

The Nice Guy

1974

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 rumple 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 pangs." 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.

2.

There's just a whole bunch of noise all over the place when I'm strolling along, trying to take it easy, but there must be fifty different radios playing that same hit song. There's all sorts of little kids tearing around on their hands and knees, yelling and kicking up sand. Their only obstacles are old adults who lie like hunks of lard melting in the sun. When the kids *do* get a couple of grains of sand on the grown-ups, these big people raise their heads, make an ugly look and yell, "HEY YOU - WATCH OUT!"

And there are groups of teenagers trying to imitate adults but just act like kids.

There are some real little kiddies at the shoreline, cautiously sticking a daring foot at the raging sea water. Then they shriek and try to outrun the ferocious five inch high waves that rush to engulf and drown their ankles. They wait at a safe distance till the wave has drifted back, then return for more.... Then there's the adults nearby with very solemn expressions on their faces making flat pit-a-pat splashes with their feet in two inches of water. The outside break is dotted with swimmers' heads who catch and ride the green-blue waves. All along the beach is this glaring brightness from refracted sunlight that hurts my unshielded eyes. I close them for a moment, resting. With my eyes shut I can even hear some idiot seagulls cawing in the background. Seagulls, kids, waves, radios ... and now I suddenly feel something moist touching my right kneecap. Opening my eyes, I look down and there's this dog investigating me, sniffing me with scientific curiosity, jabbing its damp muzzle softly at the small area of my kneecap. The dog seems delicate enough, non-rabid and even-tempered, so I cautiously reach down to caress its furry noggin, but all of a sudden it snorts disappointedly, as though checking my right kneecap off its list of interesting objects in the world, and dashes away, my smell in its nose, I suppose.

"Zed!"

I turn and squint up the beach, looking at a lot of people I don't know. The only thing that catches my eye are some girls a little ways off practicing what is unmistakably a cheerleading routine: they all-together-now kick one leg up straight and yell in unison: "*Fight!*"

"Over here!"

I look to where the *over here* has come from but I still don't see anyone I know. Just a lot of lumps of sunbathers. I'm starting to feel like an idiot looking around for something and not finding it in front of all these people. Out of the corner of my eye I notice heads turning and their interest perking up as they one by one gaze towards me, watching me, as though I'm a movie, wondering and waiting to see whether I'll find what I'm looking for and live happily every after.... I try moving toward the vague direction where I last heard this voice, acting as if I know where I'm going, what I'm doing.

Then I see this friendly fellow I dislike smiling at me and now that I see him he waves to show me where he is. He's the kind of guy whose name is a three page description of his personality: Albert Numbutt. Yet the guy reminds me of a sore thumb. Try it sometime: hit your thumb with a hammer, watch it swell up, turn blue and throb and you'll maybe have some sort of an idea what Albert Numbutt is like: his body, his personality, everything. It's too bad for him, too, because he likes to be around people: give him a quarter of a fraction of a chance, and he'll be around you. But I don't like to be around him, mostly because I really don't know him; he's never been much of a very important person in my life. He's the kind of guy who's always in the background and pops up every now and then to remind me that he's still somewhat around and alive. But mainly I'm not all that excited about him because the guy exists a bit too much. He likes to shake hands a lot and put his arm around you as if you were his buddy. He's an exaggerated human being: he needs a lot of territory in which to be Albert Numbuttish: flinging his arms around, talking way too loud, and laughing all the time about nothing. Basically, he's got a bad case of incurable enthusiasm for his fellow man.

"Hi!" he shouts so everybody on the beach can see it's me he's talking to. He smiles and takes these giant steps over to *get* me, which he does, and brings me to his towel, just like that. "What're you doing? Sit down, take a break."

I smile and don't sit down.

