

Settling down

Autor(en): **Wainwright, William**

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SETTLING DOWN

by William Wainwright

«It's a nice day to get a suntan,» said Jerry.

«Uh-huh,» said the hairy little man on the cot next to his.

«Do you usually come up here on Wednesdays?» asked Jerry. «Because I've never *seen* you here on Wednesday before.»

«Uh-huh, I'm usually working on Wednesday,» said the hairy little man, «but I just quit my job, and that's why I'm here today.»

«You just quit your job?» said Jerry, shocked. «Why'd you do that?»

«Well, I got tired of it.»

«Well, do you just up and quit your job every time you get tired of it?»

«Uh-huh.»

«Well, *then* what do you do?»

«Well, then I go.»

«You mean you leave town?»

«Uh-huh, I just travel around till I see some place I like and then I stop and get another job.»

«But don't you ever have *trouble* getting a job?»

«Uh-huh. A good accountant can always get a job. Say, what do you do?»

«I'm a hairdresser,» said Jerry.

They were lying side by side on the sun roof of the local YMCA. Jerry, the hairdresser, was a tall, skinny redhead of twenty-one or so. The hairy little accountant wore rimless spectacles and would soon start growing bald. Ordinarily Jerry might not have looked at him twice, but the little man was covered with curly black hair from the top of his shoulders to the tops of his toes, and Jerry was very susceptible to hair.

«You're not from around here, are you?» Jerry asked.

«Uh-huh, I come from Indiana.»

«I didn't think you were from around here, because I've never seen you before. At least, I don't *think* I've ever seen you before. Of course, I'm not *sure*.»

«You mean you think maybe *you have* seen me before?» the hairy little man seemed pleased.

«Well, I'm not sure. If I did, it was several months ago.»

«I've been here six months.»

«Well, then, maybe it *was* you. Of course, I'm not sure. I mean, if it *was* you, you were dressed so different. Dark glasses, and all. And riding a motorcycle.»

«Uh-huh, that was me,» said the hairy little man proudly, «I ride a motorcycle. I rode my motorcycle all the way from southern Indiana. Uh-huh. And let me tell you, that was *some* trip! I'd stop in little towns along the way for a day or so, and believe you me, some of those little towns . . .! I'm used to Chicago and Frisco, but some of those little hick towns made Frisco look like Podunk Junction.» He paused significantly, but Jerry was so paralyzed by the turn the conversation was taking that he couldn't say anything. «Before that I was in the Navy,» continued the little man. «Uh-huh. Out in California, near Frisco. That's quite a town,

Frisco, *quite a town*. Yessiree, *quite a town*.» Again he paused, as if the mere mention of San Francisco would produce pinwheels and Roman candles out of the sky, but all that Jerry could manage to say was, «I've never been to Frisco.»

«No? That's too bad. You'd like Frisco. I learned quite a lot there myself, *quite a lot*.»

Jerry was terrified. At twenty-one, he still lived at home with his mother, and except for the year he spent at the Tri-City Institute of Beauty Culture he had always lived at home. He knew everybody in town and he went to all the parties. But during all his twenty-one years he had clung to a dream of one love to last all his life, and the hairy little man was too fast for him. After a while, however, the little man quieted down, and in the end they left the sun roof together. Archy—for that was the little man's name—Archy lived at the Y, and he went to his room to change, while Jerry went to the public locker room. He was glad he and Archy did not have to change together, for he suddenly felt very modest. They met in the lobby as planned and went for a walk. Archy walked alongside of Jerry, not saying much but smiling and nodding like a perfect little man, and after a while Jerry grew more relaxed and began to chatter away as if—or almost as if—Archy was one of his old friends. For there was one topic that Jerry avoided like the plague, a topic that started with «s» and ended with «x».

