**Social Disorder Therapy**

by NotHemingway

*When clothes are a defense mechanism, is removing them a cure?*

This story does not contain graphic sexual descriptions. It is about how shedding clothes constitutes acceptance of oneself and the symbolic shedding of defenses. The genesis of this story lies in fact. Years ago, I had an employee like the one described here. A nice guy, but he was disliked by his colleagues. I sent him to a sensitivity program where he learned in bold terms how people perceived him. It absolutely changed him. All that is described as occurring in the training is from my imagination; I never asked him for details as that would have been personal. But he worked in the business for many years thereafter, with success.

I didn’t consider myself to be arrogant. Yes, I’m smart and self-confident. And admittedly, I can be impatient with people who don’t see things as clearly as I do. But arrogant?

My boss at the corporation I work for as a management analyst called me in one day.

“Brad, every time I send you to another department to handle some problem, I get calls after your visit saying ‘Don’t ever send that SOB down here again. He’s arrogant and condescending.’ I don’t know what you’re doing, but something in how you interact with people is rubbing them wrong. It’s a serious problem.”

He continued, “You’re a real asset and I don’t want to lose you. But if we can’t fix how you relate to people, I’m going to have to let you go.”

I stood there, not certain where this was going. Was I being fired?

“So I’ve made a decision. I’m sending you to self-awareness training. There is a camp in Maine that has a program for individuals with relationship disorders. It’s intensive and I’m told it can be emotionally very upsetting as your personality traits and psychological defenses are exposed.”

I stood there open-mouthed. Disorders, defenses? Was I in need of psychological help?

“It’s either that or we have to end your relationship with the firm.”

I really didn’t have a choice. I did not want to be fired.

I was handed a brochure. It read: “Ashby Institute. Repairing relationship disorders and sexual dysfunction.”

Sexual Dysfunction? What was that doing there? I did have a revolving door with girlfriends, but I just haven’t met the right one yet. What did that have to do with my relationship with co-workers?

Anyway, I found myself driving to Maine in July for a ten-day program. I arrived at the Institute. My escort, an attractive woman in her twenties, handed me some brochures.

“You’ll be starting this afternoon. Someone will come to your room to get you for the introductory session. Until then, feel free to walk around the grounds. We just ask that you not interact with or talk to any of the guests.”

That was strange. I asked, “Why can’t I talk to anyone?”

“Because we don’t want the treatment process revealed. All social interaction will be under the direction of your group counselor.”

I shrugged. “All right. I’m not very outgoing anyway.”

The grounds covered about forty acres, with trails through woods, a small lake, and a pool area adjacent to recreation facilities. I strolled over to the pool and was shocked to see that the pool was populated by people without clothes. Nude. All of them.

As I walked to the gate to look in, a woman there (nude like everyone else) said, “Hi.”

“Hi,” I replied.

“Are you coming to join us?” she asked.

To say I was tempted was an understatement. She was small-breasted, but attractive, tall, with long brown hair and a trimmed pubic area. And standing there facing me without an ounce of self-consciousness.

Yet I couldn’t. “I don’t think so. I’m not supposed to interact with anyone.”

“Ah,” she replied. "So you’re a newbie.”

“You know about that?”

“Yes,” she said amiably. “That’s the rule when we first arrive here. They want to control our interactions, so our social disorders can be managed.”

“Does everyone here have a social disorder?” I asked.

“We’re not supposed to talk. You’ll find out soon enough.”

And she left me.

I lingered long enough to get a good look at all the women. And the men, but just to see the competition. No point in wasting an opportunity. Then I returned to my room. Before too long, there was a knock at the door.

“Hi, Brad. I’m here to escort you to your first session. Are you ready?”

The group consisted of five men and five women. Most of us were in our twenties or early thirties, although one man and one woman were middle-aged. Our counsellor was a young woman, Chloe, with a self-assured manner.

