

The Nice Guy

by Vincent Eaton

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Southern California

Summer

One

1.

So much of everything isn't the way I'd do it at all. I wouldn't do myself the way I've been done. Nope, the way I'm turning out is not the way I planned, definitely. I'm turning out to be a limp middle class day-after-day type of guy ... I go to work, I come home from work, oh it's a very exciting life. Drive down a calm residential street, look at a neat house, any house and that's me. I live in a snug, middle class house, an expensive hunk of cement. Inside there are carpets, calendars, automatic devices that hum and make life go. The toilets are clean, the lawn's trim. It's the type of house wherein people try to live happily ever after.

I've been living happily ever after for eight years now, and if I'm forced to keep doing it much longer, I'm going to start killing people, myself included.

I've ended up with a wife who could use a bit of killing. I often wonder how I'd do her over again if I had the chance. Physically, she's still all sleek and desirable, I suppose ... having the kid we got put nary a wrinkle on her flesh ... but it's her mind that's gone ... well, gone puffy. At twenty-six, she's definitely turned into a puffy, fussy mother-type, really concerned about her family's well-being, and not much else. She's extremely demanding and meticulous about trivial, household matters. She's brisk, energetic, bright-eyed and damn it all to hell and back, bushy-tailed: in a supermarket

there's absolutely no one who can beat her when it comes to choosing what's balanced and nourishing for her family. She actually likes to read the helpful instructions on food cartons that tell her how to build strong bodies dozens of strong ways, then she goes and inflicts all these healthy new recipes at me. She's become a busy housewife with daily cares right before my eyes. I see the next decades coming rapidly at me wherein I become bald, beer-bellied, easy-going, fussy, puffy....

The main difference between us right now is that she loves thoroughly what she has, while I cannot bring myself to believe that what I have is all I have.

Okay, go on, do it, *say* it, I can hear it already, call me names. "Just another displeased hubby grouching about his little place in life." "Another sniveling, surfacy guy busy attempting to have deep pang." But. I stare at my life and wonder if it's as small as it seems to be getting ... and try to think if there're ways to make it bigger.

When we go to the beach, which is usually loaded border to border with common happy families, I feel a bit better. A bit. I can put on my sunglasses and contemplate the common world around me. I usually sit a little distance away from my common happy family, because I don't want other people to think I'm a typical common hubby-daddy. I like to give myself the illusion of being an individual, so when common happy people look my way they'll think: why look at that unhappy, lonesome, common individual.

So I lie a tiny individual distance away, nestled warmly in the sand, my chin propped by my hands, gazing listlessly at my prone woman, my glistening suntanning wife, Lawnair Dinks Cupping. Lawnair Cupping. Dinks is her maiden name she decided to throw back into her former self a while ago because she believes it to be a valuable part of the overall structure of her delicate female identity. I think she ran across this wisdom while reading one of her food cartons: 1) Always include fresh vegetables with every meal; 2) Keep your maiden name with every meal; 3) Brush your teeth after every meal. So she brushes her mouth with vegetables while reading the back of some carton, repeating to herself, "I'm Lawnair *Dinks*

Cupping, that's who I am. I'm Lawnair *Dinks* Cupping, that's who I am." And I think she really believes it.

But in truth, her identity, her Dinksness, is negligible; she's too much in love with the common life to be an individual. She's comforted by the fact that other housewives read food cartons as she does, that they have kids and nice homes, watch the same TV programs and movies, and go to the same beach to be happily common together. I think her seeing other people being like her assures her that she must be doing something right. Like most everyone else, she probably enjoys anonymity, it must give her a sense of identity.

She lies on her stomach, like me, but on a towel, she finds the sand too itchy, and plays a slow game of solitaire with a sandy, beat-up deck of cards. It's the only pack of cards she allows at the beach: the proper, clean, shiny deck of cards remains at home in its pristine container, plastic and pure, and is only brought out when we have easily amused guests and play snappy card games wherein we bet with toothpicks instead of money, and raise with bottlecaps. She lies there, concentrating on her solitaire, naturally she's loosing, the cards are winning, as she absentmindedly sings along with her portable radio which plays this week's hit song, something with a happy beat about frustrated love. Beside Lawnair is an eight year old kid peacefully digging a hole in the sand: she's Jody, the reason we got married.

