

Peter and Andrea

Peter was normally a quiet, reserved man, but he did allow himself a few emotional indulgences. The most frequent and intense being to join in the dance and thrum of traditional music festivals that might occur within a day or two of travel from his own village. He would do this only if he could find someone to take care of his friend Patrick for the time required to travel and attend a particular festival.

Patrick had been his friend since as long as Peter could remember. They had come up in the very same neighborhood as they now resided in, and in fact had hatched many a childhood and adolescent plot right in the very same house that they now called home. Then Patrick had joined the military and had ended up in a war zone on a far away continent. He had returned home shattered by mortar wounds that made walking, talking, and self-care very difficult. Even more insidiously Patrick had been exposed to biological agents that were causing unseen damage to his nervous system.

Peter had visited his friend religiously in the veteran's rehabilitation unit even though it was a day's travel each way. Peter's wife at the time, Cloresa had been increasingly critical of the time that Peter was spending

visiting his friend. Cloresa, a nominally attractive woman, had frankly married Peter because he owned his home free and clear, having inherited it after the death of his parents. She had thought that was an indication of him having “good prospects”. To Cloresa it seemed obvious that with them both working, though Peter was only employed as a humble clerk, and eschewing children, they might one day enjoy modest wealth. As Cloresa came to understand Peter’s lack of material ambition she became increasingly bitter and finally left him and moved to a city where “good prospects” were more abundant.

Shortly after her departure Patrick was scheduled to leave the rehabilitation unit. Patrick’s mother had died while he was away in the war and his father had become a foundering drunk, stumbling around town in shit-stained pants and sleeping under bridges. Peter didn’t have to think about it for more than a minute before he arranged to take Patrick into his care. He made the necessary accommodations so that Patrick could move about the house in his wheelchair, then went to bring his friend home.

So, there they had lived for years entering middle age as two bachelors living contentedly despite Patrick’s disabilities. People in the village remarked how lucky

Patrick was to have a friend and advocate like Peter who fed him, changed him, and showed him a deep and abiding love. Peter knew that the reality was that having Patrick gave his life meaning and purpose. He couldn't imagine wandering around the house alone with only his boring job as motivation to get out of bed.

Peter had made arrangements for a dependable neighbor lady to care for Patrick for a few days while he went to a music festival located nearby. It was one he attended annually and knew many of the players, staff, and attendees. He arrived the day before the fest was scheduled to start, as he liked to set up his camp in a secluded woodsy area along a gurgling stream. Even though this area was a bit of a walk from the fest grounds he loved the solitude it provided when he returned to the site at the end of the day's music.

As he was setting up his tent one of the workers he knew stopped by to share some early fest gossip. It seemed that a young woman had arrived that was known to make her living selling her body. It had caused much laughter and coarse speculation amongst the other workers but of course none of them had the nerve to actually go talk to the girl. Peter was immediately enthralled by the information. He had never personally engaged a prostitute but had always been fascinated and

strongly aroused by the thought of them. On the few occasions he had to visit a city he would always find out where such trade took place. He would then go to the district and observe the girls at work. He could easily see that some were in a bad way, suffering from disease and addictions. But there were others, it seemed, who had not totally succumbed to hazards of the profession. It was the images of these still healthy women that he held in mind when he satisfied himself in solitary fashion.

To find himself at his favorite music fest with the opportunity of observing a girl selling her sex was overwhelmingly intoxicating. He knew that he must see this creature at once. After he got his breathing and pulse under control, he quickly stowed the remainder of his camp gear and headed to the parking area where she was said to be set up in. As he approached her conveyance, he could hear some of the workers making crude remarks and laughing but he was mesmerized in his focus. As he got within fifty yards, she came around the corner of her camper and looked directly at him. Peter was stunned at her simple beauty. She was small, almost waiflike but her large dark eyes showed confidence and purpose. Her fair skinned face contained almond shaped eyes, a small upturned nose, full lips all framed by thick, straight black hair that stopped just above her shoulders. Peter stopped dead in his tracks unable to move or utter a sound.

She could apparently see the effect she was having on this plain middle age man with the first traces of an emerging belly. A smile crossed her lips. But it was not a mocking or predatory smile, rather one of the genuine pleasure of amusement. She had a bag in her hand but she set it down and continued to look at Peter as her smile grew more welcoming and friendly. Finally, Peter's brain began to function again and he took a few unsteady steps forward before he settled and assumed a more comfortable gait. He knew he had to meet this alluring young woman, his normal shyness be damned. As he approached her, he held out his hand and introduced himself somewhat formally "good afternoon, I'm Peter Hayes". She giggled once then offered her hand in return and said simply "I'm Andrea". Her handshake was warm and firm and her eyes continued to look directly into his.

