

CYNICAL BEAST

Colin Moriarty



IMAGE: Willy Conley

Colin Moriarty is an NYU graduate with a BFA in film and TV. He currently works with children in the mental health field, spending his days posing as a positive influence to young people. He was born and raised in southern Rhode Island, where he still resides. He likes writing movie reviews and personal essays, and his latest passion is making soap.

Bedstuy feels so heavy this September. Summer's dragging on like a slow-burning cigarette. The ceiling fan spins above me at its highest speed to relieve some of the anxious heat, but it's not enough. The air's as wet inside as it is out. I lie melting into another stale Saturday night on my financed Casper mattress with outstanding debt, thinking back on a terrible season.

I stopped drinking about two months back, and I'm living in the pits. The clarity of sobriety is a nightmare at first. All of its ugliness hits you in your waking bloodshot retinas at once. All the sad clichés you've dragged your body and mind and family through. The fear of your demise you've burdened your parents with, aging them. The shitty jobs you've clung to by a thread. The neglected dick and bank account. The bare bedroom. The pathetic reality you've cobbled together offers no comforts, which makes it pretty easy to throw away. Again and again. Chronic relapse breeds insanity in the brain, and there's an utter lack of trust in the self that's fully arresting.

The drunken behavior is total chaos, impossible to harmonize with any semblance of an adult life, but being sober feels like living with an unscratchable itch. Like some endless fast that never breaks. This fixed restraint feels Puritanical at times. My path is so pretentiously righteous now, and I catch my ego future-tripping towards the spoils of sainthood. Stay clean and all the earth will love me for it. Maybe I'll get laid for it. The reality is more like being sentenced to life on the moral high ground, without parole. The most I can hope for is to die in these sober chains a lonely, old man, and not gunned down in some unholy, failed escape.

Sitting on this perfectly-made bed, I can hear an addictive demon mocking me with whispers through my synaptic matter. You fancy yourself some philosopher king who now finds satisfaction in a good book and a rocking chair and an autumn breeze, or the birds and the bees and the coconut trees, but you're no man of peace. You're a beast down to the bone, it says. You salivate in the shame of your debaucherous fantasies. You want coke off the tits of a Floridian stripper, a skinny dip down a whiskey river, a strobe-lit grind laced with molly and sweat, and cigarettes pickable from the trees. I live with the demon's whispers in an absent-minded fantasy. An abstinent reality will never be enough for a hedonistic little brat like me.

I drank because it took away my fear of people. Their attention, their conversation, their touch. It's all scared me shitless since my beginning. According to the stories, even as a baby I'd lock my elbows and push away with fists from the chest of any adult trying to hold me. In my toddler years, if a relative wanted a kiss goodbye, I'd swiftly give them the left cheek. Or on shy days just the far edge of my ear. In middle school, any attempt to approach a pretty girl sent me glitching like a broken Furby doll.

I think I took some after my Pa, my mom's dad, a quiet and stoic man who any shrink worth their salt would diagnose with depression the second he sat down in their chair. He wasn't a hugger or a talker. His love language was changing your flat tire in silence while sporadically insulting your car under his breath. He was of a different time, when feelings were for girls, and embracing was only for post-funeral "Oh Danny Boy" renditions with cousins at the bar. But he had tender moments. I remember on Tuesday nights, which my brother and I would spend at the grandparents' to give our mom and dad a break. Old Pa would interrupt *Dumbo* to stumble into our guest room obliterated with a rare smile on. He'd kill the lights, pin us down to the bed, and bite our necks while he cackled like a demon. He called it *Dracula*, and my brother loved it, so I tried to enjoy it too. I can remember his hot breath between his teeth that pinched my skin, hard enough to indent but not enough to puncture. It seemed he could only be happy if it was veiled in elated aggression. He'd tackle and throw us both about for a few wild minutes, and then he'd leave our room to pass out in his. As we caught our breath, I wondered what that toxic smell on his lips was that made him so eager to roughhouse and walk that line of chummy abuse. Whatever this pungent elixir was, it turned this sad man into a loving Pa, and my curiosity was planted.