I get tired of looking at Lawnair and busy myself by grabbing up a fistful of sand and slowly letting it seep out one end of my fist, like a waterfall of sand, if such a thing's possible. I do this several times and soon I've made a miniature Egyptian pyramid. Now that I have a pyramid, what to do with it...? With nothing more exciting to do, I tuck my forefinger behind my thumb, aim at my pyramid tip and flick the top of it. The grains fly over to Lawnair and land with a light clatter on her cards.

"Oh Zed, watch it, please." She brushes away the grains that landed on her game. "You're getting sand all over the cards."

"Sorry." I change positions: roll over and sit up then slowly, slowly lean back on my elbows; they sink into the sand; I study the sea. It's green and blue and this and that. I heave a sigh, but low enough so my wife won't hear it. She doesn't like sighing, she takes it personally, as if my sighing is a judgment aimed at her character. She thinks when I'm bored it's somehow her fault. She's goofy and sensitive that way, and she may even be right. I take a gander at her to see if she's heard the sigh; radio's way too loud, it's okay.

Okay, I suppose it's got to happen: time for some of the old story of my life stuff. Way back when, Lawnair Dinks and I had somehow become sweethearts. It was my fault mostly. I was busy trying to recover from a sort of showbiz heartache over another girl at that time, and Lawnair happened to pop up and so I talked her into making me all better. After our first year of college began, we became campus lovers. It was all very innocent and desperate, I suppose: the innocence was hers, the desperation was all on my side. Then we made a slip-up in one of our loving sessions and Lawnair became big with a babe. I, like an idiot, thought why not and did my duty: we did the "I do" ceremony and five months later Jody appeared, who now occupies her summertime by digging meaningless holes in the sand next to her mommy. Now mommy used to be called Sally; Sally Dinks, at one time, was her original, whole and true maiden name; but, in one of her first convulsions to know herself, she had changed her name to Salli, unique *i* replacing bland *y*, which turned out not to be lastingly satisfying to her demanding sense of self. Eventually, she scraped the whole mess of Sally and Salli in favor of the inspired one of Lawnair, a name that had come to her one crispy healthy day while she was clipping some grass in our backyard: the green of mother earth, which was just a lot of manicured lawn, combined with the spiritual freedom of the air, some polluted junk hanging around calling itself oxygen, and yippee, Sally became Lawnair and all her girlyfriends cooed approvingly at her choice of who she was at the moment: they told her she had so much personality, was so inventive. And so.... So Jody has a mommy with a funny name, though Jody doesn't seem to care;

after all, Mommy is just Mommy to the kid; Jody doesn't have to bother with Sally, Salli, or Lawnair whoever they are. *Mommy* is the only magic word she needs to know.

"Mommy?" the kid asks.

"Yes?" the Mommy answers.

Jody says nothing but digs some more.

"Well, what is it, Jody?"

Jody really is one of the few little kids I know who're good at keeping her mouth shut, which she does now as she placidly unloads another spadeful of sand by her side.

"Jody. *What?*"

Jody looks up at her Mommy blankly. Mommy puts on an expression of motherly firmness because, I can see it coming, she's about to teach the kid some valuable lesson she'll be able to use while traveling that long, long road of life, as if the kid gives a rat's ass.

"Jody, you just don't say *Mommy* and then don't say anything."

"Yes, Mommy."

"Okay, then. Remember that."

Jody forgets it and digs some more in her hole. I look at Jody and feel what? Just a kid digging a hole. I don't think there's a fatherly instinct in me. I've looked. I've waited. I can keep on waiting. As far as I see it, this kid's eight, I'm only twenty-six: it'd be far more logical that I should be her *brother*, not her lousy *Daddy*.... But the kid needs a father so I stick around and let her call me Daddy if it'll make her feel better. It doesn't make me feel better. It makes me feel old and creaky with responsibility: a twenty-six year old grandpa. I need to feel a little wet, swim these feelings of family ties loose, and like a good, considerate hubby, I ask my wife:

"Think I'll hit the water. Want to come?"

