



I ONLY WANT TO TALK ABOUT THE NICE THINGS

by Claire Lombardo

BECAUSE Evie Nash married quite possibly the most docile man in the history of them all, her husband George does not strike her when she tells him she is leaving him for a woman.

Because she is new to all of it, and shy, and frightened, she does not tell him that it's a lie, that it's not a woman that she's leaving him for but women in general, that there's no short-haired, hard-eyed gal on the side but scads of possibility, maybe, who knows.

“Please,” George says instead, sitting beside her on the stripes of their slipcovered couch. He takes her hand and rubs at the veins. “Please, let’s think about this.”

Because she married the kindest man in the history of all men, she agrees, but a month later she leaves for good, moves into her own apartment in Ravenswood. Because Evie Nash married the kindest man in the history of all men, her husband helps her move.



Their middle daughter, Allison, is marrying a high school track coach. At the rehearsal dinner everyone gets fabulously drunk except for the few relatives on either side who are recovering or chronically judgmental or both. Evie gets blitzed early but then stops drinking, sipping at soda water so that nobody thinks Allison’s mother is a lush on top of everything else.

“Isn’t she something?” she says when people compliment her daughter. “We’re so, so pleased.” Or “We’re very proud.” Or “We’re just delighted.”

Which they are, of course. Allison *is* something and Evie and George are pleased and proud and delighted. They're sitting together, side-by-side, with Carla to Evie's right and George's aunt Florence to his left. George is sipping slowly but surely at a succession of whiskeys and at some point he reaches beneath the table to take Evie's hand. Because Carla is drinking whiskey with similar abandon, she does not notice. Evie squeezes back, feeling the new weight that has accumulated around George's palm.

"I think," George whispers, leaning his mouth to her ear, which used to drive her crazy in a good way, "that Aunt Cousin Irene is going to stage a coup."

"Motion seconded," Evie says, still holding his hand. "Lock up your daughters."

Aunt Cousin Irene, neither aunt nor cousin, is a family friend from Evie's childhood. Born in the era of indeterminate cognitive diagnoses, she has remained a lewd enigma for decades. She has dubious social boundaries and has been known to cup the buttocks of their daughters at holiday gatherings since they had buttocks to cup, but nobody has been able to pin her for any crimes because of an *incident* that occurred sometime in early childhood. Evie and George used to speculate about the incident before bed, twined together, shuddering with the kind of laughter generally

reserved for adolescent girls. Tonight, Evie honks inadvertently, booze still prevailing despite three glasses of seltzer. They both fix their attention across the room, where Aunt Cousin Irene is sitting at the table alone, glowering out at the dance floor, at the scores of Allison's beautiful friends lined up for the Electric Slide.

"Als looks gorgeous, doesn't she?" George asks, and they both turn their heads to look at her, their second-born, tall like her dad and honey-blonde like her mom and dancing freely in that delightful way of young people, silly and liquid.

"The most gorgeous," Evie replies.

What a mystery daughters are; how is it possible that she is the mother of three young women? Just before Roz was born Evie remembers thinking *please holy mother of God let it be a boy; please God don't give me another girl*. Because girls have always baffled her; she, a girl, baffles herself. Allison sees her parents watching and grins like a kid and waves to them across the dance floor and dad and mom alike reach up their free hands to wave back, the hands that aren't still clasped under the table.

There are gaps in the guest list, whole big blocks of people missing, the more devout Catholics who refuse to forgive lovely Allison the

indiscretions of her mother. Good riddance, Evie thinks—fewer impediments. All the better to wave freely across the room at her gorgeous daughter. All the better for everything.



Roz called her a dyke once and it hurt Evie so much that she couldn't breathe for a minute. It's the ugliest word, she thinks, though Carla has told her it's one of the ones you're supposed to appropriate with jollity—passive acquiescence in the face of hatred, take something ugly and embrace it, hug it until it becomes something beautiful.

The language of her new life confounds her, makes her squirm. *Lesbiandom?* She was a language arts teacher for a year before Lucy, their oldest, was born and has started teaching again at a parochial school in Rogers Park. *Homosexpedition?* What to call it? What to call the month Evie spent doing some vague approximation of courtship with a woman named Bonnie who tended bar at a place by her apartment? What to call the months after when she scarcely left her own apartment, let alone *dated* anyone? What to call Carla, now, the lovely woman with whom she shares a

home but who also feels a bit like a sister that you don't quite trust? What to call the fact that her daughters now feel comfortable talking to her about sex, taking her quiet admission of female attraction as a free pass to say things like *I have to fake it with Doug, like, every other time, which I'm sure you never have to worry about* and *Aren't scrotums disgusting?* They are suddenly no longer repulsed by their mother's sexual life now that she's stopped sleeping with their father. (She never *minded* George's scrotum, though, honestly, so long as she didn't have to look at it for too long; she never minded anything about it except how ugly the word was.) What to call her own discomfort with this sudden candor, with how bang-up abnormal everything is now? What to call it besides prudishness?