So in high school I got into it, and it fixed everything. I loved life and I loved people and people loved me. So I stayed in it for a decade. But what started as a lubricant for crowds had become an obsession, necessary even to live, to exist with myself. The unsustainability of an ever-present buzz caught up with me, and I crashed hard. All the common tropes. The time came for me to get dry for my health, my reputation, and my sanity, but I knew that all my fear of contact would come barreling back as a beast. Giving up alcohol felt like turning in my key to the city of intimacy, like I'd never have sex or be touched or be able to remain calm in close proximity to another human again, and leaving that behind was a punishing toil.

The city's weekend angst has reached its peak, with everyone clamoring to get some action in before their Sunday Scaries set in. My weird new subletter has usurped the common area of our three-bedroom Brooklyn apartment with a seductive presentation for his long-distance girlfriend visiting from Croatia. Apparently she's a real catch. He deep-cleaned the kitchen, bathroom, and living room to suggest we three roomies exist in pristine conditions well beyond our actual capacities. Men love cleaning their space before dates, building up lies about their lifestyle, driven with the promise of bedtime sex. As if women see a well-made bed and think, "*Okay, now I'm sold.*" Expensive wine paired with an antique set of glasses decorate our coffee table, and two China plates are placed at the center with a take-out bag of dying Thai food between them. He just texted a group message for us to please leave it all untouched, like a real Type A charmer. My other roommate is on a Hinge date, probably getting wasted in a dive bar as foreplay. I'm jealous. I used to love that mindless game.

I can't spend Saturday night in this apartment staring at the fan surrounded by ferocious love-making. I exhaust my options through a text blast. My brother's away with his new girlfriend. My short list of friends is busy drinking at different holes around town. I'm not surprised my invites were lost in the cell towers. Nobody really wants the teetotaler at the party. That's like bringing your agnostic friend to Catholic Mass. Sure, he's welcome there, legally, but it bums you out when he doesn't come down on the kneeler with your family, or join in your fun chants, or eat your Jesus crackers. You're not judging, but he's a real fun-sucker.

I try flipping through a sober dating app, which dries out of potential matches after about seven swipes. Even in America's biggest city, the sober dating pool is more of a puddle. I consider going to a recovery meeting with the hopes of finding somebody attractive, but I have no idea how to flirt with a girl at AA without feeling like a complete predator. I try to put a movie on but it turns to background noise after about ten minutes. I'm still adjusting to this new medication that my psychiatrist put me on in an attempt to quell my self-destructive tendencies, and it tends to numb my whole emotional spectrum. Life is already a talking picture, so any character on a screen exists two degrees of separation away from me. I couldn't care less if Jack's frozen carcass sinks to the Atlantic depths. Or if Sully never sees Boo again. I'm impenetrable.

I haven't been touched in so long that I'm losing awareness of my own body. My physical being is so desperate for some type of grounding, I consider going out for a massage. I've been massaged a couple times in my life. When I was about eight, my mom bestowed upon me her half of a romance package with my dad. I remember having a tough time enjoying the massage, because I got stuck with the guy. In college, I had an acting teacher who wanted to give each of her students "a gift," so we all stood in a circle with our eyes closed as she made her way around it, presenting each of us with a massage up and down our backsides. It was an odd experience that succeeded in bringing all of us together through a bond of mutual discomfort. Later, on a privileged post-college trip to Thailand, my friends and I went to get a Groupon massage, which was basically a flock of Thai women twirling around our limbs like pretzels for an hour. Mine dug her heels into my crotch and yanked me apart in all directions like she was trying to debone a chicken.