Lawnair, still singing softly along with the radio, pauses, looks over, and instead of saying yes or no, sings the next line of the song at me. I smile and get up. I take my sunglasses off and place them carefully on a corner of her towel. I catch a glimpse of her game.

"Hey." I'm taking a closer look at the cards. "There's a jack that can go on the queen, there." I start to point.

"No!" She plays at making a shriek. "Don't tell me! Don't say it! Let me find it."

"But it's right in front—"

"Sssshhhh, wait until the song's finished." And right in mid-verse, she catches up with the song, ignoring my suggestion about the jack, the queen, and swimming.

I ignore her suggestion about waiting and turn and walk toward the surf. "Wait!" is called after me. Lawnair is up and gesturing for me to wait some more. I watch her ask Jody something, probably "want to come for a swim with Mommy and Daddy?" Jody shakes her head no and shovels. Lawnair comes over to me. "I hope you don't have the car keys with you. Do you?" I do, buttoned safely in the small pocket of my trunks. But she doesn't like the idea of my taking even the slimmest of chances on losing the keys while swimming in the ocean. So being a good hubby, full of the ability to compromise and give-in, I go back to her towel and put the keys near my sunglasses.

"Jody," I tell my kid whose hole has by now hit water, "keep an eye on the keys, okay?" And I see that there is now a jack on the queen. Of course. This is typical Lawnair. No way will she put the stupid jack on the lousy queen if *I'm* the one to suggest it. she'll wait till my back is turned, *then* do it. Same with the swimming bit. When I ask her straight whether she wants to go swimming, she just can't say right out, Oh yes. No, she has to fudge around, and then, after a bit, again when my back is turned, she'll yell *yes* at me. She's always some way or another getting this phony showbiz "active rebellion" in, as if some short pause between my masculine *command* and her feminine *obedience* proves her undeniable independence. In other words, don't do anything the husband says or asks until he's not looking.

My non-dominated wife and I walk toward the ocean, going around towels and lethargic people, dodging the occasional

galloping kid, stepping over mysterious, sand-encrusted things, and finally reach the shoreline.

We get our feet wet, the weak, tiny waves rushing up and over our toes.

"Oh yes," Lawnair says to me while I silently watch my wiggling toes squishing in the moist sand, "I have some good news I forgot to tell you. I think you'll like." She turns to me. She's still got these bright, lively eyes I like to look at. "Remember when we were in the supermarket yesterday and we met Bev? Well, when you weren't around, she asked me how old you were now. I told her twenty-six, and you know what she said? It'll please you. She said, 'Oh, he looks younger.' Isn't that nice?"

So ... it's begun: aging. A long quiet moment happens in my head. I've crossed a threshold. For the first time in my life, it's become possible that I'm "older". Bev, someone I barely know, has, in a typical moment of blithe bland housewife chitchat, decreed where all my youngness is supposed to stop being, and where all the rest, old age, begins to happen. And Lawnair expected to make me happy, by telling me that at least someone thinks I look young, even though, at twenty-six, I'm as old as the hills and twice as dusty. Another quiet moment passes. Symbolically, this is a tender but harsh moment for me. Age has never happened to me before. I've always been young. This calls for much solemn contemplation of passed, ill-spent youth, and all that fun stuff. The third and final quiet moment passes.

"Lawnair," I say quietly, slowly. "I've been young all my life. Now..." And I look up and gaze out to sea, droopy and doom laden. I have to be obvious for Lawnair so I heave a deliberate sigh. "Now ... I'll start being older for the rest of my life."

Lawnair immediately becomes uncomfortable; she always is when she hears such things, such "meaningful, deep" words, because she never knows how to respond intelligently to what she considers stupid, silly remarks. So instead, she comforts. "Oh no," she replies, touching my arm, "I'm sure Bev didn't mean it that way. You just take it wrong." Then she hurriedly enters the water to get away from any further onslaughts of my deep meaning. "Let's swim."

