

Hangover

by Andrew O. Dugas

For a guy about to get married—a guy no one expected to ever settle down—Peter was solid as a rock.

I, on the other hand, was a bit wobbly. We were in the food court in Macy's basement on Union Square, nursing our hangovers while Kim and Tina searched for something new and something blue. Seizing a table for four, we cracked open bottles of much needed water and kicked our legs up on the extra chairs.

“Gawd, my head!”

“When did you turn into such a pussy?”

“That's what happens after you get married. You'll find out soon enough.”

“Whatever. Just forever hold your peace when we get to that does-anyone-have-any-reason blah blah blah part, all right?”

“But really, all fucking around aside. Tina seems like a nice girl.” And she was, a tall brunette with big soft eyes and model beautiful like all his women. Sweet, too, showing up at the hotel that morning with coffee and fresh-squeezed orange juice for two people she'd never met.

“Well, Kim seems to like her. I suppose that's a good sign.”

I couldn't tell if he meant that or not.

With his black cap and wraparound sunglasses, Peter looked like one of those stone-faced card players on the Poker Channel. We were both three years older but his face still had the lean definition of the compulsively athletic, a bony tautness earned from twenty-mile bike rides in skintight Lycra and hours of power yoga, emphasis on *power*.

That was Peter. Even hung over, he had bothered to shave.

As I took a big gulp from my bottle, his head jerked in reaction to something behind me.

“What is it?” I turned my head.

“No, don't look!” he hissed. “It's someone I used to work with. See that guy in the green sweater?”

I pretended to brush something from my shoulder, craning my head around to steal a peek. The only green sweater was on a father, about our age, mid-thirties. He had three kids, the oldest about eight, another about elbow height, and an infant in a stroller. The middle child was bouncing up and down like a superball. His wife was a pretty woman with long black hair and milky skin. She determinedly spooning a jar of baby food into the infant's mouth.

"You mean Mr. Family Man over in the corner?"

"Yeah, that's him. Tom Wykoff." The muscles around Peter's jaw tensed as if he were chewing tough meat. "We were kind of friends."

"Do you want to say hello?"

"God, no! I hope he doesn't spot us."

I waited, because I knew there was more to the story and keeping quiet was the best way to get Peter to talk.

"Nice little family there." He shook his head. "Just goes to show..."

"Sorry, what's that?" I stretched, and pulled down the last of my water.

"You wouldn't believe it." Peter leaned in to whisper. "Don't let the Kodak moment with the wife and kids fool you. That guy is totally gay."

I took a careful second look. The Tom Wykoff guy had pulled the middle child, dark and pale like the mother, onto his lap and was simultaneously straightening the oldest boy's collar. He leaned in to give his wife a quick but clearly loving kiss. "I'm not seeing it, Peter."

"Trust me. I know."

I kept quiet.

"We used to hang out some. Just at work." Peter' weaved his hands in the air, looking for a place to start. "Remember when I worked at BeckerTech in Redwood Shores? Tom and I both brought our bikes to work so we started riding together at lunch. You know, all those bike paths down along the bay and around the Oracle office complex. We used to talk, nothing real serious. Which girls were hot, who was the biggest asshole. You know, the usual office shit."

Peter paused and took a swig from his water bottle. It splashed loud and wet and made me wish I hadn't finished mine so quickly.

"After a time, he starts talking about his wife, they'd already had one kid and she wanted another. He wanted to wait longer. There was some issue or another about her going back to work or being a stay at home mom; I don't remember. The point is he started talking about all this personal shit."

"Uh-huh, so what happened, did he get a man-crush on you?"

A jolt ran through Peter. He nodded slowly and deliberately. "Oh, yeah, did he ever."

For a moment I had a vision, a vision imbued with the candy-colored lucidity characteristic of the tequila hangover: I pictured Peter and this Tom guy strolling hand-in-hand through the Castro District in muscle shirts made of that net-like material. For good measure, I gave Peter a shaved head and a mustache.

He looked around as if to make sure no one was listening, then leaned in closer. "You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Oh come on, man. Maybe it was all in your head." I winked and smiled. "Maybe you were just projecting."

"Fuck you!" Peter shook his head, grinning ear to ear and even blushing a little. "How's this for projecting? One day I'm leaving my place to go to the store. I come out the gate and there he is, looking like a forlorn kitten on the sidewalk." Another swig of water.

"So?"

"Well, he's like *I need to talk to you. My wife threw me out*. So we go down to Farley's on the corner. This is when I was still living with Tessie. Remember that cute little cottage on Potrero Hill?" I remembered Tessie and I remembered the cottage, which always had fresh-cut flowers in the living room. They'd worked hard decorating the place with rough wool rugs on hardwood floors and antique but sturdy furniture, lots of Shaker stuff. The result was something between Southwestern and Colonial Williamsburg and very tasteful. When they broke up, they fought over the furniture the way some couples fight over child custody.

Tessie was five or six girlfriends back for Peter, and probably his last remotely serious relationship.

"So what happened?" I wanted to get another bottle of water but had to hear the rest of the story first.

"Okay, so I'm like, *yeah it's hard having a new kid but everyone gets through it, you just gotta go through it.* Blah blah blah. You know, very supportive stuff because I figure he's just going through a bad spell. He'll get over it. All this time, though, I'm wondering why he's talking to me. I mean, we just ride together at work some times. Where are his real buddies, someone who really knows him?"

Peter chewed on a thumbnail.

