can get really down and dirty with a girl. What more is there?”

“Is this after you’ve been drinking?”

“My drinking has nothing to do with it. I’m not here for a drinking problem.”

“But it helps you grease the wheels.”

“What does that mean?”

“You use it to help you give you grounding.”

“I’m having a good time. If the girls dig what I’m doing for them, then the world is great.”

“You are slick!”

“I didn’t think that you were here to give me pointers on my method.”

“Are you asking me for advice on your sex life?”

“Are you willing to give it?”

“I’m actually here to do something a little more serious than that. I’m not your sex

coach.”

“Doesn’t it just come down to that?”

“You are quite glib!”

“You have an answer for everything that I dish out to you. I’m having a hard time keeping up.”

“This isn’t about keeping up. You’re refusing to ask the hard questions.”

“What’s a *hard* question? These simplistic probes that you keep throwing at me. When I was young, I believed in the girls that I was with. And they fucked with me. Women can be evil. They broke my heart. After that, I just said fuck it. So I became a jerk!”

“That sounds like a poor excuse. You asked women for so much more than they could ever give you. And your antidote to your pain is to just give them nothing.”

“What can I possibly do? I can’t marry all these girls.”

“You talk like that, and there is no way that you’re going to change.”

“Even if I change, I can’t change the world.”

“But you can change your part of it. You simply can’t blame other people for your problems.”

“I’m not. I don’t have a problem. If I don’t want to fall in love, that’s my right.”

“You have to realize that you’re leading people on by your actions. In the end, what does that really do for you?”

“It gets me off!”

“Wasn’t that the exact problem that brought you here? You realized that you had become desperate. You had lost your humanity.”

She has reminded me why I checked into this place. I am just as desperate as ever. At least, I know that is part of the problem. Before I came here, I was willing to dismiss it all as a bad patch. I am the bad patch.

Rachel is considering my release from the facility. She wants to review our sessions so that she can offer a series of pointed recommendations that might facilitate my recovery.

“There are no miracles in here. That is the biggest thing to learn. You need to realize that it is up to you to fix the messes that you have made.”

I feel gratified that she is putting the burden on me.

“I’m not telling you to forgive yourself. Lord knows, you’re not ready for something like that.

“Don’t bite off more than you can chew. You can’t make the mistake of trying to do everything all at once. But don’t lose your sight on some kind of goal.”

I am not ready for a litany of cliches. But I do want to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“I’m not sure where to start.”

“Don’t give in to your desires, especially when they seem like the right thing to do.”

“How do I stop?”

“Don’t start. Quit making excuses for yourself. It’s not just your actions. Question your personality.”

“Have you told me enough?”

“You can’t keep thinking of yourself as this sex god. Think about how you dress. You look like a damn pimp!”

I wish that there was someone's life that I could just step into. But there isn't. I have to make a go of it my own way.

"I think that I really like Michelle. I'd like to see her after I leave here."

"That would not be a good idea. You have made something of her because you need a new focus for yourself. But it's not real. You're not real!"

"I want to be real!"

"Real isn't all at once. All at once is your malady. You've got to learn how to take a little bit at a time. That is what is going to help you along."

"I can't figure it out."

"Michelle is not part of the equation."

It's only a few days later that my bags are packed at by my door.

"Michelle, I'm not ready to get out of here."

"This was not meant to be permanent."

"I can come back."

"It doesn't work that way. You can only come back if you relapse."

"I thought that this was a Wellness Center."

"It is. That is why you need to live your life separate from this place."

"I want your number."

"So that you can lose. So you won't call me."

In some deep way, she was right.

Rachel checked in on me once more.

"Just let the sunlight roll off you skin!"