"This is my mom, Evie," Allison has said numerous times this weekend. "And her partner, Carla."

And every time Evie blushes, heats up to a deep, scorching red, though she shares a house and a bed and a hypoallergenic Himalayan named Burt with Carla.

"At least they're not ashamed," George says when she admits this to him, when he whispers into her ear *I need a smoke; have you got one?* and she admits that she does and they slip outside together like convicts. "I mean—

not that they have any reason to be. I just mean—I just mean that it’s better than the alternative.”

“I know what you meant,” she says. The *alternative*. Their alternative, that last surprise daughter. She takes back the shared cigarette, their fingers brushing.

Following the rhetoric of irritating women’s magazines nationwide, the kind of magazines adorning the waiting rooms of gynecological offices and psychotherapists all over the city, it would be safe to say that George has *let himself go*. He’s gained a good thirty pounds. His hair has started to formally fall out, either from stress or from the inevitability of old age. His shirt is wrinkled and she finds herself, seated next to him, reaching to rub his collar between her fingers, feebly attempting to smooth it a bit.

“Lucy tried to teach me how to iron,” he says, smiling a little, looking down. “There may have been a small and inadvertent fire as a result.”

“She never really learned herself,” Evie says. “I’ll come by sometime. Show you how it’s really done.”

Evie clears her throat. Post-marital dialogue, when you remain friends with your spouse—when you’ve always been best friends with your spouse—has a way of sounding like an endless series of botched euphemisms.

“You look lovely, by the way,” George says. He has the tiniest hint of a brogue, though he was born in Albany Park. It comes from his parents. She smiles at him. In honor of her daughter’s nuptials she has worn one of her old dresses, not one of the newer, looser garments Carla favors. Tonight’s choice is gray and fitted and modest. It’s one of his favorites: that’s why she wore it; nobody else has to know.

“So do you,” she says, and she means it. Letting go agrees with her husband. He smiles at her and then wavers a little; cigarettes always made him lightheaded.

“Better hit the sack before I embarrass myself,” he says. “Before I become the creepy old man who ruins the wedding.”

“Impossible,” she says. She reaches to swat his knee and her hand falls, instead, northward. “Sorry,” she says, and like all of the times she has apologized since their separation, the word takes on a damp, soggy weight: *sorry I hurt you; sorry I asked to keep the Treadmill; sorry I ruined your life; sorry I just touched your crotch*. George meets her eyes with such a familiar type of kindness that she has to look away. “Sorry,” she says again.

“Sleep well, all right?” He leans in to kiss her cheek, the kindest man in the history of them all. “And stuff your sorries in a sack.”



George lives in Grand Beach now, in her family's cottage that she gave him in the divorce. She has no idea what his life is like; she used to call him sometimes in the evenings to say good night and finally he asked her to stop, asked her in his nice-guy way if she could maybe not do that anymore because it made him too sad. On Monday he'll drive back and she and Carla will go home to the city. Maybe she'll see him at Christmas but maybe not; he's talked about going to Washington to visit Roz. Inanely, she didn't realize when she got divorced that it would mean she would no longer see George every day. Tonight is the first time they've been together in four months.

"How *are* you, really?" she asked him before the rehearsal dinner, when they were sitting at the bar while Alison and the track coach posed for photographs.

"Fine," he said, smiling, clinking around the ice cubes in his scotch.

"Really," she replied, not exactly a question but kind of, not exactly saying *just look at yourself* or *did I do this to you?* but just making sure, really.

“Evie, don’t,” he said flatly, in a new voice that she didn’t recognize. “I know, okay? I know you’re worried about me. Please, for God’s sake, don’t be the hundredth person to look at me that way.”

“Sweetie,” she said, and then stopped herself because she wasn’t allowed to call him that anymore. She cocked her head and smiled at him a little, reached to squeeze his shoulder. “I was just—” she said, and then, because she couldn’t bear staying on the subject: “We should make sure Als doesn’t need anything else from us for tomorrow.”

They can share this, still, if not anything else: the needs of their children, no longer children but still fleetingly needy, will always be a thing that they can try to fulfill together. George had smiled at her in what appeared to be gratitude—a rarity from him, these days—and nodded.

“Sure. Good idea.”



In her bed now, she feels dry-mouthed and nauseated. She is propped up beside a sleeping Carla, her shoulder tucked sweetly against Evie’s thigh,

her long runner's legs tangled in the sheets. George always slept with a box fan blowing; she misses the white noise and the dry breeze of it.

