

I Wouldn't Mind

2000 words

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Jim said, "Is my unit smaller than in your previous estimation? Would you say?"

"What a truly odd question," Rhonda said, "even from you. I'm not sure."

"So it might be then. Fuck."

Rhonda didn't say anything so Jim said, 'Everything worked decent at least though?'

'Sure it did, it was okay.' The emphasis on the *key*, which wasn't good.

They had the sheet pulled up, no blanket, it was a warm night. Rhonda flicked on the late news and Jim took a look but there wasn't much update on the gal who went missing in the national park and the husband on the lam.

'I fear it can't end well,' Rhonda said. 'I mean aren't there statistics on that?'

'Doesn't look good,' Jim said. 'You hope for a fluke, but these things tend to play out simple.'

'Well howsabout giving it *no* chance. Good thing

you're not on the search party.'

She was contradicting herself but you weren't going to point that out. She did the same thing 30 years ago.

Jim said, 'Pretty good movie one time, or could have been a book, but they hatch a scheme, clever but not brilliant, black dude detective shows up, cool, suspects 'em but can't figure it out yet, says most of 'em play out simple, tips his hat and to have a good day.'

'I like black actors,' Rhonda said. 'The men. They're attractive.'

'I'm scared of black people sometimes,' Jim said, 'but I miss them when they're not around. If that makes sense.'

'Nope.'

'Like I did a bicycle trip once, New York to St. John's, took me a month.'

'That's what Newfoundland? Before I met you. Or this is later on.'

'Back then. I never mentioned it because I went with someone. She had enough, took the train home from up in Vermont. Point being I finish it off, cross the 59th Street Bridge and boom, it's afternoon rush hour and there's this gal traffic cop in the intersection taking care

of business, with the style and the energy and the attitude. It was nice to be back.'

'All white then for a month? I guess I can picture it. Why're you scared of black people?'

'Kids chased us off the bus in school. Another time, a situation in Philadelphia some guy following me back to my apartment. I'd like to correct things, especially the kids. I think about it a lot.'

'Correct things how? Everyone's grown up and moved on, except you.'

'I don't know, like track a couple of 'em down, see if they're still tough guys.'

'Christ sakes Jim,' Rhonda said, but she put her leg on his.

'Anyways . . .' Jim said, 'I appreciate you coming out, I'm not just saying that.'

'Not a problem,' she said. 'Is there anything sweet by chance? When I looked before your cupboards are pretty bare.'

'Actually chocolate. I try to hide it hoping I won't always find it. Check the drawer next to the stove, with the potholders.'

Rhonda got up, locked her fingers and stretched,

and headed to the kitchen, totally nude.

She came back with half a jumbo Symphony Bar. Jim said, 'I'm wondering what the heck is she doing, but then I'm thinking who can see in except the couple next door, and they're in their 90's and don't see great any more. Fact I can't believe the DMV still lets 'em drive, the husband. Franklin.'

'I had a great uncle like that,' Rhonda said, 'they restricted him to driving to Safeway. Three blocks.'

She was sitting in his TV chair, finishing off the chocolate, not offering him any. Jim took a little inventory. Rounder in the midsection from back then, breasts definitely fuller, a bit lower, but overall had taken care of herself. Some wrinkles around the eyes but fair enough, she always liked the sun.

She said, 'So you're the baby in the neighborhood then.'

'Yeah it's not exactly a neighborhood, like I said, it's an HOA deal, you gotta be 55.'

'And you just snuck in under the wire.'

'Right. Now keep in mind there's plenty of young folks like me. You have a big range. Though admittedly you do hear pacemakers now and then.'

‘So, it never worked with Sonia in the end? Or is she still in the picture?’

‘Nah that's on me, I was shutting her out. You knew her, or I just mentioned her?’

‘Jesus Jim, how would I know her? And what do you do all day?’

‘All's I was thinking, maybe back east? Not sure what I was thinking. They have clubs and shit, I enjoy it. Field trips too. I took one to Jack London's house.’

‘The writer?’

‘Yeah. They got it all preserved exactly from when he keeled over working on a sequel to *White Fang*. Also once we went down to Carmel, did an art walk. Two so far.’

Rhonda said, ‘You're not going to ask me to join you out here. For old times' sake.’

‘I wouldn't mind. I always felt like somehow we'd come full circle, what can I say.’

‘You're such an asshole. And your unit is smaller.’

‘Okay but I'm out of shape. That's not irreversible. Remember we used to run every morning down the shore?’

‘That was a fun summer. Since we're being so frank

I might as well point out, I was making it with someone else then too.'

'Dang.'

'So you don't want to know who? You'll laugh.'

'The thing here,' Jim said, 'you can always get on a machine in the fitness center. The seniors tend to walk outside, sometimes in these herds, either that or play pickleball.'

Rhonda said, 'So, you engaged with anyone else since you've moved in, or just me?'