Peter realized that he had become fully erect in about two seconds. He blushed completely and reluctantly let go of her hand. His mind flipped through a few possible conversation starters such as "So is it true that you are a prostitute", or "How much for your services then?" or even "How did a nice girl like you fall into such a life". In the end he settled for something more fitting of himself. "So, you like traditional music?" She did that single giggle again which did not make Peter feel like he was

being laughed at but rather that he was a charming and amusing man.

Andrea allowed that she had never been to a music fest before but had enjoyed the traditional music that she had come across in the past. Peter felt that the only way to keep from falling mute and staring like an imbecile was to start a long fast monologue covering his love of music, his friend Patrick, and possibly his entire childhood though he couldn't be sure, even as he was rambling on. Finally, Andrea touched his arm and his diatribe ground to a halt. She asked "would you like a cup of tea?" He allowed that he would and she pulled an old primus stove out of the back of her camper and proceeded to make tea as Peter slowly decompressed while he observed her. Her movements were the fluid and natural sort of a self-assured person, although she looked like she couldn't be much older than eighteen. She projected none of the "damaged goods" look that Peter normally associated with prostitutes and he started to wonder if it had been a bunch of bullocks perpetuated by the fest workers to satisfy their own smutty little fantasies.

But no, here she was, alone, much younger than the usual participants, and admittedly not a dyed in the wool traditional music aficionado. He looked at her camping

gear which was a little disheveled but contained no cases of prophylactics or menus of services offered. After she handed him a cup of tea and sat on a log stool across from him, he was able to start to relax and be his normal self. And his normal self was kind, considerate, and interested in others. He didn't want to embarrass her so he stuck to vague and generic questions to which she responded with vague and generic answers. They ended up sharing some laughs, and Peter some more of his history, while Andrea remained enigmatic. Finally, she said she had to finish setting up her camp and Peter volunteered to help. When that was finished, they prepared and consumed a small meal together. They then walked up to the fest grounds to watch some of the early arriving musicians partake in a pre-fest jam session.

Peter had observed how some of the men on the grounds had looked at Andrea. He'd even seen a couple of them start to make inquiries but she'd fended them off with a quick hard look and they hastily retreated. At the end of the night, they built a small fire by her camper and Peter ended up falling asleep on the ground next to the fire.

For the next two days they attended all of the music and dancing sessions together. Peter gave Andrea a running tutorial on traditional music and dance and she seemed to develop a growing interest in the subjects. Their only

physical contact was light and innocent while dancing. As the weekend came to a close Peter had the following thoughts. He had more love for this girl in one weekend than he had ever achieved with Cloresa. He had probably deprived her of badly needed income by hovering around her the whole time. That, as improbable as it was, he must find a way to continue to see her.

And improbable it was. Aside from the fact that he was fairly sure of her profession and that she was young enough to be his daughter. She was also beautiful enough to never be interested in a plain old geezer like himself. But Andrea surprised him. She asked if she could follow him home and stay for a short visit.

At this point Peter started to believe that he must be dreaming and would soon wake up. But the dream, if it was a dream, continued. When they arrived at Peter's home, Peter thanked the neighbor lady, who left after giving a few cool appraising looks at Andrea. Peter then introduced Andrea and Patrick. Even though his speech was garbled and hard for anyone to make out Andrea seemed to have an intuitive sense of what he was trying to communicate and they hit it off immediately. Peter saw that Patrick was as enthralled as he was and worried a bit that it might set up some jealousy between he and his old friend. After a few seconds of that he came to his

senses and derided himself thinking, “You stupid old sod she’s not your girlfriend and you have no stake in her to worry about losing”.

The carnival of emotions Peter had experienced over the weekend came to a head that night when he offered Andrea his bed to sleep in while he volunteered to take the couch. She replied “I’ll only sleep in your bed if you accompany me”. He knew it made him appear unmanly but he couldn’t staunch the tears that leaked out of the corners of his eyes as she led him into his bedroom. She undressed him on top of the covers, slipped her own clothes off and made magnificent love to him. He’d never been better than a mediocre lover with Cloresa and he could only go a few minutes with Andrea before the dam burst forth from his loins. He knew he hadn’t even begun to satisfy her but still she looked pleased and content. He fell asleep wondering how his life had turned so spectacularly wonderful out of the clear blue.