I follow her, without words, just sloshing through the surf feeling old and very married. When we're up to our thighs in sea water, Lawnair dives straight into some foaming white water that rolls our way: underneath the cool water she's safe from all above the cool water. Me and my big mouth, she might be muttering in her mind as she floats to the bottom of the sea. When she comes up, she's five, six yards further on, I'm still standing where she's left me, contemplating the water now swirling around my waist, trying to impress her with my lost-in-thoughts look.... I cut a fart and feel the air bubbles float quickly along my groin, and study them as they pop, one after the other, on the surface where I can see them, and I'm briefly amused.

"Hey Zed!" she yells in her most cheery voice, trying to be fun-loving and fancy-free for me. She gets nary a twitch of reaction from me. I want to show her I'm busy embodying a most profound melancholy. She decides to solve the problem of me by scooping up a huge clawful of sand from the ocean's bottom and flinging it at my meditating body. The goop separates in air and splatters me, stinging. Her plan succeeds. I jerk, amazed, then follow a basic instinct: revenge. I chase-swim after a giggling Lawnair; she makes little quick shrill cries of mock terror, pleading repeatedly that she's sorry as she swims away. I only catch her when we've nearly reached the outside break. We do some playful dunking and splashing of each other. I grab her, she grabs me. I think we're laughing a lot. And just when I'm starting to have fun with her and forget that she's my wife, she suddenly worries at me that Jody's been alone too long. I watch her turn from my frolicking woman into a concerned mommy—she makes an apprehensive face and points it maternally shoreward.

I try and make her forget her maternal instincts by coaxing, "Come on," and grabbing her and tickling her.

"Maybe something's happened," she forebodes.

"What do you think is going to happen? Think she's going to drown in the sand?"

She hasn't heard a word because she starts slowly dog paddling in, replying, "Zed, don't say such things."

I shout after her, shoving a huge wave of water on her, wishing it were a net I was slinging and could catch and hold her back with. "Hey, Jody's probably halfway to China by now. Let her be. Come on."

Lawnair turns around to me to say, "Zed." Her face gives me one of her reprimanding looks. "*Someone* has to be responsible for her." Then one of her silent looks comes at me as she treads water. Then she swivels around and begins hurriedly breast stroking in.

I watch her, feeling chastened, full of unspecific guilt, not knowing exactly what I've done wrong, but knowing that whatever it was I shouldn't have done it. She's ten yards away when I say the only thing I can think of: "Come back."

But saying this snaps me right out of it whatever this *it* is. "Okay, go on!" I yell, trying to splash and drown the back of her bobbing, receding head. "Go...!"

Turning away, I face seaward, waiting for a looming hump of wave. One comes, slowly gaining size as it approaches: I swim to catch it; it picks me up; I bodysurf it. And another. And another. I catch a ton of waves in the next hour or so, having some private fun getting bounced around in the water, then coming up gasping for air. I force myself to stay out and have fun for as long as I can—I'm not very excited about going in and being around her. But I have to finally. I'm so bushed and my fingertips look pretty much like shriveled raisins.

I go in and pass Jody building bucket-shaped sand castles with a couple of other kids Peking buddies, no doubt.

Lawnair's on her back, lying expressionless and closed-eyed. She's got all this oily-looking suntan lotion smeared everywhere on her. Makes her look like she's a slab of cooking bacon. I notice that she's managed to complete her game of solitaire probably by cheating, like everybody else in the world who's ever played the game. She hasn't heard me come up. The radio's on, same song, and her mind's probably sizzled into a speck of consciousness by now.

And since she doesn't know I'm around, and since she's so engrossed in doing nothing so successfully, I decide to go for a little walk instead of being near her and having nothing to say. I want to take my sunglasses, but they're lying right next to her head and they're all tangled up with the keys. If I get them the key'll tinkle and she'll know I'm there, and then she'll open her eyes and want to know what I'm going to do and then I'd have to tell her I'm going for a walk and she'd probably go "a walk?" "where?" and want to know "with whom?" "why?" "is there somebody here we know?" So I let her have my stupid sunglasses and go on off alone.