“You’re all here because you have difficulty maintaining social relationships. Most were referred by your therapists. At the Ashby Institute, we use group dynamics to uncover why you persist in socially unacceptable behavior. What are the psychological needs that lead to that, and what are your defenses against bonding with people. Then we take away those defenses and replace them with new skills.”

I was burning to ask a question. “Why were all the people at the pool nude?”

Chloe smiled. “We’ll get there. For now, let’s break into pairs and talk about your parents.”

My partner was Anna, a woman in her thirties, attractive, auburn hair, trim body with full breasts. Breasts which she flaunted by wearing a blouse with three buttons unbuttoned. Her cleavage was on display. A woman used to flirting with men, I guessed.

We were assigned to discuss our parents, particularly the one of our own gender, and how he or she related to people. I quickly focused on the fact that my father had few friends. That he relied on my mother to attract people, and his role in groups was mostly as “Sylvia’s husband.” I hadn’t thought about that before.

Chloe, the group leader, reconvened us all and we discussed how our parents influenced our traits. And how fear of rejection, fear of others’ opinions, encourages us to place barriers against the world. If we reject people first, or keep them at arm’s length, our insecurity won’t be exposed.

 “Let’s talk about the defenses we use to keep from forming close bonds,” asked Chloe.

Anna spoke. “I wear low-cut dresses to show off my breasts, because I’m actually unhappy with the weight around my middle. Nobody is looking at my fat behind when I’m thrusting my breasts at them.”

Chloe nodded. “Yes, that’s a very valuable observation. Clothes are a major defense mechanism. If we’re embarrassed about our shape, we dress to conceal. Or as Anna said, we may dress to distract from something we’re afraid of. The clothes we choose make a statement about who we think we are, or who we want others to think we are.”

 She continued, “So much of our difficulties in respecting others comes from our own insecurities. When we’re not comfortable with ourselves, physically or internally, the defense mechanism kicks in.”

Then she turned to the real question, how do we overcome that?

“Brad observed the nude bathing at our pool. We don’t allow that in the beginning. But as we progress, we’ll begin to accept each other for who we are, not who we pretend to be. Being comfortable with our bodies is part of that. Be patient. That phase of the treatment will come soon enough.”

Did I understand that correctly? Was this a nudist colony? What did I get myself into?

We stayed as a group all our waking hours. We were learning about each other, and forming opinions. We ate together, played volleyball, card games, and talked to each other about ourselves and life. And occasionally got angry with one another. On the third day, Chloe called us together.

“Today we’re going to talk about what we’ve learned of each other. Good, bad and ugly. You each will listen as the other nine people relate how they perceive you. You are not to talk or react in any way until all nine have finished.”

We each had a turn in the fishbowl. My time was very distressing.

“You often interrupt me when I talk and don’t allow me to finish a sentence.”

“You don’t really pay attention when we’re talking; you don’t look me in the eye.”

“You’re so positive you know everything.”

It went on. I had never been talked to so bluntly. Everyone perceived my indifference to them, my feelings of superiority. Or as my boss had said, my arrogance. The group did not like me. Even those with whom I thought I had developed a nice relationship, told me I was a jerk.

I was stunned. You can always rationalize one or two people not liking you, but all nine? I sat there. Then I began to weep. Slowly, a watering of the eyes at first. Then more tears, then sobs. I was wracked with shame. Who was I? Why was I like this?

Chloe was the first to come to me, to hug me. Then they all did, the women and the men. I was a jerk, but then, in our own way, we all were. We were there because of our flaws. And we needed each other.

Chloe had told us it was time to start our healing.

“In order to accept yourself, the first step is to become comfortable in your own skin. Each must accept that your body may have started to sag, that your breasts may be too small or too big, that your belly is larger than you want. And learn that you don’t have to hide yourself to be loved. To start that process, we are all going to strip down to our underwear.”

There was silence. No one moved. No volunteers.

Chloe turned to the middle-aged man. “Harry, you first.”