Andrea never spoke of the future, avoiding any scenarios of staying or leaving. Peter, not wanting to crush the delicate flower of her presence was satisfied to take it one day at a time. Patrick, while clearly in love with Andrea also, was happy to be a recipient of her charm and care. She immediately learned how to do all of Patrick’s personal care tasks and carried out the most

intimate of these without a break in her sunny demeanor.

They settled into their own little family routine often wheeling Patrick around the town to get fresh air and observe the village dynamics. And the village observed them. They were the hot topic on the gossip circuit. Word had passed back from the music fest as to Andrea's profession. This sparked speculation that Peter had secret wealth that he was using to purchase her company. That was debunked by Cloresa's sister who said "Cloresa would never have left if Peter would have had money". Others conjectured that "they were having unnatural three-way sex with that poor half-wit Patrick". But their obvious outward happiness and lack of guile eventually discredited the nattering old hags and their unseemly theories. As the weeks passed into months Peter started to think that maybe he wasn't dreaming and that this would remain his life. He knew that despite his increasingly best efforts, he was not giving Andrea full sexual satisfaction. But she seemed to be content. And she loved sharing in taking care of Patrick and helping with the domestic chores.

Patrick's external injuries had improved with time and rehabilitation sessions. But just as he was enjoying some marked progress, his nerve damage from the biological agents of war had served to cause increased loss of

physical and mental functions. It infuriated Peter that just as all of the hard work was starting to pay off for his friend, the unseen ordinance inside Patrick's body had launched a new and even more horrific attack. So, there had been slow improvement which had turned into rapid decline. Patrick had gone from pushing himself around in his wheelchair and taking a few faltering steps to back in the chair unable to even push himself around any longer. The three of them had cried alone and together about the disheartening developments.

Then fate and modern medical research had intervened. Patrick was chosen to be a participant in an experimental drug trial to ameliorate the nerve damage suffered by men like himself who had been exposed to the devastating toxins of war. The improvement was immediate and profound. Within weeks Patrick was back to getting out of his wheelchair and walking haltingly. His speech was improved to the point that he was fairly easily understood. Many in the village revised their opinion of his intellectual capabilities once they could understand what he was saying. Even more significantly Patrick was able to take over most of his personal cares. This created a sea change in the household dynamic. Taking care of Patrick was no longer the major activity for Peter and Andrea. Peter hoped that they would be able to spend more time alone and possibly even do what little travel his income would allow.

These fantasies for the future were shattered when Andrea came to him one morning and told him she would be leaving the next day. As she was telling him he wanted to howl in pain but he noticed that she was starting to weep. She began apologizing for hurting him and declared “you are such a fine, kind man and never deserved to be hurt by the likes of me”. It was the only time he had ever heard her degrade herself and it hit him like a slap. “No” he barked. “Do not ever apologize for your part in my life. I never dreamed of being as happy as I have been for these past months and I will not allow you to feel anything but joy when considering our time together.” They spent the rest of the evening in bed together holding each other while simultaneously laughing and crying. Although Peter was very aroused by their closeness he refrained from initiating lovemaking. He thought it would be too sad in the end.

The next morning Peter maintained a stiff upper lip as Andrea packed and said good-bye to Patrick. Patrick was so caught up in his reclaimed abilities that even though he loved Andrea he couldn't put much thought into her leaving. After she was gone and Patrick had shambled off for a walking tour of the village, Peter felt the depths of his loneliness. For the first time in his life, he entertained thoughts of suicide. He didn't dismiss them but decided to take a wait and see approach. If the devastating

heartbreak didn't ease in a few weeks, he could always knacker himself then.

After Andrea had been gone a few weeks and Patrick had been on the drugs a couple of months, a side effect of the medication started to emerge. Patrick who had maintained a happy jovial demeanor throughout his hard life began to display episodes of roaring anger, stomping about and raging at the top of his lungs. Most of his rants were about the shabby treatment that he had received from veteran's services, although other times Peter was sometimes the target. With Patrick being independent and often not fun to be around, Peter tried attending some music fests. All they did was remind him of the magical weekend when he had met Andrea and the subsequent loss. He could no longer enjoy what had once been his main source of pleasure outside of his relationship with Patrick.

He still felt he was teetering on the brink of self-destruction so he made a concerted effort to plan a way off of the precipice. As he reviewed his life, he once again realized how much satisfaction he had previously derived from taking care of Patrick and how it was probably a key factor in Andrea staying as long as she had. That led him to think of all of the unsung caretakers who work daily on other's behalf without notice or

commendation. Then it struck him as to what he would like to do. He decided that he would anonymously deliver letters of gratitude along with small gifts to folks who take care of others without financial compensation. That would require that he travel around and surreptitiously observe people that he thought might be candidates.

