

## Deceptive Beauty

By: Christian Sandler

Look into your heart. What the fuck kind of advice is that? Like Bernie from Miller's Crossing. What the hell does it even mean? Such an overrated film. Didn't even feel like the Coen brothers. Look into your heart. That's precisely what I'm trying to avoid. Tell me how to stop doing that. You want to look into my heart? Be my fucking guest. You'll find sorrow and despair. You'll find loneliness and pain. And you'll be cut by the broken pieces.

I was lying on an armless sofa and gazing up at the ceiling. My arms were flat at my side, and I could feel the cracks in the leather on my fingers. The office was dark and gloomy, with the only light peering through a lone window on the far wall. My eyes followed the edged panels of a brown ceiling fan as they made their rounds.

"What do you want me to find?"

"Well there are a number of things you could find. What do you think she would want you to find?" Dr. Korver said.

Dr. Korver. Dr. Keith Korver. Look at his diploma over there on the wall. It's crooked. Are you serious? University of California-Berkeley. I'm sure they have a top-notch psychology program there. What a jackass. Paint the walls a different color. This dark green is awful. Black scuff marks everywhere. And what kind of tile is this on the floor? Looks like a fucking kitchen. Is this a rip in the

leather right here? Good god. People are supposed to come sit in here and feel better about themselves? This place is a shit hole.

“Well I don’t know. I mean it’s over. So what does that matter?”

“Well of course it matters,” he said, “What would she want for you? As you try and move on with your life, what would Rachel want you to do?”

Rachel. God I shouldn’t be here. What a waste of time. What a waste of money. What is this like \$200 an hour? \$200 an hour to be told to look into my heart. What a joke. I can’t believe she made me come here. What does mom know about this? What does this ass Dr. Korver know about this? What does anyone know about this?

I sat up and put my feet on the floor. On the coffee table in front of me there was crimson mug that I assumed was for me. I put my fingers through the handle and brought it up to my nose. I took in a whiff of black coffee and put it down again.

“I just can’t think that way. All I want to do is stop thinking about it. I want to stop feeling what I’m feeling. But I can’t.”

“Maybe she wouldn’t want you to stop thinking about it. Maybe she would just want you to start thinking about it in a different way. In a positive way.”

Positive? There is absolutely nothing positive about this. I’m sure it’s easy for someone like you to take something positive out of this. You don’t know what love is. Never experienced it. She was all I had. Half of me is shattered, and you expect me to think positively. Bullshit.

“I can’t just do that. Even if I wanted to. Even if I knew I should. I mean let’s say I do. You’re right. I should think about all of this in a positive way. What Rachel would want for me. What I should do next with my life. Great. But that doesn’t mean I can do it.”

“Surely it’s not easy,” Dr. Korver said. “But let’s think about what has changed in a positive manner.”

Oh it’s not easy? No shit, Sherlock. I’d like to see you do it. Is that another tear in the leather? Jesus Christ. I’m getting up.

Are you kidding me with this filing cabinet? Drawers open and folders hanging out. The handle on that one on the bottom is just dangling there. Is this guy even professional? Can’t believe I’m here. I can see the dust on those books from across the fucking room. No way he’s read all of those. Maybe he should. Give him actual knowledge on how to help people. I’m probably better off just reading some books.

Oh you’ve got to be shitting me. There’s a hole in the ceiling. Unbelievable. Nothing on the kitchen tile. Must have been there for a while. Oh yeah no big deal. Patients won’t notice my disaster zone of an office. They’ll be too occupied venting their problems to me. Totally fine. No need to keep the place at least somewhat presentable. You fucking twat.

I walked over to his desk. The dark brown wood was faded and dull, and it was littered with paper. I counted four uncapped pens. On the corner of the desk was a picture in one of those tacky mirror-like frames. I picked it up.

And here we go. Confirmation. Probably his wife. Typical rich California couple. Blonde and tan. Fake boobs and \$2,000 dollar suits. He's got nice hair. About the only thing going for him. True love right there. A real connection.

"Is this your wife?"

"Uhh yes that's my wife. Casandra."

Casandra? You've got to be kidding.

"How long have you been together?"

"About a year. Listen, Ryan why don't you sit back down. We're talking about you here."

A year? How old are you? 37? 39? She's probably like your third wife. And yet you have all the answers about love and relationships. You've been through everything. Your divorces felt nothing like this because they didn't mean shit to you. Money. All about money for everyone.

I moved over to the window and noticed a blue sedan leaving the parking lot.

Hey wait for me. I need to get the hell out of here. Dust on the windowsill too. How hard is it? Just take ten minutes and clean the office for Christ sakes. Hire someone with all that money.

Look how much nicer it is outside than it is in here. That tree. That tree looks just like them. The trees at Shasta.

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I dove into the dark icy water from the dock and rolled over to float on the surface. The moon was at the center of a glistening awning of diamonds in the

sky above Shasta Lake. Pine and cedar trees sprouted up from a padded exterior of pine needles. They stood tall and still, their shadows darting out across the water. The air was crisp and silent. I felt Rachel's hand slide onto my chest before she kissed me.