"Then he says it's not about kids or her not working or any of that. Suddenly he confesses that he's met someone else, he thinks he's in love, really in love, maybe for the first time in his life, and he's really confused about what to do."

"And you're the someone else? Jesus H. Christ, you gotta be kidding me!"

Peter opened his arms in a mock Italian plea. "Are you telling the story or am I telling the story?"

"Story? It's gonna be War and Peace before you're done."

"All right, all right. Yes, he finally confesses that I am the special someone he's met and hence all the confusion." Peter feigned exasperation. "Are you happy now?"

I leaned back and helped myself to Peter's water. He didn't notice. "Wowie, zowie, Batman." I took another deep swig. "How was that for you?"

"What the hell do you mean how was it for me? You know how uncomfortable it is when a gay guy hits on you? Well, it was like that times ten."

I shook my head. "Sorry, can't say as I do."

"Can't say as you do what?"

I shrugged. "I can't say as I know what it's like. I've never been hit on by a gay guy."

"Oh come on."

"Sorry."

“Now you're just shitting me.” Peter looked incredulous. “You mean to tell me that you lived in San Francisco—fucking Noe Valley—for like five years and not once a gay guy offered you a drink or asked you out or anything?”

“Not that I can recall.”

Peter shook his head. “You just didn't know it, that's all. You weren't aware. You're too fucking innocent. It's that New England upbringing.”

I shrugged. “Why? Have you been hit on?”

Peter laughed. “Dozens of times! Every guy I know has been hit on.”

I winked long and slow. “Well, I don't know what bars *you* hang out in, but...”

He socked my arm hard enough to hurt. “Fuck you!”

I held my hands up in surrender. “Okay, so what happened next?”

“What happened next was I told him I didn't feel that way, not towards him, not towards any man. I wished him the best, got up and got the hell out of there.” Peter seemed lost in the memory, shaking his head slowly. He sighed quietly, as if he had a slow leak.

“What about at work? Christ, how was that?”

“Well, I was in Marketing and he was in Human Resources, so we didn't work together, but he left the company almost immediately. It seems like it was the next day but it must have been more like a couple of weeks.” Peter shrugged.

“And that was it?” I asked. “You guys never talked about it again?”

“He left a letter in my mail slot when he left. Handwritten, no less. I still have it. He apologized for everything, saying he knows it was all him and had nothing to do with me, blah, blah, blah. But he essentially repeated the same thing, that he had these powerful feelings for me, that he'd always been straight but something'd clicked with me. Or so he thought.” Peter jerked his chin toward Tom and his family. “It looks like they worked it out, though, he and his wife.”

I peered back over my shoulder. Mr. and Mrs. Wykoff were wiping off containers and bottles with a cloth and packing them in a quilted shoulder bag with a Minnie Mouse pattern.

"Yeah," I said. "They look fine. His wife is real pretty, too."

Peter nodded. "Sure. Dana. She's getting kind of chunky though. I met her at a Christmas party once and you wouldn't believe the weight she's put on."

Our table was between Tom's family and the exit, so the inevitable happened.

"Oh shit, they're coming this way." Peter leaned back, holding his hand off the table in a tentative half-wave. "Be cool."

I turned and watched the family moving toward us like a war council. "Maybe he won't recognize you."

"No, it's too late. Dana's looking right at me." Peter's hand rose to wave and we both stood up. "Hi!"

The conversation started out following the usual Social Encounter script. Each party expressed surprise at encountering the other and the passage of time was remarked upon. All the parties were introduced, including the children, whose growth and/or existence was also mentioned briefly but enthusiastically.

Then Tom asked Peter if he was still working in Redwood Shores. Peter said, "No, these days I'm working in downtown Oakland."

Dana shifted and looked away.

Tom said, "Really? Me, too. I'm at Twelfth and Broadway."

This was the point where either party would suggest lunch and then exchange email addresses or cell phone numbers. Instead, there was only silence.

I cleared my throat. "Of course, he won't be there for a few weeks; he's gonna be on his honeymoon. Our man Peter here is getting married tomorrow!" I clapped him on the back.

Dana smiled and congratulated Peter, who pshawed and awshucked in his practiced manner.

Tom scratched his chin and looked thoughtful. "Tara? Tess? Something like that?"

"Tina, actually. But you're thinking of Tessie, my old girlfriend." Peter paused, as if remembering. "That was all a long time ago."

"Yes," Tom said. "Yes it was."

More silence.

The little boy began pulling at Tom's pants leg with remarkable energy.

"Well, we'd better be off." Tom gestured vaguely at his kids and shrugged.

"Nice seeing you, Peter," Dana said. "And congratulations." She was already wheeling the stroller toward the exit turnstile.

"You, too."

I mumbled my own feeble farewells and waved mechanically. As soon as they were out of earshot, I whispered, "Boy, looking at them, I can't imagine what they must've gone through. Kind of actually gives me hope. I mean, if a couple can survive a crisis like that, you know?"

I turned to Peter. He was watching them walk away with a strange grimace on his face, as if he'd sprained his ankle or thrown out his back.

"Peter? Are you all right?" I put one hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

His features softened and he dipped his head. He pulled off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes — bleary and bloodshot — with the back of his hand. "Oh yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine." He gave his head a little shake. "It's just this damned hangover won't quit."

After a moment, he pulled on his sunglasses and straightened his cap. We were back on the Poker Channel.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go get the girls."