“Going for a walk,” she whispers, but Carla only grunts and jerks away, covering her head with a pillow like the girls used to do on Sunday mornings. She kisses Carla's elbow and slips from her room wearing an old pair of George's boxers and a loose knit sweater—her standard pajamas. She takes the stairs down one floor and finds his room—304, she knows, because his name is still on her credit card; when she went to check in the concierge thought she was still his wife and said that he had an extra key for her in their room upstairs. 304. The parents of the bride. She'd started blushing then, at check-in, and hasn't really stopped since.

She knocks gently at the door.

“Yes?” he calls after a minute. It's the wary, echoic voice of a good dad, kind and obsequious with a hint of *try anything funny and I'm calling the cops*.

“Hi,” she says, lips right up to the door. There is a bit of rustling from within and then the door swings open. George is in boxers too, and his *Illini Tennis Dad* t-shirt that Lucy bought for him not because she played tennis but because it was on sale, because they didn't make t-shirts for the

dads of meandering general-studies dabblers who quit college to pursue acting careers. Lucy used to be the one she worried the most about.

“Well hi,” he says. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yes,” she says. “Yes, it’s fine. I couldn’t sleep. I thought I’d—just come and say hello.”

“Mm,” George says.

This was always when she liked him most, this time of night when he was not yet sleeping but on his way, face softened further by shadows, hair rumpled and boyish, posture loosened by the freedom of an elastic waistband.

“Unless you have company,” she says, trying to make it sound like she’s the liberal, free-loving nonconformist that Carla is.

“Company?” he says, and then a blush creeps into his pale cheeks. “Oh, Christ, no.” He laughs a little, embarrassed. “Just me and Joan Crawford. Come in, please. If you want.” He opens the door wider and she slips past him, unable to stop herself from patting his chest up near his left shoulder as she does. The TV is on—*What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*—a movie they had watched together twice in the evenings before Lucy was born, eight days late, film after film after film consumed anxiously on the

couch while they waited for her to go into labor, George falling asleep against the upholstered arm and awakening with a start every time she moved a muscle, saying, “Oh, sorry, is it—?” and Evie, irritated and endeared, patting at his forearm and saying, “No, sweetheart, my foot just fell asleep.”

She perches on the edge of his big bed. “I haven’t seen this in ages,” she says.

“I know. I was glad I found it.” George comes over and sits next to her on the bed, Bette Davis disintegrating before them on the big hotel TV.

“How about a drink?” he asks, and though she feels a little sick, a little bit woozy, she nods, because to say no would mean opening her mouth and to open her mouth would mean crying. He rises to pour them tiny bottles of vodka into coffee mugs, splashes them with OJ, and brings them back over to the bed. Evie clacks hers against his in a sleepy, wordless toast.

“Spoken to Roz?” she asks, eyes on the TV, pretending to be casual about it. Roz, the baby, who hates her mother and her forgiving big sisters, currently doing who knows what across the country in her apartment in Spokane. *Please God let it be a boy*, Evie thought before Roz was born, but once their third child was handed to her, covered in viscera and

prominently lacking that critical anatomical appendage, Evie felt swelled with love, love for her third girl, Rosalind Rose, sort of a silly name but one that incorporated both her and George's grandmothers.

“Hm? Oh. Briefly.” His eyes on the TV too, pretending it's not common knowledge that he is the only member of their family to whom Roz is still speaking. Evie still calls her; Evie still leaves her voicemails; she called her earlier before the rehearsal dinner and said, *Hi, sweetheart, it's Mom. Born to be someone's mother, George always said; you could tell by her voice alone, her mom-voice. I miss you, Rosey. Just calling to say that I miss you and that I—well, I'm still hoping I might see you this weekend.* “Couldn't get her to budge,” he says. *I love you, sweet girl; I hope you know that.* “Exams, I guess. She's taking the MCATs soon.”

“God bless her,” Evie says softly.

“She'll come around, you know. You know she will.”

“Sure. Of course.”

“I'm not sure what to say,” George says, and Evie pats his hand.

“You don't have to say anything. How about I iron your shirt for tomorrow?”

“Really?”

She rises from the bed, goes over to the closet. There's a very specific kind of femininity, the kind that tells you where the iron is in any given hotel room, that she misses being able to use. She misses the awe that a task as simple as ironing can inspire in the domestically disinclined, in men, in her husband.

"Of course," she says, and she pulls down the fold-up board and turns on the iron and goes to get his white dress shirt, draped over a chair. *I only want to talk about the nice things!* comes from the TV in a stroke of poetic timing and Evie gets to work, her back to George, trying not to cry. After a minute he comes and lays a hand on her shoulder, familiar as anything.

"I really like your hair like that," he says. Earlier in the evening Lucy came and sat next to her and draped an arm around her and said *Thank God you're growing it out; you don't look so butch anymore*. Butch: another word she hates. She'd gotten a very short haircut on a whim, on vacation with Carla, that had seemed like a good idea at the time. Now it's back down past her ears and she feels more like herself. Evie Nash: blonde and slight and prone to saying things like "good heavens!" without a bit of irony. Longer hair suits her, she knows.

