

The Cure

By Ian Colford

One of the conditions of my release was that I undergo regular psychiatric counselling. The case was assigned to a clinic, where I was to report twice a week for sessions that would last for at least two hours.

When I arrived for the first session I was surprised to find this sort of counselling taking place in a group setting. A young man, who seemed to be in charge, explained that trials had demonstrated it was beneficial for individuals who had suffered the effects of violence and those who had been the perpetrators of violent acts to come together in a place that was neutral and innocuous and to speak openly about their experiences. He led me to a meeting room at the back of the clinic, where a dozen chairs had been arranged into a circle.

The group had been meeting steadily for months. Because membership was voluntary, people tended to come and go. I, however, had not been given a choice and that evening, as the only new member, I was required to introduce myself to the others.

I told them my name and described where I was born and how I had come to be in this country. When nobody made any comment I went on to say that I was taking night classes and that I wanted to get a degree in psychology. After this I fell silent because I could think of nothing else that would interest them. I gazed around the circle. Every face was turned in my direction. They were male and female, young and old. One woman was pretty, another plain. I waited for them to ask me questions but for some reason they seemed intimidated. Then the young man leading the group, whose name was Alex, asked me to tell everyone what I had done.

I said that after dating for a few weeks I had discovered that the woman I was in love with was having an affair with another man. I explained that where I came from this was considered the worst kind of insult. In tribal regions it was common for the man who was wronged to determine the punishment and dispense it at a time and place of his choosing. If he decided to kill the woman, he could do it however he liked, even in public if that's what he wanted. Since I lived in the city I had not seen anything like this when I was growing up but I had been told of beheadings, floggings and mutilations. I had heard about a woman who had been chained to the back of a truck and dragged to her death along miles of dirt roads. People cheered as the

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truck went by, even other women. In another story a woman had been stripped and tied to a post in the main square of her village. Her husband had then invited people to express their disgust for her in any manner they saw fit. All day she was pelted with rocks and smeared with excrement, and then, during the night, after the young men of the village had become drunk on the local wine, they took turns violating her. The next morning she was still alive but her husband decided to leave her there because, as the saying goes, she had turned herself into garbage with her actions. No one gave her anything to eat or drink. Eventually, she starved and her body was discarded in the forest. Officially, the government prohibited these practices but it was impossible to stamp out hundreds of years of tradition with a legislated package of reforms. As far as I knew, such atrocities continued to this day.

I didn't expect anyone in the group to applaud my actions but I wanted them to know the context. After I found out that the woman I loved was having an affair I made plans to confront her. I don't know what I expected would happen but I hoped that she would admit her guilt and promise to never see the other man again. I still loved her and wanted to believe she shared my feelings. We were to meet for dinner and when I went to her apartment I had my speech ready in my head. Her behaviour was the same as always and when we kissed I could have sworn she was thinking of me and not someone else. We went to our favourite restaurant and over dinner I said that people I knew had seen her with this man. I told her I believed them and wanted her to stop seeing him. To my surprise she denied everything, even when I answered her denials with dates and times. She kept shaking her head. I was wrong, she said. These people I trusted were making a fool of me. I had had a few drinks before meeting her and we were drinking wine with dinner. Soon I was very drunk. I tried to speak quietly but my voice kept rising in my throat and when I started to yell we were thrown out of the restaurant. She was disgusted with me by this time but I was staggering drunk and I suppose she felt responsible, so she put me in a taxi and gave the driver my address.

I told the driver I wanted to go somewhere else. First we stopped at the liquor store, where I bought a bottle of whisky and then I gave him the address of her apartment building. By the time we arrived I was calm and I found it easy to pretend I was sober. I was lucky, because the doorman was helping an old woman down the steps and I slipped into the building without being seen. Going up in the elevator, I imagined that after putting me in the taxi she had called her lover. By

now he was consoling her and caressing her and telling her to leave me and this made me even angrier than I had been to start with. I didn't have a key to her apartment, so I waited in the stairwell and listened for movements in the corridor while I drank from the bottle. The building was always quiet and I knew that nobody had seen me. It wasn't long before she got home. I waited until she had inserted the key into the lock before approaching her. When she opened the door I gave her a push from behind. There was nothing she could do to defend herself. She flew forward, her head striking the wall as she went down. She was unconscious when she landed on the floor. I took a drink and looked at her. She seemed different to me now, like something soiled and rotten. I could hardly stand to touch her. I took her into the bedroom and laid her face down on the bed. I took her clothes off. Beneath her sweater and skirt she was wearing pink lingerie I had never seen before and I guessed these were a gift from her lover. I went into the kitchen and found a dishtowel. I tore a strip from this and stuffed it into her mouth and used cellophane tape to bind and gag her. It was now after midnight and it occurred to me that she had not seen me come up to her from behind and would have no idea who was doing this to her when she awoke. I turned off all the lights and sat down.

