

A Year in Rehab!

by Kevin McLellan

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PREFACE

or a Warning, as the case may be...

Much has been written about the decline and fall of the rich and famous from their glorious, lime lit peaks to the degraded valleys of America's substance abuse treatment facilities – or, rehab.

Our tabloids, bookstores, and TV news all feature celebrities drinking and drugging and flaming out. Fans gawk as stars check into rehab, humbled and contrite, the wreckage of their lives in tow. It's all terrible and we pity the fallen, but we trust our heroes and heroines will rise again.

And soon, they do. After thirty days in treatment, they are sober and feeling better. They sign book deals, turning misfortune (though self-inflicted), into a sharp career move. Notoriety is trending. In the end, serious memoirs appear, vivid and mawkish, with big marketing budgets. Movie rights are optioned.

These 'rehab narratives' tell one side of it – the hero's side. But not long ago, I gained another perspective during a year I spent working as a counselor in a drug and alcohol treatment center known as Tranquility Manor. I am not a doctor, nurse, or shrink. I don't have a license, diploma, or certificate. But for twelve long months, I cared for all who came to rehab.

Most were not celebrities. They didn't check into rehab with lawyers, publicists, and photographers. They were everyday people at a low point in their lives – sad, angry, confused – and hung over. Mostly, drugs and alcohol brought them to Tranquility Manor.

But I do not judge. I simply cared for them. I learned that all the troubled souls at Tranquility Manor had something to offer me, something to teach ... if I looked deeply.

Though sometimes, I had to look away.

BUT YOU'RE IN REHAB

A rehab center is a hospital. The people who check in are patients. They come seeking help for sick bodies, impaired minds. But despite their ailments and troubles, many retained a strong sense of ego at Tranquility Manor. Strong, but not real.

For every sad, degraded man, there was a gentleman *doing fantastic* (his own words). For every broken, trembling woman, there was a lady *doing fabulous* (her own words). In Detox, patients who were slaves to drugs and booze acted like kings and queens. Pitiful wretches one moment – prima donnas the next. Needless to say, these were often the same people.

One was tempted to whisper in their ears *You're in rehab*.

It is one thing to submit the body for treatment but quite another to surrender the mind. The body clearly tells the tale of abuse and self-indulgence. People are shaken, scarred, malnourished, red in the face. They are ready for help, or at least medical attention. But the mind, the soul, is not ready. It stays right where it is. It is not willing, not flexible, not open, and may in fact be more convinced than ever of its own infallibility.

Sometimes I wanted to yell *You're in rehab!*

“Where are my rooms? Why aren't they ready? I want to see them now!” Celeste R. demanded, standing at the Front Desk surrounded by a matched set of yellow leather luggage. She was checking in. I was handling In-take that afternoon. Evidently this woman's long-suffering husband failed to tell her we offered no private rooms at Tranquility Manor.

“Rooms? Well, ma'am, it's only *one* room, actually,” I explained softly. “It's a very nice room I can tell you. As soon as the nurse takes your vital signs, we'll go there and meet your roommate. I think you'll like –”

“Roommate?!” she thundered.

“Uh, yes ma’am, a roommate . . . a nice lady from Alabama. Sometimes it’s good to have company the first few days.”

“I don’t want, I don’t need any company. ‘Especially not some drunken woman off the farm!’”

“I believe there are cities in Alabama, ma’am.”

I wish I hadn’t said that. Celeste R. had a short fuse, but I was annoyed. We were trained not to correct or disagree with patients, so I steered away quickly. Besides, I had reviewed Celeste’s chart before she arrived, and I knew she was very fond of martinis, as well as Xanax and Valium. Who’s going to argue with someone like that? It’s like talking to the wall.

“And then, when we get you checked in Mrs. R., I’ll bring you some towels.”

“I brought my own,” she sniffed.

You’re in rehab I wanted to whisper.

The nurse managed to get Celeste’s blood pressure, temp, weight, etc. Weighing the patients, especially the women, was delicate. There was no separate exam room. The big metal scales stood right near the wall, in plain view. Not a few ladies rebelled at making their weight known to anyone standing nearby, so the nurses recorded patient weights in silence. Still, it was hardly a private process. I tried to avoid eye contact at this point.

Celeste R. mounted the scales. She was not a heavy woman, but I made the mistake of glancing at her. She returned my look with red-eyed hatred as the nurse noted her weight.

“I’ve got my shoes on,” she explained. They all said this, imagining the shoes added another ten or twenty pounds. They never considered our staff were medical professionals, and did this dozens of times each day. No one cared. But vanity and image are delicate qualities. The

men were no better. They'd say: *Wait. Let me take out my wallet and car keys*, thinking to lessen their weight by ten pounds.

Finally Celeste R. was ready for her room, or at least the room was ready for her. I had personally gone there moments ago and inspected it, fluffed the pillows, etc. Our rooms were certainly decent, a cross between a dorm room and a Holiday Inn, but they were hardly luxe.