"Dig the cheerleaders," Albert Numbutt invites, meaning sex. That's Numbutt, talk about anything and he'll find the sex in it. Mention the North

Pole and he'll make a nice creepy chuckle, saying, "But we know how polar bears keep warm at night." He's about my age, unmarried, and still possesses the eager hungry look of the hopeless self-abuser. And the nice disgusting thing about him is that when he talks about sex it's as if he's suddenly got all this extra saliva in his mouth. He's always slurping a little after every sentence. "I like the one over there," he informs me, and takes his quick slurp. "I introduced myself. Her name's Dorothy, but I call her Dotty. Seventeen year old stuff, Zed. Things we old timers of twenty-six wouldn't mind having again, huh?" Slurp. "Right, Zed?"

"Whatever you say, Albert," I reply while taking a look at the cheerleaders doing their wholesome rah-rahs. "Which one's this girl?" I ask, because I've nothing else to say to this guy.

"Dotty, you mean?" Albert smiles at me like a depraved chipmunk and of course speaks louder than is necessary. People are turning their heads in our direction to see who's making all the noise. I guess old Numbutt wants everybody around to know how our conversation's going. "I know her, for a whole couple of days now. Want to meet her?"

And before I can say don't you dare you stupid idiot, Albert goes, "Dotty!"

I instantly pretend I'm looking at the sea, searching for ships on the horizon, as if I don't know him.

"Hey, she's looking over," he reports to me. He screams: "Want you to meet a friend of mine who wants to meet you!"

"Oh shit," I mutter at the sea.

Then, to show her who he means, Albert Numbutt grabs my arm and points at me gleefully. "This one!" I take a quick glare at him, then jerk my arm out of his grasp, his *clutches*. Then, to show this Dotty person I'm not an Albert Numbutt too, I look over to where she's coming from and make an exasperated do-you-believe-this-guy? face before I even see her. I see a nice, cute, little young cheerleader walking over, leaving behind a row of smirking cheerleaders.

"Say hi to her, Zed," Albert urges, loud enough for her to hear. "Zed's a bit of a shy guy, Dotty, but don't worry about that, underneath he's a real animal."

I'm not pleased, definitely. I grunt-growl and start to turn, to leave, escape.

"Say hi, Zed," Albert commands, grabbing me, glad to be of so much help.

"Hi," I say through my teeth, "cheerleader."

"Dotty," she says.

"Hi, Dotty," I repeat her name to her.

"And his name's Zed," Albert shrieks.

"So I heard," she answers, looking at me. "Hi, Zed."

"Now you know each other," Albert informs us. Great.

Then there looms this big long ugly awkward silence, wherein no one knows what the hell to say next. But I know exactly what to say next, and say it, rudely, just like that: I tell them I have to go. *Have* to. Goodbye, briskly. I leave, I turn, a tiny wave, and head back to where I started from. I'm out of there without looking back.

But when I get back to Lawnair she isn't there. Her towel's there, the cards, her radio, my sunglasses, which I put on, everything's here in fact except her and the kid. I have a look around, but as I do I notice that some people start glancing in my direction to wonder what I'm looking for again. I duck down and sit on her towel and just wait; I don't want strangers to know that I'm alive for a while. Just a little tiny ways off, almost where I was lying before, I notice a new pile of somebody's beach stuff: towel and suntan lotion and sandals. Maybe that's where Lawnair is, with the person who belongs to this new beach stuff. They might know each other, then went somewhere together, they'll come back. I wait, drawing marks in the sand, nothing in particular, no art. After a while I stop scratching around in the sand and just stare blankly at the marks I've made, half wondering where Lawnair could've gone, half-wondering at the individual grains of sand. And this Dotty girl ... some little squeaky cheerleader who I've just come in contact with. Dotty ... wonder if she's an interesting person.... Albert Numbutt, that idiot. Why doesn't he go die or do something illegal and get caught so I'll never come across him and his existence again.

Someone says, "Hi Zed" and sprinkles water on me.

I flinch, startled, and look up ... it's Julia.

"Oh, hi there, Julia."

Julia McFall, a person I definitely do not like to be around. I start to get up, to go somewhere, away.