Harry had somewhat of a pot belly, which he concealed by wearing untucked shirts that tented over his belly. All eyes turned to him. The peer pressure of nine silent, watching colleagues was too much. He stood up. He took off his shoes and socks. Then his shirt. And then his trousers. He remained in boxer shorts, with a large belly looming over. He kept his eyes on the ground.

“You are beautiful just as you are,” said Chloe. She turned to us.

We all echoed her, “You are beautiful.”

Veronica was next. She trembled as she took off her blouse, revealing a lace bra that strained to contain her breasts. Then the skirt came off, revealing (surprisingly) a thong panty. She was very exposed.

“You are beautiful,” we all said.

One by one, clothes were removed. When Joyce’s turn came, she looked at Chloe beseechingly. “I’m not wearing a bra.”

“That’s not an excuse, Joyce,” said Chloe. “You need to remove the t-shirt.”

With trembling fingers, Joyce pulled the shirt over her head, then removed her shorts. She was just in panties, with her breasts exposed. She initially covered her chest with her arms, but as we all chanted, “You are beautiful.” She relaxed and let us see her.

Some of the guys like me wore briefs, not boxers, and our men’s parts were very prominent in the underwear. The shape of our penises and testicles in the fabric was on display. Everyone looked at everyone else.

Chloe continued our discussions, and in a short time, the fact of our attire (or lack thereof) became just part of how things were. We relaxed.

Then Chloe dropped the proverbial other shoe.

“OK, now that you’ve learned that we can be in a state of undress with each other, and the sky hasn’t fallen, it’s time to take the next step. Please remove your underwear. We are all beautiful in our bodies. There is no need to hide anymore.”

No one moved. This was a point of no return, and nobody had the nerve to be first. Except for Joyce, who gave us a scowl and said, “Folks, I’ve been topless for fifteen minutes, on display, and now you all are the ones hesitating?” With that, she pulled off her panties. Her mound was covered with fine blond hair, the lips of the vagina visible. I gawked at her nakedness. We all did.

It was difficult to stay dressed after her courageous action, and slowly our underwear slid off. Breasts, vaginas, penises, all on display. We were all nude. Everyone looked at each other, making measurements and evaluations.

It was frightening and exhilarating. One guy’s penis began to stir and stiffened. No one said a word. Chloe carried on with her discussion, and in time, the erection went away as did our discomfort. Being nude was just how we were. And we were all the same. Some had breasts too large or too small, some men lacked musculature or had genitalia that seemed shriveled, others had plump bellies or backsides. Even those with good bodies were not perfect. And that was the point.

Chloe had each of us discuss the greatest failure or fear we had in our life. Everyone had a story of regret, of sadness, or mistakes, even mean things that we’d done that we regretted. One woman, an attractive female, revealed that she thought she was ugly; that the people telling her otherwise were just being kind. A man told how he felt sexually inadequate unless his partner praised him constantly for their bedtime encounters. I revealed that my father had always demanded more of me; that no matter how well I did something, he insisted on better. I was never good enough. We often ended up in tears over our failures, and we hugged everyone after their story. Hugged them while naked, but the hugs were non-sexual. We were just people, flawed, imperfect, trying to do the right thing and not always succeeding. And everyone – everyone – no matter how successful and comfortable they appeared on the surface, had a hidden story.

We went to the pool. When we arrived, all the other groups there stood up and applauded. This was a rite of passage. It meant that we had accepted our bodies and more importantly, our flaws. And wouldn’t hide anymore.

Afterwards, Anna and I went back to my room. We would never date each other in our respective lives, but now we made love as two souls that had found refuge. It’s true her backside is too big; previously I would have rejected her for a sexual relationship. I know that my legs are skinny, and I’m not as big as some of the other guys. But for one night, we hungrily explored each other’s bodies without judgment, happy to know that each is a good, kind person doing our best in a tough world.

Now, back at work, when I encounter people, I know that everyone is like me – a normal person struggling with a hidden personal story. Some not as smart as me, some not as good looking, but each one would hug me and accept me, given the chance. I try to imagine them naked, and what flaws their clothes are disguising. It makes them human to me. And I treat them all as equals.