At length a silence fell. It was late afternoon on a beautiful summer day with high white clouds, and Archy and Jerry were walking in a little deserted park not far from the Y. It was not much of a park—just a vacant lot between two narrow streets with a stream running down the center—but it was green and shady, and to Jerry it seemed a world apart. Archy was bewitching as he swaggered through the park for all the world like a tough little lesbian, shirt unbuttoned almost to his hairy navel, faded black jeans held out by short leather boots, black cloth jacket slung carelessly over his shoulder and black cloth cap pulled down to meet his dark glasses. Jerry thought with a thrill, «Now at last I have found a strong, silent man.» The only serpent in this earthly paradise was the deadly question gnawing at Jerry's heart: «What comes next?» From all that he knew of life, «s-x» came next, but already it was after five, and in less than an hour, he was due home for dinner.

They sat down on a little rustic bench overlooking the great concrete pipe through which the little stream flowed out of the park. The sun trembled on the ground like the panic in Jerry's heart. The breeze in the trees overhead gave him no relief. He sat on the bench staring straight in front of himself, not daring to look at Archy, and though the bench was hard and uncomfortable, he resolved that he would not stir till the matter was settled. But what could he say to this stranger seated beside him?—for stranger Archy still was, in spite of their talk. Could he say, «I adore you?» Could he say, «Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove that hills and valleys, dales and fields, or woods or steepy mountain yields?» Could he say, «Let not to the marriage of true admit impediment?» In the end he said nothing and it was Archy who spoke—«Do you live alone?»—breaking the silence that had spread around them and threatened to drown their island paradise.

«No, I live at home.»

«Oh.» Then, after a moment, «I'm sorry I can't ask you to my room at the Y. You know, they watch everyone that goes in and out, and . . . well, I just don't think it would be a good idea.»

Although Jerry had never visited a room at the Y, he knew perfectly well what Archy meant, and it never occurred to him that Archy might, at five in the afternoon, have felt free to invite someone less obvious than he. He only thought, «He wants me!» and was thrilled. But at the same time he was frightened. There was something casual about Archy's invitation, something that suggested that Archy had issued many such invitations before and forgotten his guests almost before they had left. After waiting so long himself, Jerry did not want to be an afternoon's trick, and just as Archy was about to invite him to go for a ride on his motorcycle Jerry said, «Why don't you come to my house for dinner?»

Archy blinked in surprise «To your house?»

«Yes, mother won't mind. She's used to me bringing people home . . . I mean, *friends* of mine . . . I mean, from *school* or *work* . . .» Jerry stopped in confusion. He realized how this could sound, and he did not want Archy to get the wrong idea, but everything he said seemed to get him in deeper. He wanted to tell Archy that he had never had a lover in his life, that he had been waiting for him alone all these years, but he didn't know how to put it just then.

«What I mean is,» he concluded, «there's always more than enough to eat, so I don't have to call up and see if you can come. And Ernest loves company—.»

«Ernest?»

«Ernest is my step-father, but he's nice. And Hilda and Julia and Sally Anne—.»

Again Jerry stopped in confusion, wondering why he had to bring his whole family in. He was afraid he might frighten Archy off, but Archy was strangely touched, for no one had ever invited him home before.

«All right,» he said. «We'll go on my motorcycle.»

II

Archy was well acquainted with certain dark, deserted lanes on the outskirts of town where people who had mothers or lovers at home drove with a newly-met friend and parked their cars, and he knew that sooner or later he would have to take Jerry there. But the evening with Jerry's family had breathed dead dreams into a kind of life, and he didn't want to bring it to an end. That evening after dinner, when he took Jerry for a ride on his motorcycle, he stuck to well lighted places, zooming around the empty downtown streets and causing great consternation amongst such of Jerry's friends as were loitering there. Then, after letting Jerry off at his house he went straight back to his room at the Y and slept the sleep of the just and the pure in heart.

During the next week Archy spent every evening with Jerry, going to the movies, or riding about, or watching television with Jerry's family. On Sunday he went with the family to the river for a picnic, and the following Wednesday he and Jerry went to the river alone and spent the day sunning and swimming and doing the kind of things (as Archy thought with a puzzled frown) that two kids would do on a holiday from

school. Archy could not believe in Jerry's virtue. When he looked at Jerry's pompadour, his faggoty walk and his genteel, ladylike stance, he could not believe that Jerry was not a whore. No one could be so girlish and not be a whore. Yet whenever Archy even skirted the subject of sex—like saying, «Gee, what does a fellow do around this town when he gets all stirred up?» or, «You know, if I was the kind of guy that goes for guys, I could go for you,»—Jerry froze up.