So far, no rub-down experience has been a pleasant one. Still, I've heard tell of others enjoying them. My dad swore by a few sessions that miraculously cured the ligament strains in his left leg. One college friend told me that, after long work weeks, she's been going to Greenpoint to visit this ripped hunk with angelic hands who squishes all of her padding into bliss: her positive mood shift on the weekends is clear. I'm hoping that some deep-tissue rejuvenation might remind me of my worth, or that I'm even still here. I do some light research, and it says online that the best full-body, standard massage is of the Swedish category. I look up places around my neighborhood that are still open that offer it, and I find a place about a fifteen-minute walk away that has one lonely but positive review. I slip on some jeans from the top of the hamper and rush out the door before I can change my mind.

I walk through the dark down Atlantic Avenue, listening through ads on Spotify, anxiously puffing at my Crème Brûlée JUUL pod like a lunatic. I don't even like the lethargic head buzz this thing brings me. It's temporary and boring. I started on nicotine down in rehab, and it's become an unfortunate crutch. It has to be related to some genetic oral fixation. My brother sucked his thumb until he was nine, but his reckoning for inhaling his own carnage was swift. The family orthodontist punished him with a medieval thumb guard that snatched up his food and kept it hanging down his throat on its hinges for hours. Fearing that gagger, I went with pacifiers, and I carried around a collection in a golden pouch that stunk like saliva for years. I'd interchange them every fifteen minutes until I was seven, until it seemed I was finally pacified. But the hole wasn't filled, and I started biting my nails for years until I found that keeping a liquor bottle at my mouth felt a lot better. But that's gone now too. And I'm stuck with this stupid gadget guaranteed to put me in the ICU for lung damage before my frontal lobe finishes growing.

A tiny Chinese woman greets me at her disheveled front desk, complete with a dusty mini-fan, a dirty fish tank, and an extensive menu of treatments listed behind it. I hear faint elevator music. There's a lone folding chair that serves as a waiting room with a pile of dirty shoes underneath it. A tabby cat scurries by my feet and hides behind the desk. The woman abruptly gives me the basic options. "You want one hour or half hour?"

"Forty-five minutes," I counter. "Swedish." My blood is swishing around in fight or flight, and it gives me an edge that's out of character. She respects my confidence.

"Very good. Forty dollars. Shoes off. Pay after." And she begins her walk down the hall.

I freeze. She turns around. "Shoes off. Follow me." I do as I'm told. Suddenly I'm the submissive in this relationship, and my spunk disappears as quickly as it had come.

She guides me into a back room and quarantines me with a robe hanging on the door. This feels a lot like a physical exam at the pediatrician, back when I was left alone to strip down to a paper johnny. I nervously take off my clothes and fold them neatly onto a stool in the corner, leaving my boxers on like a gentleman. I robe up, wondering if the big mirror on the wall has a squad of masseuses studying me for research behind it. I lie down on the hospital bed in the center of the room and place my head into the empty void at the top. I stare at the fluorescent light reflected off the glossy cement below me, meditating in low self-esteem. The masseuse returns. She dims the lights and presses play on a small boombox on the shelf that croons a gentle sitar through the room. I take a deep breath while she rinses her hands at the sink behind me and flicks them dry, splattering my feet.

She asks me if I want my back first. I say yes, nervously wondering which part of my body she plans to venture to next. I try to relax, telling myself that my mind's in the gutter, and I've seen too much porn. She asks me to lie down on my front. I ask if I should remove my robe. "Yes" she says. I take it off and hang it back up, wondering why I even put it on. I lie down again, and she places a wide white towel over my back. Her initial touch scares me a bit and gets my heart racing. This is the same feeling I used to get when making out with a gentle classmate I dated for a few weeks back in college, who I still regret running away from. She once stopped kissing me to say that we should do something about my anxiety, which was beating against her breasts, and my short supply of confidence was crushed to a pulp. I left her and went back to my dorm room to polish off cheap screwdrivers alone and wallow in sophomore emotion.