Ready? I asked. Celeste stood there amidst her beautiful luggage, looking at me, waiting – waiting for me to carry the bags. I didn't move. She flounced off down the hallway toward her room. I winced. I wasn't a bell hop. But I had come to believe in karma over the years. There is justice in the universe, and it would be fulfilled. For every selfish, unkind act, there is a reaction, a reckoning. It may take weeks or months or years, but it happens, usually on the inside, though I might never see it. I grabbed a suitcase and followed my patient. I left her in the room, with her yellow luggage.

Later that day, I walked by Celeste's closed door. I heard her inside, crying.

Welcome to rehab, I wanted to whisper.

"But I'm a cardiologist," Charles T. almost shouted when I asked him if he planned to attend group therapy one morning. "I know all that stuff already," he added.

The man stood before me with unshaven face and tousled hair. His shirt tail dangled outside his trousers. Charles T. was in fact a medical doctor, but he had no license at present, busted for doling out Class 2 narcotics to himself (and his friends) over the years. He was, in short, a felon on probation. He finally OD'd on his own prescriptions, and checked into Tranquility Manor after a trip to the emergency room.

“Group therapy doesn’t work for me,” he complained. “I’ve tried that before. It’s not properly focused (on him, I surmised). I don’t need that bullshit.”

The capacity of many patients to self-diagnose was nothing short of miraculous. Men and women suffering mental confusion and physical impairment knew exactly what was wrong with them, and exactly how they should be treated. Charles continued:

“What I need is deep work with a therapist, a real professional. That’s what does it for me. ‘Deep work to get at the root of the problem.’”

I suggested gently that maybe he could do *deep work* in group therapy.

“No, no! Nobody in group knows what they’re talking about. They’re all sick. I know. I’ve taken care of sick people my entire career.”

You’re in rehab too, Doc, I wanted to whisper.

“And massages,” Charles continued, rubbing his shoulder. “I’m tight back there. I really need to work things out – my issues, you know? Deep muscle work always works best for me, does the trick.” He grimaced, rolling his arm around. “Where’s your massage therapist? Make me an appointment!”

But you’re in rehab, I wanted to whisper.

James A. sat in the main reception area in bare feet. He was almost forty, but wore the air of a nineteen-year old after a long weekend. Stringy black hair fell around his shoulders. His eyes were dark, his skin pale. He wore tight jeans and a black t-shirt one size too small. He missed breakfast, emerging from his room about eleven a.m. with a sneer for everyone. Slumping into a chair in the reception area where I worked that morning, one might have thought

James was unconscious, except for his naked foot tapping away to the music that came to him via earbuds and a little mp3 player. His eyes were closed.

James was new, just checked in the day before, but he had signed up for the full thirty-day treatment plan. We forbade music players during the first week in treatment as they bred such isolation. The restriction was never well-received.

“Dude, you ever hear of Pantera?” James announced to no one in particular. His eyes remained closed.

“Is that what you’re listening to?” asked Peter S., a gentle pothead who stood nearby, waiting for the nurse.

James A. didn’t answer, his foot tapping. After a moment, he said “Naw. I’m listenin’ to *my* band, Iron Gate. I play bass, but we fronted for Pantera last month at a concert in Phoenix. They’re big.”

Peter S., who was indeed about nineteen, opened his eyes wide and said, “Wow. Man!”

“You ever hear Iron Gate?” James asked, his eyes still closed.

The younger man shifted his feet, and tried hard to remember exactly where he might possibly have heard this music. He thought to lie, to say *Yeah, sure*, but he noticed the bloody-looking tattoos on James’s pale arms. Then he examined his own thin, unmarked arms, and said *No, I haven’t*.

James’s eyes creaked open. “That’s because you ain’t hip.”

Peter looked at the floor. It took him a moment, but he gathered himself.

“And you fronted for Pantera!?” he chirped.

“Well, almost. They’re big you know. We got canceled at the last moment. They ripped us off man! Assholes played without us. It was total bullshit. But we’re gonna open for them next week in Dallas ... when I get out of this dump.”

But you’re in Rehab, I wanted to whisper. For thirty days.

I saw my opening: “Hey James, you got a second, bro’?”

Peter retreated to his room. James pulled himself from the chair like a man profoundly inconvenienced. He strolled to the Front Desk where I sat, and leaned against the counter as if he was in a bar. As gently as I could, I asked,

“Hey James, did they tell you about music players when you checked in?” I lingered on the *they* as if *they* were some kind of conspiracy that oppressed us both.

“What?” He brushed a string of black hair away from his face.

“The music players. I’m afraid Tranquility doesn’t –”

“You ever hear of Iron Gate?” he interrupted. “You know music, right? You’re hip, I can tell. You’re one of the cool ones.”

“Yes, maybe, I think so. But listen buddy, the music player. They don’t allow patients to use them during the first week.”

“We opened for Pantera once. They’re huge. Well, we almost did, until they screwed us. But next week, in Dallas –”

“James. Listen,” but it was no use. He stuffed the earbuds back in and turned away.

“Iron Gate!” he yelled, as he shuffled back to his room, playing air guitar down the hallway.

You’re in rehab, Dude, I whispered, but James didn’t hear me.

