

HAVE A NICE LIFE
by Dave Biscella

Have a nice life.

Is there anything more final you can say to somebody?

This is all that Tom could think about after a random encounter with a stranger at the bus station earlier that day. He came across a man who seemed nice enough that asked if he could bum a cigarette. After letting him have one and exchanging pleasantries for a couple minutes as they smoked side by side, the man left to catch up to his family.

“Thanks,” the stranger said as he walked away before he headed off to board their bus for wherever they were headed. “Have a nice life!”

Something about this phrase sat oddly with Tom. Maybe because it instantly invokes disdain. ‘Have a nice life’ is something you say to somebody you don’t want in your life anymore. It’s often said out of anger, in a way of saying ‘I don’t want to see you ever again, but well wishes.’ Tom hadn’t heard it used with a sincere tone very often before, and that’s what the stranger’s intentions were. They were two random people meeting at a random moment in time. Once they exit this moment, the chances of them ever seeing each other again during their lifetimes is extremely slim. So, in this situation, isn’t ‘Have a nice life’ much more appreciative and thankful than ‘Thanks for the smoke’?

Obviously. But why did it feel so weird?

It took Tom back to the only other time he could remember it being said sincerely.

His mother worked in a small office while Tom was growing up, and he’d spend a lot of time there after school during the year. They all treated him as part of the family since they cared about and valued his mother so much. He enjoyed all the candy and the birthday cards

and the random gifts they would give him during his time spent in the office, but most of all, he enjoyed his conversations with Ty.

Ty was one of the younger people to work in the office. Not much younger than Tom's mother, but younger enough to feel like a completely different level of adult. Tom loved hanging out with Ty as he wrapped up his work day. They'd have awesome conversations about whatever. Tom really looked up to Ty. He didn't know why, he just did. He viewed him kind of like the cool uncle that he never had. His mom had brothers, but not like Ty.

Eventually, Ty got offered a better job in a bigger city. Tom couldn't remember exactly which city the job was in, but he knew Ty didn't have family around where they lived, so he really had no reason to stick around. And once he took the job and left for the bigger city, he'd really have no reason to ever come back to visit. Tom knew this, but it never really registered until Ty's last day. Generally, Ty's shift would end with Ty gathering up items around his desk, giving Tom a high five, putting his satchel over his shoulder and saying, 'I'll see you tomorrow, pal,' or 'Have a great weekend, see you Monday.' But not this time. Ty gathered up his surroundings, gave Tom a high five, and put his satchel over his shoulder.

"Have nice life, pal," Ty said as he exited the office and left on his way to begin his new life, wherever it was.

This was before the internet was really a thing. Before Facebook. Before email. When somebody left your life, they left it. There was no way to follow their new life on Instagram. Or to keep up with their daily musings on Twitter. It wasn't until that moment, the moment Ty said 'Have a nice life' that it really sunk in with Tom that he would never see Ty again. But it sure was nice of Ty to leave him with such well wishes.

When you think about it, why the negative connotation? Have a nice life. Shouldn't that be awesome. Think about it. How many times does somebody say 'Have a nice day' when they

could be saying 'Have a nice life'? That's a much more powerful sentiment. Every day we meet person after person that will never be part of our lives. We may share a smile, hold a door for them, leave them a nice tip, thank them for doing their job, whatever. But in that moment, that relationship ends and you'll not see them ever again. Have a nice day, but after that I could care less what happens to you? No. Have a nice life. This was a random encounter, and you made it pleasant. I wish you a wonderful life full of a lifetime of pleasant experiences.

Why do we even say 'Have a nice day'? Why is that phrase so embedded in our vocabulary? And why do our minds immediately think of 'Have a nice life' as a negative thing. In a way, isn't that filled with so much more love.

This is all Tom could think about as he sat on the bench in the large bus station waiting for his bus to begin seating as his cell phone rang over and over.

"Somebody really wants to talk to you," the older stranger sitting next to Tom said with a smile. Tom had his phone on vibrate as to not bother the people around him, and he was declining the call as soon as it came in, but it was still noticeable what was going on. He left his phone at home on purpose when he left the house yesterday and bought a disposable burner phone on his way out of town. It was a fool-proof plan, until guilt took over him and he called his mother to let her know he was OK. He knew Deborah would do anything she could to track down Tom, including calling his mother. His mother loved Deborah, of course she'd give her the phone number he called her from so she could try to talk to him.

"Yeah," Tom answered the stranger, trying his best to muster up an awkward smile. "I guess I'm just not much in the talking mood."

The stranger stood up as an announcement called for his bus to begin loading. "Well, that's me," he said as he gathered up his bags. "Look, son. This is none of my business, but

before you run away from something, you need to look deep down and make sure it's not something you should be running toward."

"Thanks," Tom said with a genuine smile as the man began to walk away. It felt good to feel genuinely cared about. "Have a nice life!" Tom said loudly enough for the man to hear as he walked away.

The stranger turned back and smiled, before heading off to board his bus for wherever he was going. It felt good to genuinely care about a stranger's well being. In that moment, Tom truly did hope that stranger would have a great life from this point on.