The masseuse starts a soft and low-pressure massage over the towel. There's no skin-to-skin contact, or oil, or lotion, or sexual base-running. Just a nice, appropriate, and legal back rub. I take deep breaths, try to focus on the moment, and start to enjoy it. It's just enough to get grounded again. Maybe this can exorcise the fear of touch out from my insides.

"Do you want lotion?" she asks. I say yes, without hesitation. I need to push further out of my comfort zone. She removes the towel, and I sprawl fragile again in my underwear across the table. She squirts a dollop from her cream-spigot in the corner and starts on my back again, with more pressure this time. Her full weight collapses onto me with each push she makes, loosening my delroids and allowing some relief. This feels better. Just a touch of aggression to squeeze my stiff body out of resistance and re-organize my spirit.

She rubs deeply down my back until she gets to the tip of my boxers and stops. She flicks the edge of my waist band with her index finger, indicating that the undergarments are an inconvenience to her flow. "You want off?" she asks. It seems like her whole artistic process would be made easier with a blank canvas, so I say yes. She grabs at them to pull them down, and I grab them back.

"It's okay" I say. "I've got it." I remove my underwear as she watches and I place them folded on the floor below, suddenly painfully aware of my nudity. I lay my face in my hands above the table-hole and try to breathe, staving off panic.

I replay her request in my head, confirming I'd heard correctly and that I didn't get into my birthday suit out of nowhere. I fear I've crossed a boundary, and creeping this woman out. I fidget and adjust my placement on the table, and she relaxes me with deep pressure again.

"This okay?" she asks.

"Yes" I say. She continues down my sides and rubs each of my thighs. She goes down to my toes, and back up to my neck. She goes down my arms and squeezes and cracks each finger. Back down my back and a bit on my bare hips, which I cashamedly enjoy. Here is the full-body, Swedish experience. This is The Ultimate, and exactly what I was looking for. I'm fully present, enjoying a natural high.

Her focus then homes in much more directly on my butt. Specifically the middle of it. Her hands slide slowly down my lower back and into my cheeks repeatedly like windshield wipers, widening her circles with each swipe. She waxes on and waxes off for about a minute, presenting my asshole to the world like some holy vision. She's just about made the sun shine out of it when she returns to my legs, and my eyes stare widely through my hole at the floor. This feels like a turning point. I question the normalcy of her methods, but remain frozen.

I guess it's important to stretch the glutes. She rubs the insides of my thighs, which excites me in the wrong way. I feel like the sleaziest loser alive when I start to get aroused. I adjust my half-chub into my belly to hide it, hoping she won't notice. My mind's crossed some inappropriate line. I'm so sex-deprived that I can't even handle a massage without it sparking a blood rush to my crotch.

"You like this?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. She starts to lightly tickle the length of my body like a lover's gentle scratch. I feel paralyzed with pleasure, under some tantric spell. She starts to tickle my scrotum.

"You like this?" she whispers.

"Yes," I say. I'm not even hearing her at this point. Just responding with affirmations, saying yes to life, in the passenger seat of her joy ride.

She tickles the hairs inside my butt. Then my ankles and feet and neck and shoulders. She leans into my ear. "I do your front now?"

"Yes," I say. I turn over and cover my erection. "I'm sorry," I say.

She looks at me, confused. She motions me to lie flat, and so I lay with my phallic display, my face red as a brake light. She continues tickling, first my clavicles, then nipples, then up and down my torso, grazing my shaft as she tiptoes her fingertips along the valleys of my goose-bumped skin. It dawned on me fully that this was the thing. I'm in that pornographic storyline that I must desire deep down, because I'm not stopping it. I feel oddly like I'm not allowed to. She wraps her fingers around my penis with a full, a little late this time.

"Yes," I say. She's gotten consent at every step like the wakest of masseuses, but I still wonder if any of this is in my control. My self-respect disintegrates in unison with my rising pleasure. The neurotic questions start to race as I'm serviced: How much will this really cost? Who is this woman? What does she have? How low have I sunk? I am scum.

