

A Pleasant Fiction

by niceguyted

The old Jeep pulls to a stop at the end of our driveway, lets us out by our own faded Jeep and pulls a youie, Bill's gnarled hand waving goodbye to us from where the window would be. At the same time, Jen and I take a deep breath and smile broadly as we exhale. We don't say anything to each other, though we both know we're thinking the same thing: it's good to be home; it smells different — better — here.

Jen jumps into the front seat and cranks up the old machine — it seems she can ALWAYS get it started on the first try — as I throw our packs into the back seat. By the time I get to the driver's side, Jen is already buckled up and ready to go. It's a beautifully sunny afternoon, but not hot enough for the dust from the road to stick to the dust that's already covering our traveling-clothes.

"You sure you don't want to drive?" I say.

"Nope. It's all you. But let's take it easy on the way up, hmm? I won't fall asleep on you, but it'd be cool to zone out for a bit."

"Okie-dokie," I say, and throw it in gear. I give it some extra gas, slip the clutch and spray gravel from our driveway onto the highway as I fishtail it around a bit. I can feel Jen looking at me.

"What?!" I protest, unsuccessfully suppressing a smile. "There's no way you had time to zone out already!"

Jen laughs and slugs me in the arm as I roll to a stop and put the Jeep in four wheel drive. It hurts and I drive (more or less) carefully for the remaining 5.2 miles of dry dirt track leading up to our house. I'm sorely tempted to play in the mud as we get up the hill and into the forest closer to the house, but Jen anticipates this and is looking right at me when I glance over to see if she's paying attention. I feign innocence. Poorly. And she laughs again. God, I love to hear her laugh.

We pull up under the port cochère (which I am NOT allowed to call 'the car tent', even though I built it) just as the front door

opens. Jackson, our eldest, saunters out with a dish rag over his bare shoulder like he owns the place.

"You look like you own the place," I say with a smile as we trade grips and our daughter Meghan (thirteen this spring and two years younger than Jackson) bursts out the door and into Jen's arms.

"I do," he laughs, "Unless you and mom changed the will while you guys were in town?"

"No," I reply, "you're still slated to get everything when we go." I have no idea where or how this macabre joke got started, but I play along because, well, it's *our* joke. We don't even *have* a will.

"Daddy!" Meg squeals, jumping into my arms and almost bowling me over in the process. (I swear, I think she's really trying to — and one of these days she's going to succeed.) But I saw her coming and was ready by the time she was two steps away. I have no idea how much longer I have before she's actually able to take me down, but I pretend she almost does and turn it into one of those twirl-arounds the military guy from the old movies always does when he comes back from the war and sees his girl for the first time.

I let Meg down as Jen walks to my side and encircles my waist with her arms. I put one of mine over her shoulder and we both heave one of those same happy sighs as we look past the kids at our cabin, which hasn't burnt down in the five days we've been gone. The kids have grown like weeds out here. Jackson is a couple of inches taller than me — and he hasn't even had a real growth spurt yet — and Meg is just about her mother's height (barefoot maybe three or four inches shorter than me). I don't know if it's the fresh air and exercise or their mother's midwestern genes. Jen's dad and my dad are both 6'4" — maybe that's where they get it.

"What's for dinner Stoney?" I say to Jackson, reaching for the dish rag on his shoulder with my free hand as Jen nuzzles my neck.

Jackson's been cooking since he was about eight, and after seven years of practice at every opportunity, he's probably better at it than me *or* Jen. And that woman can *cook*. 'Stoney' is short for 'Stonewall' — yes, just like the Confederate General — I forget why

we started calling him that; it just seemed natural. Jen gives me a squeeze and I turn to her and we kiss.

"Trout," he says, "I caught them a couple of hours ago. With baby potatoes and garlic and . . . okay, oKAY! Ten second rule!"

Jen and I both turn our eyes to him and break our kiss; she pulls me closer.

"We really need to change that rule," I say, "you guys are getting old enough to handle it."

"Ew, gross!" says Meg. "I'm going inside!" And she bounds off into the cabin I built before she was, presumably to get back to commandeering her mother's reading nook and hogging every last scrap of bandwidth of the mountain's only internet connection.

"C'mon inside; dinner's almost ready. How was your hike?" he says over his shoulder as he steps up onto the porch.

I kiss Jen on the forehead and grab our packs from the Jeep. "It was pretty nice," Jen calls to Jackson, who's already inside. "We bagged six peaks and your father almost got eaten by a bear."

"Now wait just a minute," I say. "That was just a cub and she only chewed on my boot for a second before I told her to stop!"

"Yeah, but what does a bear cub chewing on your boot mean?" Jen retorts. "It means she's probably hungry and you *know* her momma couldn't have been too far away."

"What?!" I say, looking dejected. "We were playing. And it was only for a minute and we skedaddled like two seconds later."

"Maybe. But that's not how I remember it." Jen gives me a wink.

I give her a look that says that I concede (as always) to her infinite wisdom and she socks me in the arm again — in the exact same place as last time (how does she *do* that?) — I'm pretty sure there'll be a mark by the time we go to bed.

"Jesus!" I exclaim as I carry our packs toward the porch. "How the hell did you carry this all week? What's in here?" I know full well that Jen packs light and, if anything, my pack is the one that's usually on the heavy side. I put the packs down. She gives me that look that can freeze well water.

"You know perfectly well what's in there: that stupid dominatrix outfit you insisted I bring with us."

"What?!" I say, sidling up to her and putting my arms around her shoulders. "I just thought it might be particularly sexy to see you in your leather corset, fishnets and stilettos by the firelight. C'mon, you gotta give me points for originality."

"Points for originality, sure," she says, "but you're in the negative for practicality."

"Whatever," I say (again feigning dejection — hey c'mon, sometimes it works), "you'da looked wicked hot."

"Hey pop!" Jackson yells from the kitchen window. I love it and hate it when he calls me that.

"Yo!" I respond.

"Meg and I are going to go down to the south meadow tonight with the telescope so we can work on her astronomy project, ok?"

"Sure," I say. "Are you going to sleep out or are you planning on making a racket after your mom and I have gone to bed?" Just like when I was younger and still courting Jen, my *deja vu* tells me I used to ask the same underlying question of her parents: 'am I guaranteed some alone time with this girl I'm in love with?' Now the tables have turned and *I'm* the adult in the situation, but I'm still asking the same question, in a probably too-strident tone, to cover for my inner butterflies.

"No, we're going to stay there tonight," Jackson laughs as he pulls his head in from the window. With a slight echo from inside, I can hear him say "Why would we hike back with that heavy telescope in the *dark*?"

I turn to Jen and give her my strongest knowing-slash-seductive look. She socks me in the arm. *Again*. And smiles. God, I love to see her smile. "Maybe," she says and starts to giggle. "*Maybe*."

That's a yes. But still, I wonder if maybe my smile was too wide and the eyebrow-wagging was a bit over the top.

After all these years, why do I still wonder about that?