I tipped the bottle of whisky up to my mouth. As the minutes went by my mind became crowded with images of the women I had heard about who had betrayed their husbands and who had suffered unspeakably as a result. These stories had been whispered in the schoolyard when I was young and recited at bars where I'd spent many of my evenings drinking before attaining legal age. I was always disgusted with the people who narrated these tales. I remembered laughter and raised glasses but I thought it was nauseating, whether the stories were true or not, that civilized men could speak like this about the women they were supposed to love. When I considered these loutish friends of mine, I often thought it was no wonder their women looked for companionship elsewhere, away from hands roughened by manual labour and minds left dull from inactivity. Who could blame them if they sought kind words and gentle manners? Who could blame them for being dissatisfied with a role that would never allow them to be anything more than the bearer of children and a plaything that their stupid husbands used to spend their lust?

After a while I fell asleep but I woke up when the empty bottle rolled off my lap and clattered on the wooden floor. I opened my eyes and saw dimly that light was filtering into the room from outside. I

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realized that the sun was coming up and as my eyes regained a kind of focus and I saw where I was, the previous evening returned to me in all its horror. She was still on the bed, naked and lying on her stomach, her arms behind her bound together at the wrist, her legs bound at the ankle and these bindings held together with more tape so that she could not move her arms or her legs. The gag was still in her mouth. As she struggled she made whimpering sounds that made me think of an animal caught in a trap. Then I giggled because what she suddenly reminded me of was a turkey trussed up and ready for the oven. I tried to stand up but reeled drunkenly. My stomach lurched with every move I made.

As I unwrapped the tape from her arms and legs I fought against the pressure of vomit forcing its way up my throat. Her face was stained with tears. I pulled the gag from her mouth and heard my own voice telling her how sorry I was and asking her to forgive me. But I was laughing too because the turkey image refused to go away. I couldn't stop laughing. My hands were shaking I was laughing so hard and I was afraid I'd hurt her when I loosened the tape where it stuck to her skin. She didn't say a word. When she was free she jumped from the bed, grabbed the bottle and struck me on the head. I fell to the floor; vomit spewing from my mouth. The last thing I remember before blacking out was the tremor in her voice as she spoke on the phone to the police.

As I talked I watched the other participants. Alex nodded and smiled encouragement whenever I paused or appeared unable to go on. The others seemed unsure how to respond. A few kept their eyes on me as I spoke but some looked at the floor. As a group they seemed confused and embarrassed. I noticed in particular one older woman whose mouth was set in a prim scowl.

The next step in the process involved discussion of what I had told them but nobody seemed willing to go first. After a few moments of unsuccessful prompting Alex got things started.

The discussion turned on my state of mind at the time of the assault. A woman asked if I'd ever imagined I could do something like that. Another remarked that culture was no excuse and that people made their choices according to their hearts. Then a young man in a jacket and tie asked if it had been raining on the night I had hurt my friend. I said I couldn't be certain but it might have been. He explained that there are a lot of people who get depressed during bad weather and that storms and rain showers can cause some people to lose control of their impulses. If you check the statistics, he argued, you'll see that

the incidence of violence becomes more frequent as the weather worsens. There was scientific proof, he said. This provoked some harsh comments from others in the group and, after a passionate exchange, Alex intervened. During the pause in the discussion, someone asked me if I'd apologized to the woman I had terrorized. I said that I'd written her a letter to say I was sorry. But I hadn't actually seen her again because she refused to set foot in any room where I was present.

"No wonder," the older woman said. "You're an animal."

I looked at her and tried to think of something to say but before I could open my mouth, Alex told her that this sort of response was neither welcome nor helpful. To this she raised her chin and repeated what she'd said. Alex repeated what he'd said but she refused to back down and when he saw that arguing with her was pointless he moved the discussion on to other topics.