The phone kept ringing, and Tom kept declining the call. It was getting harder and harder with every ring, but Deborah kept calling. Deborah was stubborn, and Tom knew that she wouldn't give up until Tom answered that phone. Tom glanced at the trash can nearby, tempted to take the battery out of the phone and throw the whole thing away. That's what you do with burner phones when you no longer want them, right? But he couldn't do that. Throwing the phone away, in a way, would feel like throwing Deborah away.

Tom loved Deborah more than anything in this world. He loved Deborah with a love so deep that he didn't ever think possible. She gave him reason to breathe, reason to live. Every day waking up to her felt like the best day in the world. Tom met Deborah six years ago when he was in a very dark place. The dark times have still been constant over the past six years, but Deborah was always there for them, which made them more bearable than ever before. That made them liveable. Tom likely would have been dead years ago if it weren't for Deborah giving him a reason to wake up every day. Deborah was easily the best thing to ever happen in his life.

All of this made declining that call over and over again harder and harder. Tom finally gave in, answering the phone but not saying anything into it.

“Tom! Thank god you answered,” Deborah said on the other end, breathing a sigh of relief with a sense of desperation seething through her voice. “Tom, baby, please come home. Please come home to me, baby. We can get through this.”

Tears started to form in Tom’s eyes as he listened to Deborah plead for him to come home to her. She knew he didn’t want to talk, and she wasn’t forcing him to. Instead, she went on and on about the great life they had together, making her case for him to return home. She didn’t have to beg. Tom wanted nothing more than to return home to her. Tom wanted nothing more in this life than to grow old with Deborah. To start a family. To move out of their shitty apartment and buy their dream house. Tom wanted all of this. And he wanted it with Deborah. And she wanted it with him. More than anything in this world, they both wanted this.

“Baby, please come home,” her pleading continued.

Tom stayed silent. Every ounce of blood in his body wanted to force his mouth to say, ‘OK, baby, I’m on my way back.’ But he couldn’t. Tom had to run away, even though Deborah was everything you’d ever want to run towards. His heart broke over and over again as she continued to beg him to come home, crying hysterically. The desperation in her voice tearing Tom apart.

But Tom couldn’t go home. Tom couldn’t return to Deborah. Tom was an addict, and so was Deborah. Except Deborah has been clean for the last eight months, and in that time she’s found herself a good job and got herself back into school, putting herself back on track for the nursing career she’s always wanted. Tom was so proud of her. Just eight months ago he was dropping her off on the sidewalk in front of the Emergency Room after she OD’ed. He wanted so badly to stay with her, but he was too high and couldn’t risk it. He caught up to her when she came home after a few days, and she wasn’t mad. She completely understood and knew she would have done the same. But she knew they needed to change.

After that dance with death, Deborah dedicated herself to getting clean, and she begged Tom to do it with her. He wanted to so badly. They'd each tried to get sober many times over their time knowing each other, and often times together. But they'd always revert back. The need would always overcome them and they'd end up back at square one.

Neither of them had ever made it eight months before. Neither of them had ever been clean long enough to get a decent job or to do anything of substance like getting back to school. Until now. Deborah had done both, and Tom was more proud of her than he'd ever been of anything. But in those same eight months he'd relapsed five times. He kept trying to stay clean with her, but he couldn't.

He was able to change his habits a little bit. He wasn't doing it at home. He wasn't bringing it home. He was trying to make sure he did it as far away from Deborah as possible. He knew the struggle Deborah was facing, because he'd faced it so many times himself, just never as well as Deborah has been.

Addicts slip up, though. And Tom unintentionally left some in his pocket. In the pocket of his pants that were in the dirty clothes. The dirty clothes that Deborah regularly cleaned, each time double checking the pockets knowing that Tom would always forget to empty them out before putting them in the dirty clothes. Luckily, he's the one that found it in his pocket this time. But what if it wasn't? What if Deborah was doing laundry that day and came across it? It doesn't take much to relapse. As awesome as she'd been doing, and as strong as she'd been this entire fight, addiction can be stronger.

Tom would slip up again. He would mess up and put Deborah in a position that would make it far too easy to relapse. She would throw everything away to start getting high again, and it would all be Tom's fault. Tom couldn't live with that. Deborah was winning her fight, and

Tom knew he'd never win his. And as much as it hurt, he knew Deborah would never win her's completely as long as he was by her side.

He didn't know where he was going. He didn't have a plan. He just knew he needed to get away from Deborah before he brought everything crashing down. She pleaded and made it clear that she'd do anything she could to help him get on the same path that she is. She would help him fight and he would never be at it alone. He knew this, and he wanted so badly to fight alongside her. But he knew he couldn't win. And he couldn't take her with him.

Deborah was the best thing to ever happen to him and he faced losing her eight months ago. He couldn't risk doing that again. He just couldn't.

"Tom, baby, please," she continued, forming words through hysterical crying. "We can do this, baby. Just please come home to me.

"I can't, Deborah," Tom said, tears pouring down his face. Those were the hardest words he's ever said in his life. "Have a nice life," he said, hanging up the phone, throwing the phone in the trash and heading on his way to wherever he was going.