"How goes it?" she asks, picking up the towel from the pile of new beach stuff nearby.

"It goes." I shrug my shoulders for emphasis and I'm standing up by now. I watch Julia dry herself; she's just come out of the water. "Seen Lawnair about?" I ask.

"Sure," Julia says. "We went swimming. She's still out there." We have a twin look at the sea so we both know what we're talking about. "She'll be back in a minute, I think. She's with Jody."

"Oh," I say, and keep looking at the sea. I don't like to see Julia drying herself off.

"Why don't you go for a swim?" She pokes her face into my view of the sea. I look at her, not answering, beholding her beauty, until she insists, "Huh, Zed?"

"Maybe I will," I answer. "I probably will." Just to get away from her.

I don't like to hear her say my name. I don't like to have her poking her face into my sight. I'm nervous being around her, and all for one excellent reason ... I'm in love with her, sort of. And if I stick around here I'll end up staring at her with one of those soft long looks that are always trying to get on my face when she's around and if I do that she'll notice, and she'll certainly know what it means, and she won't like it, and she'll begin avoiding me again and I won't be able to see much of her then. Truth is, she's an expert in knowing when I'm all in love with her.

It looks as though I'll have to go into another hunk of history, about me, myself and Julia, whether I like it or not. I don't especially enjoy going on about the past, it tends to get very gooshy and trimmed with romantic lace when I do it, especially where Julia's concerned. So watch out for it.

Well then let me take a gulp of air and try to make this as short and painless as possible. When we, meaning Julia and I, were sixteen and seventeen and a little bit of eighteen, we were in love with each other, definitely. We just met, got to know each other, liked what we knew, and somewhere along the line it became love.... There, that's not too bad: I got around to saying *love*, and saying it seriously, without heaving a broken-hearted, sentimental sob. Fine: love. Of course, it'd be easy to say that it was all just in a teenagerish sort of way, with lots of insecurity and hesitant explorations of each other's private places. But it was really all quite sincere, intimate, and loving, very loving....

Anyway.

She used to write "Mrs. Zed Cupping" on her high school notebook to see how she'd sound when we got married. We used to call each other up on the telephone all the time, whenever we weren't together, and make up all sorts of plans about how we were going to live, as man and wife, happily, of course, everly afterly. And we loved each other and our futures so very much, and blah

blah blah. And notice how everything's tending to get rather syrupy-sweetie-pie? And it's getting less short by the sentence. Anyway, love.

And then? Well, unexpectedly, I made a kid in her, and we weren't anywhere near married yet, as a matter of fact, hadn't even gotten out of high school. So there we were with an illegal baby bumpkins going to classes with Julia. We tried to talk seriously about the matter but didn't know what to say of any significance except *What're we going to do?* so we had no choice but to inform the parents and they gasped and couldn't understand how we could do such a thing to them. They certainly hadn't taught us this sort of behavior. Didn't we know the consequences of such an act? Julia and I did our very meek bit, and hung our heads to the parental chastisement, agreeing humbly that we had indeed conceived in sin, and much silent penitence was done before those sermonizing relatives. Then hurried emergency plans were made for a nice magic marriage ceremony to be performed over me and Julia and our little unborn buddy. Life started swirling forward, our confused futures becoming suddenly neatly planned: many arrangements were made and reported to passive us. The pressure was on, the nervous juices flowed, and lots of tension bore down on Julia who didn't seem to like it all that much. This wasn't in her plans, *having to* get married to me. She *wanted to, sure*, but *having to* made it different. Having to start living happily ever after, husband and wife, till death do you part, before she planned to, bothered her. I, for my part, was contented with my fate: I believed I loved, was loved, always loving.... Julia fretted and threw up a lot, became generally overwrought and so depleted that poof! she made a *deus ex machina* perform a crummy miracle: Julia suddenly and swiftly purged baby bumpkins: a miscarriage.