I reach sexual completion for the first time in my sober life, and she masterfully catches everything in her fist as she pumps away and whispers "So good," which makes me momentarily believe she's actually into this. Dopamine slides through my pathways the same way they did back in my drinking days. Immediate relief pings through my extremities and back to my brain. I wonder if I've unconsciously been manifesting this result all night, like I'm experiencing the perks of once skipping through *The Secret* from Oprah's Book Club. This is what I actually wanted. Why do I feign such chastity? It's the best hand job I've ever had. Here's a woman at the height of her craft, performing an elite operation. Physically, I'm in heaven. Spiritually, I'm more lost than I was before.

She cleans me with a few squares of Charmin UltraSoft. "Thank you," I mumble meekly. I lie still, unsure if it's over. "Hot towel?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. She leaves the room with my wad of excretion, and I hear her flush it down her toilet in the back. I stare at the ceiling, reflecting in shame again. She returns and rubs me down with a warm cloth. Then she stares at me again for a bit. "Are we done?" I ask.

"Yes," she says. I thank her a second time, but it feels insufficient. I have an urge to hug her and give her a kiss and ask if she wants to spoon or have me cook her something up. I go over to my clothes as she starts to remake the bed with clean linens. I pointlessly conceal my genitals with one hand while trying to dress with the other. I ask her about the price while I finish buttoning up my shirt.

"Fifty dollars?" she asks, like it's up to me. I nod okay, confused why the price hasn't changed, having expected an exponential skyrocket. She asks if I'll be using a card, which I confirm, as we leave the room and head towards the front counter. "How much you tip?" she asks me as we walk. There's the kicker. I have no idea how to navigate the etiquette of sexual tipping. My parents forgot to teach me that one.

"How much should I?" I ask.

"Up to you," she counters. I sheepishly offer twenty, and she makes an overtly offended face. Apparently I'm a cheap skard. I'm not prepared to haggle, and I honestly would give her my whole wallet if she asked. I sweeten my deal for her. I give her the next guy stumbles through the front door, a sixty-something Boomer with a dirty mustache and a musky smell, who my new girlfriend will be servicing next. I finish settling up, and she walks me to the door.

"Thank you again! Take care!" I say, like I'm leaving the barber. She smiles without eye contact and locks the door behind me. I never got her name.

As I walk home under the light pollution, I wonder if this lubricated and paid-for TLC had at least washed some of my toxic cynicism away. Reintroduced me to the world of human connection. I try to be present. I feel the hot night's wind ease my face, and I try to fall into it. I think back on that acting teacher who massaged her young thespians years ago, named Ms. Mae, whose hair was raggedy blonde and whose amping and soul appeared fully diluted at all times; just unapologetically open. Either she had an ecstasy problem or some amazing ability to access her own serotonin at will. She once told the class that sometimes before a city storm she would stand outside her Gramercy apartment on the cobblestones with tears running down her cheeks in the gusting, misty wind, not from its force on her exposed eyes, but from a true cry. One that starts with a choke in the back of the throat and turns to a complete emotional well-up, simply as a fruit of her witness to the breeze's beauty. As she recounted her gratitude for the elements, she began to weep again in the classroom. Anyone else putting on this sappy display would have brought a skeptical reaction to my gut, but I saw nothing but truth in this woman's public surrender, and I bought it fully. I watched cross-legged before her in awe of her body's harmonious access to the plangency of the earth, and with full envy of the intricate plane that she existed on, so far above my own. She was fearless. She seemed to understand connection beyond humanity. The wind and rain fell just as good to her as a loving kiss, because she recognized herself in them.

My eyes are dry on my walk home. I can't get there. I feel nothing but my broken ego. Disconnected and alone again. Enchanted by that addictive voice again. I wonder if I should find a bar to indulge my pain. There seems to be a profound sadness inside me, somewhere far behind my eyes. It's a patient, cynical beast that's determined to keep me alone. He's always crawling through the muck of my lobes towards the front, striving to put my light out.