When this happened, Archy would scratch his head and frown. «Well, *is* he or *isn't* he?» he would ask himself. «If he *is*, why haven't we done it already? And if he *isn't*, why are we palling around like this?» Sometimes Archy would find himself so confused that he thought of forgetting the whole thing and leaving town. But just about that time he would catch Jerry devouring him with his eyes, and he would be reassured. «There's plenty of time to pick this fruit,» he would say; «no need to shake the tree.» Then he would settle back and bask in the thought of his own masculinity, for he was, he was sure, more of a man than other men, since he was so admired by other men.

Jerry, meanwhile, was utterly transformed. No longer did he wake up reluctantly. No longer did he dread his lonely bed. When he woke up in the morning his first thought was Archy, and Archy was the last thing he thought of at night. He whistled and sang to himself all day long. He stopped snapping at Julia and Sally Anne and started to view Hilda's adolescent romances with kindlier eyes. He gave up parties, he gave up gossiping, and when his old friends told him about their own affairs—those brief hectic flings that packed ten years loving into one night and a minute or two of vain hopes into the morning after—he listened kindly now, secure in the knowledge that *his* would be different from theirs.

Of course it could not be kept secret. Archy and Jerry were seen everywhere together, and as Jerry's friends came to know that he was going steady, a strange unrest began to spread among them, and busy tongues began to clack. For had they not all known vain hopes and vain regrets? Had they not seen the endless procession pass in and out of their beds till they no longer even tried to remember names? Had they not stared at themselves in a mirror at dawn, wondering if they would ever love again? And had they not all learned to steel themselves against hope and against despair—against any human feeling that might be dashed or dash them to the ground? Busy tongues clacked, but still the unrest spread, for everyone knew how virtuous Jerry had been, and everyone hoped, half-hoped and half-despaired, that with him the pattern of broken vows and one night stands would break.

At length a pattern did break. One morning Archy was counting over the money he had saved up for his travels. He was shocked to discover how much of it was gone. If he did not leave town soon, he would have to get another job. «Get another job?» he thought. «Why should I get another job?»

When it came to thinking, Archy was rather slow. He had an accountant's mind, workmanlike and efficient when running in well-worn grooves, but likely to balk and stumble over any unexpected obstacle. So far in his life it had never occurred to him to settle down. «I'm not

that kind,» he would say, «I'm just doing it for kicks. Hell, it's the same as with women, and you don't have to pay.» Now, when he found himself thinking of staying here, he began to grow frightened.

He telephoned Jerry and told him he would not be coming over to dinner that night. Then he sat down and tried to think it through. For hours he pondered the question, restlessly roaming through the nighttime streets, then lying on his bed, unable to sleep. Finally, at four in the morning, he decided what he would do.

He planned it carefully. Jerry had a free Saturday coming up. They would go up to Mooney's Lake and rent a cabin for the weekend. Friday and Saturday night and two whole days: he'd make up then for all the time he'd lost. Then he'd climb on his motorcycle and head out of town.

When, stammering more than usual, but more in command of himself than he had been since that first afternoon on the YMCA sun roof, Archy proposed the weekend trip to Jerry, Jerry paled and trembled but said yes. He knew what Archy meant and he didn't know how it would end, but he knew that the time had come.

The days that followed were nervewracking days for him. Would Archy like him? he wondered. Would Archy find his ignorance annoying? Then too, would he like Archy? For it was by no means certain that he would. What if he found that Archy was not for him? What if he found that no man was meant for him? Faced with such a prospect, Jerry began to fret. He stared at his face in the mirror for hours on, squeezing out every tiny pimple and blackhead. He screamed at his sisters fifty times a day and got so cross at work that the new girl cried. Is it any wonder that Archy, seeing him so, waxed sleek and self-satisfied, even a bit contemptuous? Or that Julia and Sally Anne, wise beyond their years, giggled and tittered so at the sight of him that they had to be sent up from dinner without dessert?