And then? The doubts that had been steadily nibbling at her love for me got worse: she started staring at me and wondering, and doubting, and soon these things became unhappy confusion. She loved me, she said, postponing the wedding indefinitely. Then some *people* began helping her uncertainty along, people commonly known as mommy and daddy. They suggested to her that, after her harrowing experience which was all my fault, she take a nice long rest at an obliging aunt's one thousand miles away. But there was still some trembling love in her for me, for why else had she spent so much time with me, on me, was all that to go to waste by going away, leaving me? So she told her parents, in an irresolute quaver, no doubt, that she loved me and couldn't ever think of leaving me behind. But whenever Julia expressed any serious feelings

for me to her parents, they faked some warm sympathy and after about five minutes of "Yes, we understand we always wanted the best for you we know it's hard for you" they got around to coming up with a few tidbits of parental wisdom for her, telling her the real her. Her love, they explained, was not really love. It was ... well honey darling our precious ... merely puppy love, young love, an infatuation you call love ... and other types of qualified love. But love love love? Oh Julia, come now. That's not our little smart girl using her brains. So "love sick" Julia swilled her parents' propaganda around in her nibbled brain of doubts, and, in whirling confusion, confided all this to her qualified lover, me. I quickly told her that her parents had their heads stuck up their adult opinions, and that in any case, the one word *love* always remained constant. "It may be a *something* love," I pointed out to her then, "but the basic ingredient, the root word love, *love*, it's always included. No matter what, it always remains the same, constant. Love." It was a feeble enough touché but my perplexed Julia, the battleground of our fifth rate arguments, took my advice and mentally jabbed it at her parents' dictums, and for some unknown reason, in her mind, my remarks deflated their remarks, and she returned to the hearth confident and securely in love once more, her mind a serene bed of loving warmth. But she made the naive mistake of boastfully explaining to them my explanation of their explanation. The parents, lovingly condescending, agreed, yes, yes, Zed was certainly right there, no denying, and then sat back smugly and turned on the TV, acting as if it were impossible to answer my argument because of its very youthful inanity, and said no more on the matter. And this wrecked everything in Julia's loving mind and split her confidence right down the middle. Her parents' final comment, after they'd switched off the TV, was: well, honey, the choice is up to you ... but ... remember ... you're only just eighteen. Which is one of the most common dirty low-down adult tricks going around in existence, accusing some kid of her age, as if being a teenager was the biggest error a person could make.

Finally, anyway, at last and of course, Julia took the adult way out: she compromised, in other words, and her parents won. That final hexing remark about age worked. Those parents managed to murder her eternal love for me in just under two weeks. Julia decided that, owing to our "close call" of almost becoming parents, and because we were still so young and immature and confused, maybe it would be better for us, at this time, oh, just for a little while, to ... uh, separate, grow; to mingle and mature in the world; to learn and

expand; in short, to get our adolescent bearings on who and what we were, on who and what we wanted out of life. I had replied: "But what are you talking about, Julia?" I sputtered. I was confused. I was still in love. "*Finding* ourselves? Find me? I don't need to find me, I need to have you. Who am I? Who cares. I love you —*that's* who I am."

But Julia's parents couldn't be budged when it came to keeping her to her compromise. High school graduation came and we separated, a loving separation, full of promises and remorse. She was off, gone a good thousand miles to an anonymous auntie, gone to the world and who she was. She gave time a chance, gave "experience among others" time to alter her slightly into another, more mature personality. At the end of the summer, when she was slightly more grown-up, and not used to being around me, we met. Embarrassed, we tried out our old love on each other, and we'd changed, she'd changed just enough to make our young love of three months before not work so hot any more. In decisive adult terms, she informed me that I'd taught her a lot about life, especially concerning what she needed and wanted from a relationship, but apparently not my participation. She was going to college where her aunt lived, four years worth. She said she would always regard me highly and hoped we could always be friends. I guess she had begun to find herself, and it wasn't me.

And then? Why, the end, of course.

