

The Tractor

Whitney sits in the living room with her mother, father, and younger sister, telling them about her boyfriend, Phillip.

“He graduates with me in a couple of months and...”

Her father, Wes, asks, “What’d he major in?”

“Liberal Arts.”

“Oh God, I hate him already.”

“Daddy!”

“What kinda man majors in Liberal Arts these days?”

“You’re gonna love him, and I’m bringing him home to meet you guys next weekend, so please at least give him a chance.”

Her mother, Iris, asks, “Does he make you laugh? That’s the most important thing. I’ve been laughing at your father for 25 years and...”

Wes interrupts with, “Notice she said, laughing *at* your father not *with* your father.”

Iris, “See what I mean, he’s a hoot.”

Whitney's fifteen-year-old sister, Willow, asks, "What did you think when you first saw him?"

"Well, I thought he looked very sure of himself, confident, and ..."

Willow again, "Is he tall, dark and handsome, or what?"

"He's a little taller than me, about five ten, reddish hair, green eyes, and well-built, muscular."

Wes, "I'm starting to have a bad feeling about this. In four years of college, this is the first time you've ever brought anyone home to meet us. I've made it clear over the years that no one is good enough for you, and now you want to break my heart by bringing home this over-educated jock who..."

Iris, "Oh please, get over yourself; she has a boyfriend; be happy for her, and quit being so dramatic, he might be a great guy."

Wes, "Where's this *great guy* from anyway?"

"Georgia, a little town outside Atlanta."

"Georgia! Oh my God, he's not even from New England? Is he one of those slow talking Southerners?"

Then with an exaggerated Southern accent, Wes says, “Proud to meet you Mr. Wishart surh, I shore have taken a cotton to your daughter.”

Iris and the girls laugh.

Wes gets up and starts for the back door, “It’s a damn shame, put her through college, and the first thing she does is hook up with some four-eyed, Rebel, Liberal Arts major who...”

Whitney yells after him, “He doesn’t wear glasses Daddy, and you’re gonna like him.”

Iris says, “Don’t worry, this is something new for him, he’ll come around.”

Later, when Whitney and Willow are alone in Whitney’s bedroom Willow asks, “What kind of car does he drive?”

Whitney, “It’s an older car, I think he said it’s a ’68 Challenger.”

Willow, “And, ah, so how far have you and Phillip gone?”

Whitney acts shocked, “Willow, that’s not something you should be asking me.”

“Oh, come on, it’s 1982, and it’s not like I would tell anyone.”

“Well, we haven’t gone all the way... but we have done some real slow kissing.”

“He sounds dreamy, I can’t wait to meet him, but aren’t you afraid to bring him here?”

“What do you mean, because of Daddy?”

“No, me. I’m just a younger, hotter version of you. He might take one look at me and forget all about you.”

They both laugh, Whitney says, “I’ll take my chances, but I like your confidence.”

“Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

The next weekend Phillip and Whitney are in his car driving the two hours from campus to Whitney’s home when she says, “Momma asked me if you make me laugh.”

“What’d you say?”

“I said I have to laugh every time I look at you.”

“Oh funny, well you know what they say? If you can make a girl laugh, you can get in her pants.”

She laughs, catches herself, slaps his arm, and says, “You’re terrible, why do you say such crude things.”

“I don’t know; you just bring it out in me.”

“My sister wanted to know what I thought the first time I saw you.”

“What’d you tell her?”

“I told her I thought you were one of the janitors.”

“Oh, good one.”

Later, he stops the car and looks around, there isn’t another car in sight, just an open stretch of highway with no cross roads.

He looks at the rearview mirrors, and at her seatbelt, then asks, “Have you ever been fast?”

“What do you mean?”

He floors it, pops the clutch, and the front end almost comes off the ground as the 440 Magnum roars to life, she is slammed back against the seat, the rear tires squeal, she screams, she grabs the armrest and the console, he shifts into second, she slams back against the seat again, and screams again, he jerks it into third, the car leaps forward, and she yells, “Stop, stop, slow down, slow down.”

