

Hammered then hungover

by Stephen Stark

When she got back to Claire's, she was hammered and she had no idea what time it was, what day, or, frankly, what planet. It was the first time she'd been that drunk in years. The last time she could remember getting even close to that wasted was at a Christmas party right after Robbie was born. The first thing she wanted to do—and which Claire stopped her from doing—was to call Robert and ask what the fuck he was thinking. She couldn't stand the idea that he might already be fucking someone, and that maybe his distance had something to do with some real absence after all, and because she was drunk, her mind went wild with imagined details. Except rationally, if she could for a moment grab a toehold on that elusive state, it was impossible. There was simply no way. He was in his office in the mornings before he went to work, and then in his office again after he came home, hammering away at his stupid laptop. But that didn't stop her head from running wild. And what about looking so good? And happy?

Claire hardly seemed fazed, but then she had stopped drinking long before Ann had.

While Ann had propped herself against a wall, splaying her feet a little to keep from falling, Claire paid off the babysitter, then went up to check on the kids. When she returned, she helped Ann get undressed and into bed in the guest bedroom. Claire convinced her that there was a rational, non-threatening explanation. She was a colleague. She was a relative—okay, Ann would know that. In the worst case scenario, as far as Claire could see it, *at most* Robert was *maybe* trying to show that he could live without her. There were a million explanations that could preclude sweaty, nude grappling. And it all made a kind of sense while she was drunk, and so she went to sleep (read: passed out) only to get up when the sun was unreasonably bright and her cell phone wouldn't stop ringing.

It was her father, Jack Miles, famous trial attorney. He was not pleased that she had taken off, and he was worried, but when she

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told him what happened, he seemed almost relieved, even a little gleeful. (Jack could be—and it was his bread and butter to be—as maniacally tenacious as a terrier.

Maybe then you've got grounds.

What do you mean? Her head was a metallic meatloaf, her mind crumbling but doing it very noisily.

Jack said: If you can show that he's committed adultery—

I don't want grounds, she screamed, and was surprised at herself. She tried to get control. No. I know he hasn't, but even as she said it, she remembered how the Bombshell had looked at him, and the carnality in her gaze.

When are you coming back?

I just woke up. I'll call when I leave. (She did not tell Jack that her car was still in the parking lot over in Kingstowne because she had been too impaired to drive, or that Claire was going to have to drive her over to claim it.)

Well, I hope you accomplished what you wanted to accomplish.

I have no idea, father. (She rarely called him anything but Jack, and when she didn't call him Jack it was for irony or some other rhetorical purpose.)

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She got up and the headache hit her and bent her over. She tried to straighten up again, but there was a wave of dizziness and nausea, so she got dressed bending over like that, and then found Claire in the kitchen. Claire wore a pair of very skimpy shorts and a top that looked like one of James's T-shirts cut off just below boob-level. Her legs were long and slender and tanned. She had one of those granite and maple kitchens, with acres of room, pretty, recessed spotlights that could make even a peanut butter sandwich look like something out of *Gourmet*, a work island, and a stove that likely cost ten times what Ann's own cost.

Hangover, Claire said matter-of-factly.

How'd you guess?

It's the green blush in your cheeks.

Funny. There was throbbing even in her sinuses, her earlobes.

Claire made her some sort of anti-hangover concoction that consisted primarily of V8 juice, but also had numerous other and secret ingredients. Claire joked that it was developed by the NASA to keep astronauts in tip-top shape. It tasted horrid, but Ann had to admit that afterward it made her feel a little less woozy. Then she brought her a plus-size mug of coffee.

Thanks for taking care of me, Claire, Ann said, feeling small and miserable.

Claire came up behind her and rubbed her shoulders, gathered up her hair. I've always loved your hair.

Thanks, Ann said and reached up to put a hand on Claire's hand.

No, really, I'd steal it if I could.

Claire sat down across from her. It was one of those pub-style tables, bar height. Claire went on: My hair's so blech. Claire ran her hand through her own hair and shook her head. I ruined it with too many perms.

You look gorgeous. I wish I had your hair.

Annie, she said. It's gonna work out. It's awful now, but it's gonna work out.

I'm gonna call him, Ann said.

Who?

Robert. I want to know who the bimbo was and what he's thinking.

Annie, don't.

Why? It's been one day and already he's with someone else. I mean, she said, picking up her coffee mug and then putting it down again. I am so—

Claire cut her off: Maybe that was his lawyer.

Why Ann hadn't thought of this, she had no idea. Her hands were trembling—the tequila had leached out her ability to think. Maybe, she said. But what if she's not?

Last night you said that what you really wanted was just time to be apart.

Yeah, Ann said, noticing, as she lifted her coffee mug, that her hand was trembling.

Claire leaned forward, her boobs pressing against the table. She looked like she'd had work done, but she swore she hadn't.

So, I mean, Claire said, Can't you say that to him? I mean, can't you sit down with a mediator or something and negotiate, like, six months or something?

That was what I was thinking—I mean you put it better than I was thinking it—last night when I said it. But then there he was, with that woman. And looking really happy and content and kind of, I don't know, disdainful.

All I know is if you call him, you'll hate yourself. If he really was trying to get to you—and I have no idea, really—but calling him would say, Hi, Robert, you got to me.

Oh, shit, she said, and sighed. You're probably right. It's just so unlike him. Or I think it's unlike him.

It's unlike him. But, you know, you pushed him. Guys always want to show that they're the ruler of the herd.

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Ann here: Had I actually been sober the night before, I might've remembered just how weird the whole thing was. That he was physically transformed, Robert but not Robert. That he had a way better haircut. That he bore himself differently. But all I could remember was the bimbo.

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She, Mia, isn't a bimbo. I've met her. She's a totally driven professional.

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Who happens to have big boobs. Did you sleep with her?

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Ann, this is hardly the time or place to be discussing this.

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You did, didn't you?

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Let's go swimming or something, Claire said. The pool will be open by the time we get there.

I need to get back, Ann said.

Claire ran her hand through her hair and cocked her head. Okay, she said. Listen, though. Don't call him.

I'm not going to call him.

Yes you are. I can tell. You're like totally planning what you're going to say and that's okay, except just don't do it. There has to be some kind of explanation.

Claire had her purse and car keys.

I just wasn't—that was so weird. So weird.

I know, Annie. That's part of my point. There has to be some sort of explanation. I have no idea whether it will be rational. Claire laughed.

Outside, the car was hot and the day had raced ahead of her, away from her. While Claire drove, she leaned against the window, the air conditioning blowing now, and she was thinking about telling Robbie, and it certainly didn't seem like it was going to be anything less than awful, especially with this pyrotechnic hangover.

Claire nosed her car through the parking lot and they found Ann's Prius. Claire got out of the car and hugged her, and now Ann got into her own car, and for a moment, after it started and the AC got going, but before she went anywhere, she wanted to scream. She looked around to see if Claire was gone, and then she dug into her purse for her cell phone.