There was a girl sitting opposite me in the circle and an hour later when the group broke up she was the only one who hadn't spoken. Her eyes were dark and her expression enigmatic. She had seemed to follow the discussion with interest, so I assumed she was just too shy to say anything in front of the group. I was about to approach her when Alex patted my arm and began telling me not to be discouraged, that these things happened and everyone got over them. I said that, on the contrary, I didn't think the session had gone badly at all and I was looking forward to coming back. The others were talking among themselves now and when Alex said goodbye I turned to where the girl had been but she was gone.

I left the clinic and lit a cigarette as I walked. It was a clear night. I drew my gloves out of my pockets and pulled them on. When I'd left the bus shelter on the way here I'd noticed an all-night diner and since it was cold and I was not in a hurry, I went in and took a seat in a booth. Someone had left behind that day's newspaper. A waitress came by and I ordered a cup of coffee. As I read about the events of the day, my mind returned to the therapy session. I suppose I could understand that having the perpetrators and victims of violence together in one room would force each to learn something about the other. But I didn't see how someone like me would benefit from this program. I was not a violent person and had only acted the way I had because of the alcohol. I wasn't looking for excuses, like the fellow who wanted to blame the weather. I knew I had hurt another person but I preferred to think I would never do something like that again. The old woman seemed to think I was incorrigible but I wanted her to

know that my remorse was genuine, that I accepted my punishment and understood her disgust. I think more than anything I needed her to forgive me and perhaps this was what Alex's program was all about.

The waitress brought my coffee and left but I sensed someone else was standing nearby and when I looked up I saw the girl from the group session, the one who had not spoken. She was wearing a white winter coat with a fur-lined hood pulled back from her head.

"Do you mind if I sit down?" she asked. But she had already slid into the seat across from me. She smiled. She was very thin. Her neck was slender and her skin was so pale it hardly seemed real. Her gaze was unflinching and her eyes haunting in their loveliness.

"Do you want some coffee?" I asked. "Or maybe something to eat?"

"Oh, no. I'm fine."

She removed her gloves and shrugged off her coat. Settled now, she continued to smile. Beneath arched brows her eyes were a steely blue. She linked her hands together on the table.

"What is it?" I asked. Even though Alex had made the members of the group introduce themselves, I could not remember her name.

"What you did to that woman – "

I held up my hand.

"I'm not going to talk about it here," I said.

She nodded and looked away.

"You did really well tonight. New people usually don't handle it as well as you."

"How long have you been part of this group?"

"A year." Then she seemed to think. "Or maybe longer. I can't remember exactly."

We were silent for a moment. When the waitress appeared and refilled my cup the girl smiled up at her.

"Is this process supposed to be humiliating?" I asked.

"Did you find it humiliating?"

"Not particularly. But I get the impression I'm supposed to feel chastened. I can't see any other reason for doing it. Actually, I don't feel anything."

"Alex is a good man. He tries very hard."

"I don't doubt his sincerity. But I'm not convinced that what he's doing is of value to the rest of us."

She gazed at me as if she had nothing to hide and I wondered if she had been a victim of violence, as I assumed the old woman had been, or, like me, a perpetrator.

"You'll learn," she said. "It might take a while but some day you'll

see the worth in what he's doing.”

“A year is a long time,” I remarked after a moment, when it seemed she had nothing more to say. “Why is it taking you so long to get through this?”

She glanced down at the table. “It's not easy to explain. There's something in me I'm learning to confront. I'm still not where I should be.”

All at once she seemed saddened or distressed. I waited for her to go on.

“What you did to that woman,” she said, “You only did it because you loved her. I can see that. Love makes us do terrible things. But you only did what you had to. She should have been thankful. I think it's too bad she couldn't understand that you were telling her how much you loved her. If she had listened she would have heard what you were saying. But some people, you know, they never listen. Your friend didn't even try. I can tell she didn't from what you said. I only wish – ” Here she attempted a smile but instead the corners of her lips turned downward. “It's what I've always wanted, someone who loves me enough to hurt me. You know. Really hurt me.”

I watched her. As the words tumbled from her mouth I caught them, one by one. F&C

Ian Colford's fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including the *Journey Prize Anthology*. His unpublished novel, *The Confessions of Joseph Blanchard*, won the 2001 H.R. (Bill) Percy Prize from the Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia. A collection of stories will be published by Porcupine's Quill in 2008. He lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia.