

DAF BUFFER

A SWEDISH MAN'S ROLLER-COASTER JOURNEY
WITH 'NICE GUY SYNDROME'

PSYCHOLOGY THAT HELPS YOU
BOOK 17

LEE HOPKINS

°138

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*For G - You're the Vegemite to my toast: a bit salty, oddly
appealing, and utterly irresistible.*

You live and learn. At any rate, you live.

DOUGLAS ADAMS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to my new friend Madge, who inspired me to include her in this, my latest fact-fiction novel in the 'Psychology that helps you' series.

No, unlike Dr Lee and Madge in this novel, we're not having an affair, but we are becoming good friends.

CHAPTER ONE

THE RESTAURANT BUZZED with the chatter of happy couples, but my heart raced as I fumbled with the small velvet box in my pocket. Across from me, Sarah's emerald eyes sparkled in the candlelight, and I couldn't help but marvel at how lucky I was to be on a date with someone so beautiful.

"I hope you're enjoying the evening," my voice barely audible over the clinking of cutlery.

Sarah smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. "It's lovely, Daf. You've really outdone yourself."

I beamed, pride swelling in my chest. "I'm glad you think so. I wanted tonight to be special."

As I reached for the box, ready to present Sarah with the necklace I'd spent weeks saving for, she cleared her throat.

"Daf, I need to tell you something," she said, her voice tinged with hesitation.

My hand froze mid-reach. "What is it?"

"You're such a great guy, and I really enjoy spending time with you, but..." She paused, biting her lip. "I think we're better as friends."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I felt my face flush, memories of a similar rejection flooding back from my childhood.

I was ten years old, standing in the schoolyard with a hand-made Valentine's card clutched in my sweaty palms. Jenny, the girl I'd fancied for months, stood before me, her friends giggling behind her.

"Here," I'd said, thrusting the card towards her. "I made this for you."

Jenny's face contorted into a grimace. "Ew, gross! I don't want your stupid card, Daf!"

The laughter of her friends echoed in my ears as Jenny tossed the card to the ground, crushing it beneath her shoe as she walked away.

Back in the present, I forced a smile onto my face. "Of course," I said to Sarah, my voice cracking slightly. "Friends is great."

As Sarah continued talking, her words faded into background noise. All I could think was: not again, please, not again.

Emma Johnson sat across from her husband Andrew in their sleek, modern dining room. The tension between them was palpable, thick as the steaming risotto on their plates.

"So, what do you think about moving to Sydney for my new job opportunity?" Andrew said, his tone gruff and challenging.

Emma's heart sank. She loved Melbourne, her friends, her career. But instead of voicing her concerns, she plastered on a bright smile. "That sounds exciting, darling. I'm sure Sydney would be wonderful."

Andrew grunted, seemingly satisfied. "Good. I've already started looking at houses."

Emma's fork clattered against her plate. "Houses? But we haven't even discussed--"

"What's there to discuss?" Andrew cut her off. "It's a great move for my career. You'll find something there, I'm sure."

Emma's throat tightened, but she swallowed her protests. "Of course," she said. "Whatever you think is best."

Later that night, Emma lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Andrew's snores filled the bedroom, but her mind was racing. Is this all there is? she thought. A life of constant compromise, of burying my own desires?

Across town, Daf tossed and turned in his own bed. Sarah's rejection played on repeat in his mind. Why can't I find someone who appreciates me? he wondered. Someone who sees me for who I really am?

In the darkness of their separate bedrooms, Emma and Daf shared a moment of synchronicity. Both yearned for something more, something genuine. A relationship where they could be true to themselves, where their needs and desires were valued.

Emma sighed, rolling onto her side. There has to be more than this, she thought. I can't keep living my life for everyone else.

Daf punched his pillow in frustration. I'm tired of trying so hard and getting nothing in return, he mused. There's got to be a better way.

As the night wore on, both Emma and Daf drifted into uneasy sleep, their hearts heavy with unfulfilled longing and the growing realisation that something needed to change.

I stepped into the Fitzroy Gallery, the cool air a welcome respite from Melbourne's sweltering heat. My eyes darted around, seeking a distraction from the gnawing emptiness in my chest. The stark white walls were adorned with vibrant splashes of colour, each painting a window into another world.

"Bit abstract for my taste," I muttered, squinting at a particularly chaotic piece.

As I moved through the gallery, my thoughts drifted. What am I even doing here? This isn't filling the void. I'm ... existing.

I paused in front of a painting that seemed to capture my mood—a solitary figure on a vast, empty beach. The loneliness radiated from the canvas, mirroring the ache in my heart.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" a soft voice said beside me.

I turned, startled, and found myself face-to-face with a woman with striking green eyes behind stylish glasses. Her auburn hair was perfectly styled, and she exuded an air of polished professionalism.

"Yeah, it is," I said, my voice catching slightly. "It's... speaking to me, I guess."

She nodded, a flicker of understanding crossing her face. "I'm Emma," she said, extending her hand.

"Daf," I replied, shaking it. The moment our hands touched, a jolt of electricity seemed to pass through me. Our eyes locked, and for a brief moment, the emptiness inside me receded.

“Do you come here often?” Emma asked, her gaze still fixed on mine.

I chuckled. “No, actually. I ... needed to get out of the house. You?”

“Same,” she said, a wry smile playing on her lips. “Sometimes you need to surround yourself with beauty, you know?”

As we stood there, discussing the artwork, I felt a connection forming—something genuine and unexpected. For the first time in ages, I felt seen, understood. And judging by the warmth in Emma’s eyes, she felt it too.

“Absolutely,” I said, nodding enthusiastically. “This piece really captures that feeling of... isolation, doesn’t it?”

Emma’s eyes lit up. “Yes! That’s exactly what I was thinking. The artist’s use of negative space is brilliant.”

I nodded again, though I had no idea what ‘negative space’ meant. “Totally. It’s... very negative. In a good way.”

We continued chatting, our conversation flowing effortlessly. Every opinion Emma offered, I found myself agreeing with wholeheartedly. It was like we were two peas in a pod, our thoughts perfectly aligned.

As the gallery began to close, we exchanged numbers, promising to keep in touch. I couldn’t wipe the grin off my face as I drove home.

Later that evening, I was sprawled on my couch, scrolling through my phone, when I stumbled upon an ad for an eBook. “The Secret to Genuine Connections,” it proclaimed. Without thinking, I hit ‘buy’.

Excitement bubbled up inside me. I had to share this with Emma. My fingers flew across the keypad as I dialed her number.

"Emma? It's Daf," I said when she answered. "You'll never guess what I found!"

"Daf! What a lovely surprise," Emma said, her voice warm. "What did you find?"

"I bought this incredible eBook," I gushed. "It's all about forming genuine connections. I thought maybe... well, it could be useful, you know?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Then Emma's laughter rang out, clear and bright. "Daf, you're not going to believe this, but I bought the exact same book!"

My heart leapt. "No way! That's... that's amazing!"

As we chatted excitedly about the book, I couldn't help but feel that maybe, maybe, this was the start of something special.

"The Secret to Genuine Connections" promised to be a game-changer. As I flipped through the digital pages, my eyes widened. The book was a treasure trove of insights, offering a roadmap to authentic relationships.

"It's like someone's handed us the Rosetta Stone of human interaction," I said to Emma during our next phone call.

Emma's enthusiasm matched mine. "I know! The chapter on vulnerability really struck a chord. I've always struggled with that."

I nodded, forgetting she couldn't see me. "Same here. And the exercises... they're challenging but intriguing."

"Daf," Emma said, her voice taking on a thoughtful tone, "what if we worked through this book together? As friends, of course. We could be each other's sounding board."

My heart raced at the suggestion. "That's brilliant! We could meet up weekly, discuss our progress..."

"Exactly!" Emma's excitement was palpable. "And maybe we could practice some of the techniques together. It'd be less daunting than trying them out in the real world straight away."

I chuckled. "Like training wheels for our emotional bicycles."

Emma laughed, the sound warming me from the inside out. "Precisely. So, what do you say? Partners in self-improvement?"

"Absolutely," I said, grinning from ear to ear. "Let's unravel these mysteries together."

As we hammered out the details, I couldn't help but feel a spark of hope. Maybe this book, and this unexpected friendship with Emma, was exactly what I needed to break free from my people-pleasing prison.

I took a deep breath, standing outside the quaint café where Emma and I had agreed to meet for our first "practice session". My hands were clammy, clutching my tablet like a lifeline. As I pushed open the door, the rich aroma of coffee enveloped me.

Emma waved from a corner table, her auburn hair catching the sunlight. "Daf! Over here," she said.

I plopped down across from her, forcing a smile. "G'day, Emma. Ready to revolutionise our lives?"

She laughed nervously. "As ready as I'll ever be. Shall we start with the first exercise?"

"Right," I said, opening up the eBook. "It says we should practice expressing a genuine opinion, even if it might contradict the other person."

Emma's green eyes widened behind her glasses. "Oh boy. That's... confronting."

I nodded, my stomach churning. "Tell me about it. But hey, no pain, no gain, right?"

We spent the next hour stumbling through awkward conversations, each of us hesitating and backtracking as we tried to voice our true thoughts. It felt like learning to walk all over again.

"This is harder than I expected," Emma said, running a hand through her hair. "I keep wanting to agree with everything you say."

I let out a heavy sigh. "Same here. It's like my default setting is 'yes-man'. Do you reckon we can actually change? I mean, these habits are pretty deeply ingrained."

Emma's brow furrowed. "I don't know, Daf. Part of me wonders if we're ... broken somehow. Maybe we're not cut out for genuine connections."

Her words echoed my own doubts. "Yeah, I've been thinking the same thing. What if we're wasting our time?"

We sat in silence for a moment, the weight of our self-doubt hanging heavy in the air. I couldn't help but wonder if we were in over our heads, trying to rewrite decades of learned behaviour.

. . .

as the silence threatened to swallow us whole, Emma's phone buzzed. She glanced at it, her eyes widening.

"It's Andrew," she said, her voice tight. "He wants to talk about... us."

My heart sank. "Oh. Are you going to—"

"I don't know," Emma interrupted, her fingers hovering over the screen. "I should probably agree to whatever he wants, right? Keep the peace?"

I bit my lip, remembering the book's advice. "Maybe... maybe this is a chance to practice what we've been learning?"

Emma's green eyes met mine, a mix of fear and determination swirling in their depths. "You're right. I should be honest about my feelings, even if it's uncomfortable."

She took a deep breath and answered the call. "Andrew, hi. Actually, I have some thoughts I'd like to share..."

I watched, heart racing, as Emma stepped into the next room. The muffled sound of her voice drifted back, occasionally rising with emotion.

What would happen now? Had our fledgling attempts at authenticity blown up Emma's marriage? And if so, where did that leave us and our journey?

As I sat there, caught between hope and dread, I realised we'd crossed a point of no return. Whatever came next, there was no going back to our old, people-pleasing selves.

The only question was: were we ready for the consequences?

CHAPTER TWO

I STARED at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, adjusting my tie for the thousandth time. “You’ve got this, Daf,” I muttered, but the words rang hollow. My stomach churned with a familiar cocktail of excitement and dread. Another first date. Another chance to impress. Another opportunity to disappoint myself.

As I walked into the bustling café, my eyes darted around, searching for Mel. There she was, stunning in a red dress, her blonde hair cascading over her shoulders. I took a deep breath, plastered on my best smile, and approached.

“Mel? Hi, I’m Daf,” I said, extending my hand. “It’s great to finally meet you in person.”

She smiled warmly. “Likewise! I love your tie.”

My chest swelled with pride. “Thanks! I spent ages choosing it,” I admitted, then immediately regretted my honesty. Too eager, mate. Play it cool.

As we settled into our seats, I focused on being the perfect gentleman. I pulled out her chair, laughed at her jokes (even

the ones that weren't funny), and nodded enthusiastically at everything she said.

"So, what do you do for work?" Mel asked, sipping her latte.

"Oh, I'm in marketing," I replied, downplaying my recent promotion. Don't want to seem boastful. "But enough about me. Tell me more about your job as a veterinarian. It must be so rewarding!"

As Mel launched into a story about a particularly mischievous golden retriever, my mind wandered. Why can't I just be myself? Why am I so afraid of showing my true colours? But the thought of rejection, of disappointment in her eyes, was too much to bear.

"That's fascinating," I said, leaning in with exaggerated interest. "I've always loved animals. In fact, I volunteer at the local shelter on weekends."

A little white lie won't hurt, right? Anything to keep her smiling, to keep this connection alive. But as the date wore on, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I was building a house of cards, destined to come crashing down.

The scene shifted to Emma's stylish living room, where she sat across from Andrew, her husband's scowl deepening the lines on his forehead.

"I was thinking," Emma said, her voice carefully modulated, "perhaps we could try that new Italian place for our anniversary next month?"

Andrew grunted, not looking up from his phone. "Why bother? We'll just end up disappointed like last time."

Emma's fingers twitched, itching to express her frustration, but she plastered on a smile instead. "You're right, love."

Maybe we could have a quiet night in? I could cook your favourite—”

“Whatever you want,” Andrew interrupted, his tone dismissive.

Emma swallowed hard, pushing down the lump in her throat. She longed to tell him how his indifference was slowly suffocating her, how she craved a genuine connection. But the words died on her lips, fear of conflict winning out once again.

“Right, then,” she said softly. “I’ll sort it out.”

As Andrew shuffled off to bed, Emma found herself alone with her thoughts. She stared at her reflection in the hallway mirror, barely recognising the woman looking back at her.

“Why do I keep doing this?” she whispered to herself. “Why can’t I just speak up?”

Across town, Daf paced his small flat, replaying the date in his mind. He cringed at each moment of insincerity, each careful lie designed to impress.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, running a hand through his hair. “I’m turning into a doormat, aren’t I?”

He flopped onto the couch, the weight of his people-pleasing tendencies crushing him. “There’s got to be more to life than this,” he said to the empty room. “But how do I break free?”

I sat on my bed, the self-help book “Authentic Connections: Breaking Free from People-Pleasing” propped open on my lap. My phone buzzed with a new message from Emma.

“Just finished Chapter 3. Mind-blowing stuff!” she said.

I grinned, feeling a spark of excitement. "Same here! These exercises are intense. You try the 'Mirror of Truth' yet?"

"Oh god, yes," Emma replied. "Staring at myself for five minutes straight was... confronting. But liberating?"

I chuckled, imagining Emma's perfectly styled hair and crisp suit as she engaged in this soul-searching exercise. "Tell me about it. I nearly chickened out halfway through."

"But you didn't, did you?" Emma asked.

"Nah, stuck it out. Realised I've been wearing a mask for so long, I'd forgotten what my real face looks like."

There was a pause before Emma's response came through. "That's deep, Daf. I feel the same way."

I flipped to the next chapter, titled 'Embracing Your Authentic Self'. The words seemed to leap off the page, challenging me.

"Emma," I typed, "I think I need to focus on this masculinity stuff. Been a bit of a wet blanket lately."

"Go for it!" she replied. "I'm working on boundaries myself. Scary stuff."

I took a deep breath, feeling a surge of determination. "Time to man up, I reckon. No more Mr. Nice Guy."

"Careful now," Emma said. "Don't swap one mask for another."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me. "Fair point. But I'm done being a doormat. Time to stand up for myself, yeah?"

"Yeah," Emma agreed. "We've got this, Daf."

I closed the book, my mind buzzing with possibilities. For the first time in ages, I felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe,

I could learn to be my authentic self and still find connection. It was time to embrace the real Daf, warts and all.

I heard Emma take a deep breath on the other end of the line. "Daf, I've decided. I'm going to set some boundaries with Andrew tonight."

"Good on ya," I said, feeling a mix of admiration and nervousness for her. "What's the plan?"

"I'm going to tell him how I really feel about his constant criticism," Emma replied, her voice wavering slightly. "No more brushing it off or pretending it doesn't bother me."

I could practically hear her squaring her shoulders through the phone. "You've got this, Emma. Remember what the book said about 'I' statements?"

"Right," she said. "I feel... when you... because... I need. Got it."

We chatted a bit longer, psyching each other up for our respective challenges. After we hung up, I stared at my reflection in the mirror, trying to channel my inner confident bloke.

"Right, mate," I muttered to myself. "Time to stop being a doormat and start being a legend."

I grabbed my keys and headed out to meet Mel for our date. No more Mr. Nice Guy, I told myself. Time to be real.

At the restaurant, I took a deep breath and decided to put the book's advice into practice. When Mel suggested a wine I didn't fancy, instead of agreeing like I usually would, I spoke up.

"Actually," I said, my heart racing, "I'd prefer the Shiraz if that's alright with you."

Mel looked surprised but nodded. "Sure, no worries."

I felt a small thrill of victory. Baby steps, but it was a start.

Meanwhile, across town, Emma was facing her own challenge. She sat across from Andrew at their dining table, her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"Andrew," she began, her voice shaky but determined, "I need to talk to you about something important."

Andrew grunted, barely looking up from his phone.

Emma took a deep breath. "I feel hurt when you criticise my choices because it makes me feel like you don't respect me. I need you to listen to me without judgement."

Andrew's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. "What's gotten into you?" he asked gruffly.

Emma felt her resolve wavering but pushed on. "I'm trying to express my feelings honestly. It's important to me."

The conversation that followed was tense and uncomfortable, but Emma held her ground. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start.

As we both discovered that night, change isn't easy. But it's necessary if we want to break free from our people-pleasing habits and find genuine connection. One small step at a time, we were on our way.

I sat at the local pub, nursing a pint and waiting for Helmut Schingle. My Swedish mate burst through the door, all smiles and swagger, but I could see the tension in his shoulders.

"Alright, mate?" Helmut said, clapping me on the back. "What's new in the world of Daf?"

I hesitated, then decided to be honest. "Actually, I've been working on some personal stuff. Trying to be more... authentic, I guess."

Helmut's eyebrows shot up. "Authentic? Sounds serious. What, you joining a hippie commune or something?"

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Nah, just... trying to be more honest about what I want. It's harder than I thought."

Helmut's smile faltered for a moment. "Yeah, well, who needs all that deep and meaningful rubbish? I reckon we're better off keeping things light and breezy."

I watched him carefully. "You really think so?"

Helmut shrugged, his eyes darting around the room. "Course. Look at me and Maria—we're happy as Larry, no drama."

But I could see the lie in his eyes. Helmut was struggling too, hiding behind his charm like I used to hide behind my nice guy act.

Meanwhile, across town, Emma was facing her own battle. She stood in the kitchen, chopping vegetables with more force than necessary.

"I was thinking," she said, trying to keep her voice steady, "maybe we could try that new couples' counselling program?"

Andrew snorted from his position on the couch. "Counselling? What for? We're fine."

Emma took a deep breath. "I don't think we are, Andrew. I'm trying to grow, to be more honest about my needs, and I feel like you're not supportive."

Andrew's face darkened. "Oh, here we go. What self-help book have you been reading now?"

"It's not about books," Emma said, her voice rising. "It's about us, our relationship."

"There's nothing wrong with our relationship," Andrew growled. "Stop trying to fix things that aren't broken."