"Thanks," she says.

“Roz is safe and she’s healthy,” George says quietly, rubbing her back, digging his fingers into the groove of her shoulder blade.

“That’s the important thing,” Evie agrees. She watches a tear slide down her nose and land on the pocket of George’s white dress shirt.

“She’s going to regret not coming,” he says. “And we should be kind to her when she realizes that.”

Evie hums a little, afraid to speak.

“Things are going to be strange for awhile,” George says. “Not forever, though.”

This unfolding: so familiar; it must have happened a thousand times when they were married. Evie, sad or anxious, her back to him, doing something with her hands—folding a shirt or rocking a baby or tearing coupons from the Wednesday grocery ads; and George, pacific and tentative, touching her hair and giving it to her straight: *it’s out of our hands; it’s going to work out.*

Step two in this long-established marital custom is out of the question, of course. Step two involves the warm wetness of mouths and the sweet dismantling routine of button and bra clasp and the slick conversant angle at which married people fit together. Step two involves the well-known

grooves of George's head in her hands, so surely that's not what she's doing; surely she is not holding the back of his head with one hand as the other hand explores the new weight around his waist. Surely, because it is out of the question, George is not slipping his hand down the waistband of her boxers; surely he is not slipping it back up, slick, under her sweater, under her breasts where the skin is pale and sweaty. Surely they don't move to the bed together; surely George doesn't gently lay her down on top of the duvet; surely his added weight isn't a welcome surprise to Evie, who has grown so used to the reedy fragility of Carla; surely George's curiously-inherited brogue doesn't tell her that he loves her.

Surely not; surely when it's over Evie doesn't curl herself into him like a shrimp and rest her head into the crook of his neck. Surely those things, equal parts lovely and out of the question, do not occur between George and Evie Nash, twenty-nine years married and twenty-three months divorced.

Tomorrow they're going to walk Allison down the aisle together because Allison asked them to, because she thinks having just the dad is archaic; tomorrow they will each take one of their daughter's lovely elbows and guide her to her waiting, tuxedoed groom; tomorrow Evie will wear the dress that Carla picked out, gauzy and patterned and rustic. But tonight

she is wearing George's boxers and, come to think of it, his sweater, too, pilfered from his dresser when they first started dating; tonight she leans her head against his shoulder and hears the muffled thwack through the plates of her skull as he kisses the top of her head.

When she returns to Carla in the morning, having fallen asleep in George's arms, Carla will just smile at her, rumped like George, hungover and bleary, and say, "Someone had a late night" and she will kiss Evie's cheekbone and Evie will hug her tightly and cup her ass like Aunt Cousin Irene and agree.

Later, at the wedding she'll hug Aunt Cousin Irene and her new son-in-law and her two beautiful older daughters; she'll hug Carla and George and then herself, tightly around the belly, hug the muscle memory that Roz has become to her. It's too soon to call her again, and too early in the morning on top of that, but she conjures the recording on her daughter's answering machine, *Sorry I missed you*, a voice that does not sound the least bit apologetic.

Love, so much love, so many more different *kinds* of love than she ever knew existed, so many different ways to love someone that sometimes thinking about all of it makes her want to fall right asleep. Instead she will go to shower alone and think of them both, Carla and George: complete

opposites, dissimilar in just about every fundamental way save for their mutual love of Evie Nash, their mom-voiced frayed wire with a growing-out blonde bob who doesn't *mind* the scrotum, really, who holds her girlfriend's hand sometimes while they jog clumsily along the lakefront, who sleeps each night in a thematically complicated pair of boxers.

Those two, her two, waiting patiently for it all to make sense.

In the shower she will smell George on her skin, the sweet saltiness of him, and she will bathe carefully without using any soap and afterward dab a little bit of Carla's lavender oil behind her ears. She will smell not like herself but like both of them, George and Carla—her twin pillars, united improbably over a blinking grid of blurred electric lines.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claire Lombardo is currently pursuing her MFA in fiction at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her stories have appeared in or are forthcoming from *Atticus Review*,

Burrow Press Review, Luna Luna Magazine, Oyez Review, Wyvern Lit, and Modern Shorts, an anthology from Fiction Attic Press. She hails from Oak Park, Illinois, and is currently at work on her first novel. You can find her online at www.clairelombardo.com or follow her on Twitter [@clairelombardo](https://twitter.com/clairelombardo).

LF #085

© 2015 Claire Lombardo. Published by **LITTLE FICTION** | **BIG TRUTHS**, October 2015. Cover design by Troy Palmer. Edited by Beth Gilstrap.

Read more stories at littlefiction.com