He started his new pursuit by returning to the veteran's rehabilitation unit. There he could observe various caretakers bringing "their veteran" in for his check-ups. Since he had been there many times himself with Patrick, he knew most all of the staff and they universally liked him. So, it was easy to pump them for information that they were officially not supposed to give out. That is how he found his first recipients. And it worked. As he gave more and more letters of gratitude accompanied by flowers or inexpensive presents his depression started to fade and his heart mend. Since his village was located in a sparsely populated area he had to go further and further away to find caretakers to honor. He had also developed more sources of information and was no longer focusing solely on people who provided care for veterans.

He soon heard of an elderly woman in a rural village that had recently taken in a mentally impaired teenage girl

who had been abandoned by her family and required much care. He was touched by the compassion that this woman had seemingly showed providing for this stranger in need. And she was doing so, by herself, at a time when most women her age were taking it easy.

Peter was excited. It sounded like someone who really deserved to receive thanks and recognition. As was his usual method he went to clandestinely observe the situation to make sure it was one that he really wanted to involve himself in. He located the house that the woman and her ward were living in and began lounging around a park near the home. Within a few hours he saw the woman and girl emerge from the house about a block away. Even though he couldn't make out their faces he recognized the "disabled" gait and body movement of the smaller of the two females. He didn't want them to see him staring so he pretended to read the paper he had with him as they approached the park. He waited until they had entered the park before he looked up. When he did, he experienced immediate mental disorientation and an emotional implosion.

The "disabled" girl was unmistakably Andrea. But she looked genuinely disabled. From the vacant look on her face, to her incoherent rambling to the elderly lady, to the body movement he had noted from afar. If he hadn't

known better, he would have sworn that it was not an act. He thought for a few minutes that maybe he didn't know better and that maybe she had suffered an accident and become brain damaged. That thought was abruptly ended when she happened to swing around and her eyes passed over him. For two seconds the vacant look was replaced by one of complete confusion, then recognition. But she quickly got her vacant look back on and turned her attention back to the old woman. Peter sat stunned. He realized by her reaction that she saw him but wanted no contact. As wave after wave of emotion flooded over him. He felt hope, understanding, despair, and finally bittersweet love. He refrained from looking at her directly but observed her out of the corner of his eye. He watched as the woman pushed her on the swings, caught her at the bottom of the slide and assisted her in all of the activities that a young child or mentally disabled adult might enjoy.

Peter felt like a ship on a becalmed sea. Even after Andrea and her minder had left the park, he could find no reason to move or form a plan of how to proceed into the next moment of his life.

He sat there till well after dark when he heard her voice from the shadows. "Peter, please come over here". She was completely submerged by the shrubbery and he

couldn't really see her until he entered the hollowed-out space where she was. They hugged for a few moments then she put her hands on his shoulders and held him at arms length. "You must go Peter. And never return. Please understand. This is what I need to do now. Just like when I met you, I needed to feel the genuine love of a kind and decent man. Just like when you and I both needed to show our kindness, love, and compassion by taking care of Patrick. Right now, I need to be unconditionally loved and cared for by this benevolent woman who has no expectations of me. These are all things I missed in my childhood. Instead, I had pain, abuse, and exploitation. But somehow, I never believed I deserved them so when I finally had a chance to experience them, I was able to. You made it possible for me to change my life completely Peter and I will always love you and be grateful for that. But I have more of my own needs that I now have to attend to and I can't do that with you in my life."

Peter felt like he had left his body and was impartially observing a conversation between two strangers from above. He heard his voice reply "Yes I understand. I will go." As Andrea embraced him in another hug he returned to his corporeal self and returned the embrace. Then Andrea disengaged, looking him in the eyes for a few seconds then turned and disappeared.

Peter returned to his village replaying the events that had occurred in his head for days then weeks. What she said absolutely made sense. Even though she had never shared anything about her past he had deduced that it had been hard and bleak and had been the reason she had become a prostitute. But he had always trusted her and was sure she had always been honest, albeit evasive, about her past.

Peter maintained his promise to never interfere with her life but did regularly travel and read newspapers from other locales in order to keep track of her. He found out from the gossips near the village in which she had settled, that she had had a “miracle medical cure” and had gained enough mental capacity to obtain a job as a secretary at a cartage firm and had eventually married an ordinary but decent young man of her own age. Peter clipped the wedding announcement that contained her picture and kept it in the drawer by his bed. In the photo she had managed to project the look of a plain and simple housefrau. Peter knew better.