'Yeah you broke the ice. Mind you it's only been a little over three months . . . You wanna take a walk or something?'

'I'm comfortable here. I guess I could, if you need to.' Looking at him funny.

Jim wasn't sure how to interpret that but if there was a round 2 suggestion in there, that wasn't going to work.

'I'll show you the pools and stuff,' he said.

Rhonda slid on a cotton dress and sandals, no underwear whatsoever, and Jim thought Jeez well you never know.

He pointed out the big man-made pond on the way

to the main complex, explaining that people float these miniature mechanical yachts around on it. Rhonda said she saw that somewhere and they've gotten quite sophisticated. She took his arm.

Jim said, 'You're not gonna, like, actually try to make me perform something. Are you?'

Rhonda said, 'Remember when I'd look at someone else and you'd catch me, and you'd say are you boy-watching again? You were amused.'

'No.'

'It made me want you more. I can't believe I fell for that. It's embarrassing. You did the same thing now, no reaction to the Jersey Shore thing.'

'I'm faking it,' Jim said.

'Well it was Anthony Areganos.'

'Dang, that guy . . . Now I am intimidated. He was like all-city in everything. Buffed. Stronger than shit.'

'I picked up with him again later too, when they sent you to Seattle for that training.'

'Fine no problem. Do you feel better now?'

'So that's the extent of your response. No jealous, no mad, nothing.'

'Babe we're talking decades.' And oops, the babe

slipping out, not intending for that to happen.

‘I get that,’ she said, ‘and all these years I’m throwing up roadblocks, why moving on was for the best, why you’re essentially an asshole, as I say. And yet . . . one phone call and I’m like putty.’

Jim said, ‘You know something, you’re way over-dramatizing it. I’m showing you northern California. Tomorrow we can go swimming, do a little wine tasting.’

She said, ‘You never wanted kids with Sonia?’

‘Ooh boy, here it comes. Brutally honest? No. I mean we tried the fertility thing for a while, no dice. It was half hearted. Looking in the mirror we were both relieved.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Yeah. Sonia grew up rough, step dads, it was a mess. No way she wanted to re-live that.’

‘And you?’

‘I never liked ‘em. Which you probably knew.’

‘I have two,’ she said.

It took Jim a second. ‘Fuck. You’re kidding.’

‘Henry’s in Little Rock and Jessica is in Canada. Ontario province.’

‘Ho-ly Smokes.’

Rhonda said, 'Well I'm sorry if I laid something on you I shouldn't have.'

'Don't be silly,' Jim said.

'But you're still in shock.'

'I am. But I have no right to be. And obviously I mean odds are . . . but damn . . . so where's the dad and stuff?'

'That part's fine, he's in their life.'

'Well what do they do? What are they like?'

'Henry's working on his PhD in math. I know, that sounds crazy, with me not being able to add up the prices that time, on the ferry.'

'No idea what you're talking about.'

'Really, you were irritated. Then you'd kid me about it.'

'The other one?'

'Jessica? She's trying to find herself. Sort of a modern day commune situation up there.'

'Wow, again,' Jim said. 'And communes can be a good thing. Guy I met at the UPS store was in one. This is back in the 70's, guy says. Mendocino area.'

'Oh,' she said. 'And plenty of free love going on back then, I'm guessing.'

They were at the lap pool, no one around. There was a little structure, like one of those tough-sheds from Home Depot and Jim tried the door and it was fine and Rhonda followed him in there. There were some shelves with pool maintenance equipment. Jim figured this should do the job as long as he kept the cramped conditions in mind.

Rhonda said on the way back, ‘That was an improvement, I won’t deny it. Over the first effort.’

Jim wanted to tell her she made his day with that evaluation but he played it cool and put on some coffee and they sat out in back.

‘The other part’, she said, ‘I lost my mind once. Henry was 6 and Jessie was 4, and I decided I didn’t want to be a mom. I moved to Australia and worked for a dive company.’

‘Jesus . . . Ocean?’

‘Unh-huh. The worst thing, I loved it. I didn’t miss a soul.’

‘You didn’t?’

‘It was the best 8 months of my life.’

‘Sheez . . . Well you ever, like talk to someone about this, Babe? Or anything?’

‘You mean professionally? No.’

‘Oh. And what, you picked up where you left off, like nothing happened?’

‘Sure. Except I resented all three of them. Now you think I’m a nutcase, I know it.’

‘Not sure what I think,’ Jim said.

Rhonda said, ‘Exposing one’s self like that, it can make you hungry.’

Jim said how about some pancakes and she said that would be incredible.

Jim got to work, fired up the griddle, and when he put a big plateful on the table and sat down she came up behind him and rubbed his shoulders.

‘All of that true?’ he said. ‘For real?’

‘No not all of it,’ she said.

‘Any of it?’ he said. She was chewing on his earlobe.

Jim said well get ‘em while they’re hot, that he didn’t have buttermilk available but a dash of white vinegar comes pretty close.