He takes his foot off the gas pedal and the Challenger relaxes, he touches the brake, the car slows to a stop, and she says, “Oh my God, I had no idea this car could do that.”

She catches her breath, looks around, then exhales sharply, gives him a sly look, and says, “Do it again.”

When they drive up to her house Phillip says, “Wow, what a house, it’s huge, and beautiful. How long has it been in your family?”

“Almost two hundred years.”

“Holy Moly girl, you’re like aristocracy.”

“Not really, just another old New England family.”

“How much of this farm land goes with the house?”

“About a hundred acres, it used to be a lot more, Daddy farms most of it. He’s never said it, but I’m sure he wishes he had a son, he sometimes hires local guys to help out. He grew up here, and he’s one of those men who can do anything, fix anything, build anything. He describes us as being ‘land poor’ we’ve got land, the house, farm equipment, just no money.”

As he is getting out of the car, Phillip smiles, and says to himself, “A farmer, cool, no problem.”

Whitney steps in the front door and calls out, “Hello.”

Iris comes from the kitchen as Willow slinks down the stairs. Whitney hugs them and then introduces Phillip. Iris and Willow are both obviously impressed, as is Phillip. He looks from one to the other, they look alike the only difference being age.

Later, while seated at the dining table Iris serves hot chocolate and pineapple upside down cake. Willow has seen enough to realize that he is out of her league, and she is now just being a girl.

They talk and laugh and Phillip charms them with his soft Southern accent, and funny stories. After a pause in the conversation, he says, “You know, some people think that it’s shallow to place too much importance on physical appearance, on looks, but I disagree. That’s why I ended up in Liberal Arts I wanted to study beauty, beautiful art, music, literature, that’s why I was first attracted to Whitney. And now I see where she gets it, seeing the three of you together is amazing. It’s like feminine perfection through the years, like the history of female beauty sitting around one table.”

Willow blushes, “Wow.”

Iris, “Phillip you are too kind” her eyes get a little misty, she picks up a couple of dishes and starts toward the kitchen.

Whitney looks at him with soft eyes and doesn’t say anything.

Phillip says, “Well I guess it’s time I went out and met Mr. Wishart.”

Whitney walks him to the back door and points to the barn, then pulls him to her and kisses him.

“Mr. Wishart...”

Wes looks up, smiles and reaches out as Phillip walks up to him. They shake hands, “You must be Phillip, call me Wes.”

“Nice to meet you, sir. Is that an old 730 John Deere I see back there?”

Wes is surprised, “Yes, it is. My father bought it new in ‘58 and it’s still going strong. You know tractors?”

“A little bit, it’s hard to keep up with John Deere they come out with new models every year. But you have a classic, this was the first one with power steering, and they’re very versatile as I’m sure you know. What is it? Fifty-nine horsepower?”

“Yes. Did you grow up on a farm?”

“No, but in high school the only extracurricular thing I did was FFA, Future Farmers of America, and I worked on farms during the summers. We had a Generation Two 2440 that the school bought with money the FFA made selling produce. It was a work horse, the first to have high and low gears in each range. I spent many an hour on it.”

“That was in Georgia, right? What crops did you raise there?”

Thus, began an hour-long conversation comparing northern and southern agriculture; growing seasons, soil chemistry, irrigation, raised beds, short rotation crops, high tunnel greenhouses, building soil structure, and more. Ending with Wes saying that farms need generations of people working them to stay viable.

While they talk, they work on the tractor, Phillip helps without Wes having to say anything.

In the kitchen, Iris, Whitney and Willow are looking out the window at the barn when Willow jokingly says, “Do you think Phillip is okay? I’d be glad to go check on him.”

Whitney laughs, "I think he'll be alright, thanks for offering though."

Iris says, "It's a good sign. If they weren't getting along Phillip would have already come back to the house."

Wes and Phillip work in silence for a few minutes then Phillip says, "One reason I've been wanting to meet you was so that I could ask your permission to marry Whitney."