One night at dinner Julia asked her mother, «Are Archy and Jerry going on their honeymoon?»

«Hush, Julia, men don't go on honeymoons, they go on fishing trips. There is good fishing up at Mooney's Lake, isn't there, Archy?»

«Yes'm that's what I've heard.»

They left on a Friday evening after work and rode the forty miles to Mooney's Lake in silence. Jerry was cross and tired when they arrived but he insisted on unpacking without delay, while Archy sat on the porch of their cabin and smoked a cigar, silently contemplating the dark, dappled waters and the row of weekend cabins that rimmed the wooded lake. There was a kitchenette in the cabin—something that Archy had not anticipated—and when Jerry had finished unpacking he came out onto the porch and said, «Tomorrow I'll go buy some groceries and we'll eat in.»

They went to a roadhouse out on the highway for dinner, then came back to the lake and took a walk along the shore. Finally the path got lost in a brambly mire and they had to turn back. Their cabin was right in the middle of the camp, and when they reached it Jerry was so afraid that he wanted to walk on down the path to the other end. But Archy yawned and said, «Time to turn in,» and so they went into the cabin.

Jerry stood just inside the door while Archy crossed the room to the two twin beds and stubbed out his lakeside cigar on a table between them. Then, without speaking, Archy began to undress, throwing his jacket and shirt and cap into a heap on the bed and stepping out of his trousers. Finally, grunting audibly, and clad only in his underwear, he sat on the edge of the bed and started to take off his boots. As far as Jerry could tell he wasn't thinking of sex. He wasn't thinking of Jerry. He was, to all appearances, thinking of fishing tomorrow, and he had removed one boot and was taking the other one off when he heard a low moan from the door. He looked up in surprise and saw Jerry standing there completely dressed, pale as a sheet and trembling violently.

«What's the matter, buddy?» said Archy not unkindly.

«I'm afraid,» Jerry moaned.

«Well there's nothing to be afraid of,» Archy said. «I'm no different than the rest.»

«There haven't been any others,» Jerry said.

Archy stared at him stupidly. At first he could hardly grasp what Jerry was saying, then almost laughed out loud at the absurdity of it, and finally, at the sight of Jerry's terror, he checked himself, for what if it were true?

Archy dropped the second boot on the floor and got up and walked over to the corner where Jerry stood trembling like a great silly crane, six feet tall, six months older than he, and perhaps a virgin still. Archy only came up to Jerry's chin but he felt a hundred years older. He took Jerry by the arm and looked up at his frightened face. Then he slipped his arm around Jerry's waist and laid his cheek against Jerry's trembling shoulder.

«Don't worry, buddy, don't worry. I promise you it won't hurt.»

Now Jerry was really frightened, for Archy hadn't understood him at all. He burst into tears and collapsed in Archy's arms.

«Oh, Archy, I've never done it, and I'm afraid.»

«There, there,» said Archy, patting his back, «you'll be all right. Just trust in old Doctor Archy, he'll see you through.»

And so he did. Archy knew what he was doing, and when it was over and he had fallen asleep, Jerry stared at the ceiling for hours, going through every moment in his mind. But whether he liked it or not he did not know.

III

The rest of the honeymoon passed like a dream. Jerry cooked and scrubbed, he sewed buttons on Archy's clothes, he brushed the flies away as they lay on the beach. He refused to let Archy wash dishes—«That can come later,» he said—and Archy, unaccustomed to such luxury, sat back and smoked his cigars and read his newspaper and fished and in short, enjoyed such perfect indolence as scarcely a man alive has ever known, at least in America. Archy had planned to give Jerry the gate on the way back to town, but by the end of the weekend he had decided to put it off for a little while, and on Sunday afternoon they rode back to town in perfect peace and amity.