"It's amazing out here," she said.

She was an angel in the moonlight. Her wet blonde hair was shaped into strands of gold that ran down her back. There was just enough light to make out the detailed emeralds of her eyes.

"It's sort of like you," I said, running the back of my fingers along her cheek.

She smiled and we kissed again. We floated there frozen in the water, just holding each other. I blew out a foggy breath, and pressed my lips against her forehead.

"I'm a little chilly," she said.

"Let's go make a fire."

We set up our tent in a small opening near the water. We leaned our packs on a large boulder, and formed a pile of logs on the pine needles. There was one bigger log that was almost flat on the top that we slid next to the fire and used as a bench. We made smores and drank hot chocolate.

Rachel pulled a hoody over her head, and rested it on my shoulder as she sat down.

"How did you find this place?" she asked.

“My dad and I used to come up here on weekends when I was a kid. The south side of the lake is always crowded with campers, but there’s never anyone here on the north side. We used to hike through the woods, and go swimming, He always used to throw me off the dock there.”

“It’s so pretty.”

“I’ve never been anywhere like it. It’s always quiet and peaceful. You can see eagles in the trees sometimes,” I said.

“That’s cool. I’m still worried about climbing the mountain tomorrow. I’m going to go so slow.”

“Seriously don’t be. We’ll move at your pace. We have all day. And actually we should leave a bit later so we can be at the summit for the sunset. It’s absolutely breathtaking.”

We both looked up at Mount Shasta in the distance and then back down at each other. Our eyes locked in place. Different shades of green fused together and left me in a marbled trance. Her hair was drying and tucked behind her ears, exposing her earrings. Meager freckles on her cheek were made visible by the fire. She was glowing.

“Okay,” she said smiling. We kept our eyes on each other as long as possible before closing them for a kiss.

I locked the car and we began the trek. The parking lot was almost empty, and the dirt at our feet was fresh and rich in color. It was a warm afternoon, with little wind and the sun right above us.

“How long will it take to get to the top?” Rachel asked.

“Well, that depends. At least a few hours. You’ll enjoy the trip though. It gets better and better as you get higher.”

“I hope I can handle it. The most I had to climb back home was a flight of stairs.”

“This’ll be a little different than San Diego,” I laughed.

About half way up, we got to a steep, rocky ridge on the edge of the mountain. Trees surrounded it, but above the clutter, there was a flat clearing.

“Alright, hold my hand for this part. It’s a little tricky,” I said.

We made our way up gingerly from rock to rock, her grip tightening with each step.

“How do I-“

“Hold on,” I said.

I slung my pack onto the top and pushed myself up with both arms. I looked over to the left, and saw the picturesque valley beneath me. I got back down on my stomach and reached an arm down for Rachel.

“You’re almost there. Put your left foot on that flat rock.”

“This one?”

“Yeah put your left foot on it. Make sure you have a solid grip. Then grab on to this branch right here and lift. There you go. One last step onto the tiny rock here, and then grab my hand. Good. I gotcha.”

“Okay,” she took a deep breath, “I think that’s enough climbing for one day.”

“Here drink some water. I promise that was the hardest part. Not too much longer. And how about this view.”

She put her pack down and walked over to the edge of the clearing.

“Oh my god.”

It was like a painting. Thick patches of bright green trees lacing around the lake. A slim grey road winding it's way through the hills. The clouds were resting on a wavy gray horizon formed by smaller mountains in the distance.

“I could look at this forever.”

I put my hands on her shoulders.

“We're not even at the top yet.”

“I love scenery and nature and landscapes like this,” she said, “Did I tell you about that time I was driving through Colorado? I was on the road that wrapped around a mountain and I just couldn't keep my eyes off of it. Blue sky and snow at the top. I drifted into the other lane and a truck took my side mirror off. Pretty scary. It was just so distracting.”

“Well you don't have to worry about driving here. Let's get going so we can make it to the top in time”

The rocks got bigger above the tree line. They were steep, but flat, and easy to walk on if you kept your balance. I put my hand above my eyes to block the sun and saw the summit a few hundred yards away. I turned back to tell Rachel, and saw her on her knees gasping for air.

“Where's your inhaler?” I ran back to her, “Where is it?”

I fumbled through her pack and propped her up against a rock.

“Alright deep breaths. Breathe it in. Okay. It’s alright. Keep going.”

“I’m sorry I-“

I put my palm on her cheek and kissed her on the forehead.

“Don’t be. Just relax.”

I sat down next to her and offered some water. I heard a sharp cry above me and looked up to see an eagle. Its wings were spread and it was gliding around in a smooth circle.

“I love it up here,” she said, “I can’t breathe for shit, but I love it up here.”

I smiled. “Just a bit longer and you’ll be on top of the world.”

By the time we reached the summit, the sky was splattered with bright shades of pink and orange. Thin bursts of color faded slowly as the sun went down. Miles and miles of land stretched out below us. I glanced over at Rachel, her eyes glued to it all.