Wes hesitates then says, "Have you asked her yet?"

"No, and this may all be for nothing, she might turn me down."

"How do you plan on taking care of her?"

"I don't know if she told you, but my Father passed away two years ago, and..."

"Yes, she told me; I was sorry to hear it."

"Thank you, he was only forty-five, a drunk driver ran into him. It's one reason why I don't drink."

"Damn, he was about my age."

“He was an insurance man, and he was well-covered, I was the beneficiary, and I’m an only child. My mother ran off when I was twelve, and he raised me by himself after that. When he died, it was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but as a result of that, the silver lining was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I have a friend who was majoring in Finance at that time, and he encouraged me to invest some of that insurance money in a company that was just going public that month. It was December 1980, so I took his advice, and it worked out real well. So Whitney will be well taken care of; she’ll never have to work if she doesn’t want to.”

“Well that’s good to hear. What was the company?”

“Apple Computers.”

Wes laughs, “Damn, Boy.”

Phillip nods, “Yeah, hundreds of people became instant millionaires when that happened.”

Wes smiles, sticks out his hand, and says, “Welcome to the family, Son.”

They laugh and shake hands, “Does she know your financial situation?”

“No, we haven’t talked about it.”

A minute later, Whitney walks in.

“Well, I see you guys are getting along okay.”

“Whitney, you didn’t tell me that Phillip is a farmer.”

“A farmer? I didn’t know he was a farmer.”

Phillip, a little exasperated, “I told you I was in FFA all through high school.”

“You did? I don’t remember that, I probably wasn’t listening.”

Whitney leans back against the kitchen counter while Iris, Wes, Willow and Phillip sit at the table.

Iris looks at Phillip and says, “Whitney tells us you’ve been all over the world.”

“No, I traveled around Europe last summer, but there’s still lots of places I haven’t been that I’d like to see.”

He pauses, then, “I’ve dated girls from all over the world.”

Whitney looks down while exhaling exasperation, Iris looks shocked and confused that he would say something like that, Wes raises his brows and

looks like he wants to hear more, but then looks down, Willow drops her jaw and circles her eyes.

That all takes place in one second before he continues, “But I never loved a girl till I met Whitney.” They all look relieved; Iris puts her hand over her heart, Wes smiles, Willow says, “Ahh”. Whitney looks at him, their eyes meet, and she registers a heartfelt moment.

He continues with, “Course that works both ways, meeting me is probably the best thing that will ever happen to her too.”

They all laugh, Whitney says, “See how he is? He says something nice then takes it all away.”

He stands and steps up beside her while saying, “When I first saw that beautiful face of hers,” he puts a hand on each side of her face, and looks back at her family, “I couldn’t help myself; I wanted to kiss her all over.”

He starts quickly kissing her face all over while turning her face from side to side, and up and down. She struggles against him while saying, “Stop that you idiot, leave me alone, quit.” She pushes him away, wipes her blushing face, says, “You’re stupid,” and tries not to laugh. Everyone else is laughing.

That afternoon, Wes takes Phillip into the library and shares some family history with him. On a huge, framed, antique map he points out the farm's water sources, and he outlines the original boundaries of the farm.

Later, Wes looks toward the open library door to make sure no one can hear them before whispering, "When are you going to ask her?"

"On the way back to campus. I know this beautiful place where we can pull over and walk down by the river."

"Do you have a ring?"

"Yes, locked in the glove compartment."

When they drive out to the main road, Phillip turns, goes a quarter of a mile, then notices a For Sale sign. He pulls over, the sign reads: "178 acres for sale with house and barn" with a realtor's name and phone number.

She looks from the sign to him and says, "That land adjoins our property; it used to be part of our farm, many years ago."

He says, "It'd be a cool place to live."

She replies, "It'd be a *great* place to live but... dream on."

She looks at the sign again, then looks back at him. He's looking at her and smiling.

She pulls her head back a little, and asks, "What?"

He continues smiling, lifts his brows, and says, "Nothing," then puts the car in gear and drives on.

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