Emma felt tears pricking her eyes but blinked them back. This was harder than she'd imagined, but she knew she couldn't give up now.

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, my hands gripping the edge of the sink. "Come on, Daf," I muttered. "You can do this. You're making progress."

But was I really? Every step forward felt like two steps back. I'd tried being more assertive on my last date, and she'd looked at me like I'd grown a second head. Maybe I was kidding myself. Maybe I was just meant to be the eternal nice guy, forever putting others first.

Across town, Emma sat at her desk, absently twirling a pen between her fingers. Her conversation with Andrew replayed in her mind, each dismissive word cutting deeper. She glanced at the self-help book on her desk, its cover promising authenticity and fulfillment. "Fat lot of good you've done," she said bitterly.

Emma's phone buzzed. A message from her boss, praising her latest project. She felt a familiar surge of validation, but it faded quickly. Why couldn't she feel that same sense of accomplishment in her personal life?

"Right," I said, straightening my shoulders. "Enough wallowing." I grabbed my phone and dialed Emma's number. She answered on the third ring.

"Daf? What's up?"

"Emma, we need to talk," I said. "I think we're both at rock bottom here."

Emma's laugh was hollow. "You can say that again. I'm starting to think this whole 'authentic self' thing is a load of rubbish."

"Maybe," I said. "But I'm not ready to give up yet. Are you?"

There was a long pause. Then Emma said, "No. No, I'm not."

"Good," I said, feeling a spark of determination. "Because I've got an idea. Meet me at the park in an hour. We're going to make a new plan."

"A new plan?" Emma asked, her voice a mix of curiosity and scepticism. "What did you have in mind?"

"You'll see," I said, trying to inject confidence into my voice. "Just be there."

An hour later, I paced nervously near the park's entrance, clutching a flyer in my sweaty palm. When Emma arrived, her auburn hair windswept and glasses slightly askew, I thrust the paper at her.

"What's this?" she asked, squinting at the colourful advertisement.

"Our ticket to change," I said. "A couples retreat run by Dr. Lee Hopkins and Myrna Collins. They're experts in authentic relationships and breaking free from people-pleasing patterns."

Emma's green eyes widened. "A couples retreat? But we're not..."

"I know, I know," I said, waving my hand. "But hear me out. It's a chance to work on ourselves, surrounded by people who get it. Plus, the techniques they teach could apply to any relationship, romantic or not."

Emma bit her lip, considering. "I don't know, Daf. It seems a bit...intense."

I took a deep breath, pushing down the familiar urge to back-track. "That's the point, Em. We've tried the easy way. Maybe it's time for something drastic."

She looked at me, then back at the flyer. "Dr. Lee Hopkins," she read aloud. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

"He wrote that book we've been reading," I said. "The one about authentic connections."

Emma's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Blimey, that's...interesting."

I watched her face, trying to gauge her reaction. "So, what do you think? Are you in?"

Emma hesitated, her fingers tracing the edges of the flyer. I could almost see the gears turning in her head, weighing the pros and cons. Finally, she looked up at me, a determined glint in her eye.

"You know what? Let's do it," she said. "What have we got to lose?"

I grinned, relief washing over me. "Brilliant! I'll sign us up right away."

As we walked back towards the car park, discussing logistics, I couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and trepidation. What would this retreat bring? Could it really help us break free from our people-pleasing habits?

Little did we know, our decision that day would set in motion a chain of events that would challenge everything we thought we knew about ourselves and our relationships.

CHAPTER THREE

TO BE CONTINUED...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in London, refined in Adelaide, Lee is a retired psychologist and counsellor, social media maven, business writer, amateur photographer and amateur composer of ambient music.

Living in Adelaide, Australia, he has a beloved 15-year-old Labrador, *Caz*, and counts among his closest friends a motley bunch of stragglers he's known since high school.

When he moved to England to pursue a music career he lucked into some wonderful people with whom he became life-long friends.

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