“I wanna look at this forever,” she said.

“It’s something else isn’t it?”

“It’s unbelievable.”

I put my pack down and used it as a pillow. She lied down next to me and put her head on my chest. We sat there in silence until the sun was completely gone. The only sound was our breathing. I closed my eyes.

“Rach?”

“Yeah?” she whispered.

“I just want you to know that. Uh. I just want you to know that you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. And spending time with you is like nothing

I've ever felt before. I mean it's that much better when we're out here alone in a beautiful place like this, but really it doesn't matter. We could be anywhere at all and to me it would be amazing just because of you. I just never believed that I would feel this way about someone. I saw it all around me and just never thought it would be me. But you changed that. And I just want you to know."

She was silent for a moment, and I was nervously holding my breath. Then she rolled over on top of me, our eyes meeting.

"I love you Ryan."

I let out the deep breath of relief, and slid a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"I love you too."



"What are you thinking about Ryan? Clearly something," Dr. Korver said.

Don't you do it. You can't shed a tear in this place. You're supposed to be winning here. Don't show him shit.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Alright. What do you want to talk about?"

Just shut the fuck up for a minute. Jesus. I need to leave. I need to be alone. I just want to go home and think about Rachel. I don't need this.

I sat back down on the sofa, and buried my face in my hands.

"These flashbacks alright. I just keep thinking about all these things that happened. They're good things, but they kill me. And I know I'll never be able to stop thinking about them. My mind doesn't want to stop."

“Positive things are healthy. It’s okay to think about those. What we need to take away is the painful portion. We need to feel fortunate that we felt these things in the first place.”

Oh yeah? And how do you propose we do that Keith? You gonna flip a fucking switch? All the answers but no way to get there. Tell me how to forget.

“I mean again. Let’s just say that’s precisely what I need to do. Great. How do I do it? I just need to know how to do it.”

“Well it’s a process. We’ll need to talk about some of these thoughts in detail and analyze them.”

That’s it. I’m done. I’m fucking done. Been here an hour and you’ve yet to give me one simple tip. The slightest bit of advice that I can actually use. All bullshit that doesn’t include any real solutions. I’m done.

“Is the session up yet? I really need to get going.”

“Well just about. Listen, for next time, try pinpointing some of those thoughts you’re having. Try preparing some details. We’ll be much better off that way,” he said.

You’re dreaming if you think there’s a next time. I’m never coming back to this hellhole you call an office. Never listening to any of your trivial bullshit again. You’re just like everyone else. You settled. You settled in your marriage and your fine with someone you just get along with. You’ll never know what it feels like. I hope you’re okay with that. I also hope you find a new profession. And stop assuming everyone drinks fucking coffee.

“Alright.”

I slammed the door walked and down a narrow white hallway that led back out to the waiting room. I wrapped my hands around the back of my neck and tried to breathe. Next to a fish tank, there was a slumped-over old man holding his cane. He was contrasted by a plump woman smiling widely behind the counter.

Well that sucked. Now let's just go home and listen to music or something. Maybe. Anything but this. Oh god are you about to go see Dr. Korver? Turn around now. It'll be worse in an hour. Do yourself a favor. And why are you so fucking giddy?

"You have a great day!"

Oh I will. Really appreciate it. Hope your husband is doing alright. Hope you didn't settle. Not everyone has a spouse you know.

"You too."

One more person. If I see one more person on the way to the car, I'm gonna fucking lose it. Quiet. Please just some quiet. I can get through this by myself. Where are my keys?

I patted down my pants and pulled the keys out of my back pocket. I looked up to see a police car parked next to mine. The strip of lights on top started flashing in my head.

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I slammed the car door shut and starting jogging along the silver road barrier. Cars were rushing by in silence. Blue and red lights flashing caused me to wince and blink. A crowd was formed around something I couldn't see.

Everything turned into slow motion. I saw people yelling, but I couldn't hear the words. To my left, the skyline was illuminated in the night. Reflections of the skyscrapers were floating in the motionless water.

*I love scenery and nature and landscapes.*

No.

*I drifted into the next lane and a truck took my side mirror off. It was just so distracting.*

No. No.

*I want to look at this forever.*

Christ. No.

I got to the edge of the crowd, and started pushing shoulders back with my hands. Then I saw him. He was tall and in a pressed, tan uniform. The bill of his hat was lifted up, and he kept anxiously looking around for something.

Through the railing, I saw pieces of a car floating in the water. Some of the bumper, a broken headlight and a side mirror from the door were spotlighted by the red lights. The main cabin was crunched and rested on its side with a tire missing. I had been in it before.

I looked back up and he was walking towards me. His eyes grew wide when they met mine, and he slowed down even more. He knew who I was. He had never seen me before, but he knew. He had been waiting for me. I threw the crime scene tape over my head and tried to move forward, but he extended both

arms and planted them into my chest. My mouth opened to say something, but all I heard was him.

“She’s gone.”