



“Leroy’s going to stay here for a little while,” Jerry announced to my husband Ralph and me one day. Leroy stood behind him looking skinny and frail, dressed in a frayed nylon sweat suit and carrying a paper sack of belongings.

# The Pleasure Was All Mine

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“He’s a little down on his luck,” Jerry continued, “but he won’t be no trouble, I promise.” They went upstairs to Jerry’s bedroom and shut the door before I could reply.

My husband is a quadriplegic, and Jerry is one of his live-in attendants. Almost a decade ago, Ralph had a cycling accident that left him paralyzed below the shoulders. He couldn’t perform even the most basic of human functions, such as eating, bathing, or going to the bathroom. We became prisoners in our own home, unable to attend social functions, no longer capable of the activities we’d enjoyed before the accident, such as skiing, kayaking, rock climbing, walking together, or holding hands.

Although we were insured, our health benefits did not cover full-time, live-in help. We were forced to hire unlicensed attendants to care for Ralph while I was out, and to help move him. It was the nineties, and while our friends were upwardly mobile, we spent all our time worrying about money. Ralph’s pension paid our bills, and my paycheck covered his attendants’ salaries. At the end of each month, we had little left over.

Our old friends disappeared, but we made new ones in our mixed-income neighborhood. And our attendants — the ones who worked out — became like family. Then when the economy went bust, we found ourselves part of the mainstream. In fact, we were living proof of America’s hard times. I wrote a book about our new life and got it published. It wasn’t exactly a happy ending, but it was better than I’d hoped.

Now Leroy was joining our unconventional household. Through a series of misfortunes, Jerry’s eighty-one-year-old friend had recently lost his home of forty years. He’d lived in transient hotels for a week or two, until his Social Security check ran out. That’s when he arrived at our house.

Leroy and Jerry slept in the same bed, dressed in their street clothes. Jerry came downstairs several times a day and carried plates of food and cups of coffee up to the room for him and Leroy to consume by the light of the television screen. The tv stayed on day and night, even on the rare occasions when they went out to buy cigarettes and lottery tickets.

Ralph was stuck downstairs in his hospital bed, but my room is across the hallway from Jerry’s. At night I could hear him and Leroy arguing. They quarreled over who would win the World Series. They argued over who was better, the Forty-Niners or the Raiders. They squabbled over cards and cigarettes. They used a certain obscene compound word repeatedly, as a noun, verb, and adjective — sometimes all three in the same sentence.

One night they had a big blowout over the definition of the word *terrorist*. Leroy said that anybody who threatened anyone was a terrorist, and gave as examples the Ku Klux Klan, the Mafia, and the Black Panthers. Jerry disagreed. He said a terrorist’s victims were random, but the Ku Klux Klan knew

its targets ahead of time. Jerry and Leroy asked me to mediate, but I declined. I couldn't keep up with them.

Another night I was awakened by a terrible row. I opened one eye and looked at the clock: 3:20 A.M.

"You don't know nothing!" I heard Jerry shout. "The zero on your cellphone ain't the same as the letter O, Leroy. It's different."

"Then why does everybody say 'oh' instead of 'zero'?"

"I'm trying to explain it to you, but you ain't listening," Jerry said.

"I'm listening," insisted Leroy, "but you ain't explaining nothing to nobody, especially not to me."

They obviously needed my help to work things out. I got up, but by the time I reached their bedroom door, I heard them both snoring.

The next morning Leroy came downstairs and announced that it was time for him to leave.

"Don't go," I said, surprising myself.

"Why not?" he asked.

"Times are tough."

"Baby," he said, "times are always tough. But OK, I'll stick around. Not for too long, now. I don't want to overstay my welcome."

"You won't," I answered.

Leroy was a retired bartender and an avid cardplayer and sports fan. He and Ralph liked to watch the Giants, the A's, the Raiders, and the Forty-Niners on TV. Leroy would also watch golf and tennis, if Tiger Woods or Serena and Venus Williams were playing.

Leroy had moved to the Bay Area from Omaha, Nebraska, during World War II. He didn't have to serve in the armed forces because he was the sole provider for his younger brothers and sister. Back in Nebraska he had trained to be a machinist, but because the union didn't allow African Americans, Leroy was out of work. Then the government taught him to weld, and Leroy found a job in the Oakland shipyards. In 1958 he switched to bartending and worked in a series of low-rent clubs patronized by African Americans. In the early 1970s, Leroy and a handful of others sued the Local 52 Bartenders Union and broke the color line. He became a homeowner, a husband, and a father.

But that was a long time ago. Now the house was gone, the ex-wife deceased, and the children scattered and only marginally in touch. And I wondered how long Jerry would put up with Leroy sharing his mattress.

About three months after Leroy moved in, I got a phone call from my friend Ronnie. "Suzy, is that old man still living at your house?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Girl, you've got to get rid of him. You've got too much on your plate already. You don't need another mouth to feed."

"You're right," I said, and then I changed the subject.

The following Sunday my mother called. "Is Jerry's friend still staying at your house, Susan?" she asked cautiously. "Do

you really need to be taking care of him with everything else you have to do?" She handed the phone to my dad.

"I don't like it that you are in the house with all those men," he shouted. "It just doesn't seem right. Plus, from what you've told me, they can't fix the plumbing or change the oil in the car. Can they?"

"Well," I answered, "Jerry and Leroy aren't too bad at repairing things — with duct tape, clothespins, and paper clips."

"I figured as much," mumbled my dad.

Later, while walking my dog, I stopped to chat with my neighbor Mrs. Washington.

"Is that old man still up at your house, Suzy?"

"Yes," I sighed.

"Honey, if it was me, I'd tell him who's boss and give him the toss. You hear what I'm saying?"

"I hear you," I said.

I wanted to explain to everyone why I liked having Leroy around, but I wasn't sure they'd understand. Leroy wasn't any trouble. He didn't eat much, and Jerry and I got along better now that he had someone to play cards and dominoes with him. But that's not the real reason I enjoyed Leroy's company. My motives were more selfish.

Propped on the nightstand beside the bed that Leroy shared with Jerry was a crumpled photograph of me. Every morning when Leroy woke up, he saw my picture, and every night before he turned out the light, he saw it again. He said I had the most beautiful dimples he'd ever seen: "Three of them in a row on either side of that lovely smile of yours," he said. When I explained to him that they are not dimples but, in fact, wrinkles caused by years of stress and frowning — lines my dermatologist has referred to as "deep trench marks" — Leroy shook his head. "You know I've got cataracts in both my eyes, and I can't see a damn thing without a magnifying glass, but, baby, they look like dimples to me."

Lately I'd been seeking Leroy's approval on my appearance. I'd long ago stopped asking Ralph and Jerry for compliments. They usually grunted and mumbled something resembling an endorsement. But Leroy's reaction was different. When I put on stockings and a skirt and blouse and asked Leroy what he thought of my outfit, he sat up in bed and squinted at me. "Baby," he shouted, "you look beautiful!"

"Say what?" I asked, though I'd heard him perfectly.

"Darling," he repeated, "you look very, very pretty."

"Do I?" I said, not completely satisfied.

"Baby doll, you are the most gorgeous woman in the world!"

"Thank you, Leroy," I answered, spinning around, suddenly light on my feet. "And you know, of course, that you can stay at our house for as long as you want."

*(end of excerpt)*