The next morning Archy had his breakfast not served in bed by loving hands but slung across a greasy lunch-room counter by a straggle-haired slattern. He spent the morning not lying in the sun while devoted hands kept glass filled up and brushed away the flies, but wandering lone through hot friendless streets where everyone except him had things to do and no one even paused to look at him. At noon he ate his cheap and tasteless meal in the gloomy depths of the YMCA cafeteria, far from the sparkling waters of Mooney's Lake and the picnic baskets Jerry prepared so well. The afternoon he spent on the YMCA roof, where soot rained down from factories outside of town and the trickle of sweat on his skin felt exactly like flies. That evening, at Jerry's for dinner, things looked up a little, but after the TV was over, everyone had a bed to go to but him.

This went on for about a week. Archy and Jerry rented a tourist cabin one night but it wasn't the same as their own little cabin had been. They went to the deserted lanes beyond the reservoir, but that wasn't right either. Then one morning at breakfast, as the straggle-haired slattern sat watching the swarming flies, Archy glanced idly over the Help Wanted ads and noticed one that said, «Immediate Opening, Experienced Accountant, Crown Meyer Shoe Stores.» He noticed that their office was near the Y. «It can't hurt to try,» he thought, «just for kicks.»

The next day he went for a second interview, and the day after that he picked up Jerry and drove him out to the river.

Half way out, shouting to make himself heard over the rushing wind and the roar of the motorcycle, he said, «Well, this is the last Wednesday we'll spend at the river together.»

Knowing how crazy in love Jerry was with him, Archy expected transports of delight, and when Jerry did not reply he twisted around and looked at him. Jerry was wearing dark glasses to keep out the dust and bugs, so Archy could not see his eyes, but his long, pale face was longer and paler than usual, and his lips were trembling. Archy realized with astonishment that Jerry thought that he was leaving town. Archy quickly looked back at the road and shouted again, «I've gotten a job, I start work next week.»

Now, Archy thought, the delighted outburst would come, but still Jerry did not reply, and when Archy looked back at him again tears were streaking out from beneath Jerry's glasses, but otherwise Jerry's expression was unchanged. They drove all the way to the river without a word, and twice Archy ran off the road, and once he nearly struck a tree, and they spent the whole afternoon with hardly a word. But on the way back to town Jerry shrieked, «Archy, I didn't want to say anything before—before I knew, I mean—I mean, before we had talked and settled things—but I've found the perfect house for us.»

«House?» Archy shouted, for it hadn't occurred to Archy to think of a house.

«Well, it isn't exactly a house,» screamed Jerry, «it's more an apartment over a garage, but it's not expensive, and it's furnished, so we don't have to buy anything. I thought you might like to look at it on the way home.»

«House . . .?» Archy said again.
 «Well, you don't want to stay at the Y, do you?» Jerry shrieked.
 «No . . .»
 «And we can't stay with mother and Ernest . . .»
 «No . . .»
 «And motels aren't any good . . .»
 «No . . .»
 «So we need a house.»
 «Well yes, I guess that makes sense.»
 «So do you want to look at it on the way home?»
 «Well, all right, if you say so,» Archy said, for he still couldn't see himself saddled with a *house*.

IV

Jerry was right, it wasn't exactly a house. It wasn't even much of a garage apartment. It was all mouldy plasterboard and burlap curtains, something that someone who should have stood in bed had slapped together over a rainy weekend. Archy looked at it apprehensively.

«It's a very good value, boys, you'll never be sorry,» said the landlady, an elderly crone who knew that men gave much less trouble than women.

«Well, shall we take it?» said Jerry.

«Well . . .» said Archy uncertainly.

That Friday evening, after they had moved in, Archy climbed the rickety wooden stairs and opened the front door. Jerry had already put their clothes away and straightened up. The lights in the kitchen were on and Jerry came to the kitchen door, wearing an apron and carrying a skillet. «Well, here we are,» he said, smiling brightly at Archy.

Archy looked about in astonishment, for here they were indeed, and only a month had passed since they had met.

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**HAD SOCRATES AND PLATO NOT LOVED YOUNG MEN,
 WHAT A PITY FOR GREECE, WHAT A PITY FOR THE
 WHOLE WORLD !**

**HAD SOCRATES AND PLATO NOT LOVED YOUNG MEN
 AND AIMED TO PLEASE THEM, EACH ONE OF US WOULD
 BE A LITTLE LESS SENSIBLE !**

(André Gide, Journal, 1918)

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