I, moaning with what seemed to be some ancient form of adolescent heartache, ran into a sympathetic female by the name of Sally Dinks, and she became *my* "further development." I took my lonely pain out on her and she cuddled me to her breast ... and all that sort of pathetic stuff. She became pregnant quickly and we got married, definitely.

I saw very little of Julia on her occasional trips home, and anyway, by then I had successfully talked myself into believing all the love I had had for her had been successfully transferred to Lawnair, who accepted it gratefully, acting as if it was really hers. Julia's life to me became a series of overheard rumors, a bit of gossip. In time, the college gave Julia a degree in finding herself or something, and she acquired a job a thousand miles away. And that was that for a while. Then she did something that wasn't good for me: she came back.

Returned, to live, in front of me, which got my discontent going. She got a job locally managing a chain of dress stores, and found some love again, this time in a friend of mine, Gary Bonnett.

Today, drying herself next to me, she's twenty-six, living unmarried with Gary and probably taking convenient pills to stop any further inconvenient babies from making their unwelcome way into the world through her uterus. I guess at the moment she, too, is mostly contented, living happily ever after, waiting for something further to happen to her.

And still I'd like to be that something further that happens to her. Now that she's around to remind me of what I once had, what I now have, what I could've been, and what the hell, she's got me thinking about it all.... I don't know. I *remember*, and it all looks a lot better back there. It's funny how one little thing, a little thing like Julia, can make eight contented years of married life seem like the shriveled existence of a non-entity. It's funny. Oh just very hilarious. She got me thinking along the line of how I'd like to change a lot of things that happened to me. How I wish Julia and I hadn't happened as we happened. How I wish her parents hadn't ... she hadn't ... Lawnair hadn't, the kid hadn't, I hadn't.... Now *there's* a whole bunch of grief to snivel over. I do snivel and can't help it. I'm damned discontented. I'm getting good at being damned discontented. I just don't know what to do with it. At the moment, the best thing I can think of is to love Julia with it.

"Gary's out there someplace," she says, "if you want to talk to him."

"Oh yeah?"

But she makes me sad to be around her nowadays; she's some sort of twenty-six year old who vaguely resembles this teenager I used to love. I mean, now when I try to remember what she was like, compared to what she's become, it's difficult. I do my best to fill in the gaps, but she's fading away. When I try to match her now with what she once was, nothing fits. If she's found herself over the years, then she's found somebody I've never known. She used to be tender, spontaneous, and confused. Now she's rough, tough and confident. I made the mistake of trying to approach her after she first returned, as though she was an old-time flame ready to be reignited, instead of the mysterious acquaintance she'd decided to become. I'd said, "What do you think, Julia? Think us? Again?" She said: "No." Then paused a moment, as though double-checking her present emotions and rate of heartbeat. "No, I don't think so.... Do you?" I did; I even really declared my still burning love for her—love. I declared and she spurned definitely. She got immediately chilly and preferred not to talk about it. After that she pretended to forget me, avoided me. There used to be a spontaneous friendliness between us, "Hi, Julia!" "Hi, Zed!" real

pleasant surprise, which, after the screw-up of my showbiz advances, turned into, "Hi, Julia!", "Oh," her pause for disappointment, "Hello." She acted as if I were just some Albert Numbuttish type of guy, someone in the background of her life, that flopped into her line of vision once in a while and did antics at her. So I laid off declaring my love and looking longingly at her, acted as if I'd gotten the message and given up hope. And after a while she became relaxed with me again, calm and somewhat spontaneous. I guess I didn't mean so much to her any more now that I didn't love her where she could see and hear it. Just another guy.

"Yeah, I think I'll go talk to Gary," I say to Julia without looking at her, acting as if she's just another girl. "Whereabouts is he?"

"Oh, out there," she gesturing to the vast ocean. "Last I saw him. Could be anywhere."

I look at her, smile a weak thanks, she smiles back, I love her, and I turn and go to talk to Gary.