The End of the House of Cleaver or what happens when a nice guy finishes last

by Phillip W. Weiss

My name is Wally Cleaver. I lived in the town of Mayfield with my father, Ward, my mother, June and my younger brother, Theodore, whose nickname was The Beaver. Beaver was eleven years old; he was in the sixth grade at Mayfield Elementary School. I was sixteen years old and a junior in high school. My father had an office job with a big company that makes parts for airplanes while my mother stayed home and took care of the house. Everything was going swell at home. My father would go to work, my mother would clean the house and make dinner, and Beaver would, well, being the family dope, always get into trouble. Nobody knew why. He wasn't a bad kid; he was just a stupid kid and would keep doing stupid things that got him in hot water. Like the time, he locked himself in school after class was let out for the day, or the time he loaned his creepy friend Gilbert his entire month's allowance and then ran to my father for more money, or the time he fell into the lake while looking for frogs, or the time he got stuck in a tree because his friends dared him to climb it. Every time Beaver messed up, my father had to go and get him out of trouble and it sure bothered my father. After my father got Beaver out of a jam, he would get on Beaver's case, telling Beaver how he screwed up, that he needed to think before he acted, and to just be

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Note: The characters in this story are based on characters featured in the sitcom *Leave It to Beaver*.

more careful. Beaver would sit there and listen and then, when my father was finished with the lecture and was about to impose punishment, Beaver would run to my mother who would tell my father that he should not punish Beaver because Beaver was just a child who needs kindness and understanding. So, my farther would wind up forgiving Beaver just to stay in my mother's good side and never making good his threats to punish Beaver. I thought Beaver was getting away with murder and didn't like it. Whenever I messed up, my father laid into me like I had robbed a bank, and my mother would never say a word. But with Beaver, it was different. For some reason, she acted like she had to protect Beaver from my father. While it was okay for my father to punish me, like holding back my allowance or stopping me from watching television or having to spend the weekend cleaning up the yard, stuff that when I look back now weren't even real punishments, it wasn't okay for him to punish Beaver, no matter what Beaver may have done. For my mother, Beaver could do no wrong. He was her darling little man and she let my father know it. This undermining of my father's authority went on for a long time and of course Beaver's behavior got worse. He continued getting into trouble, and after each screw up my father would deliver the same lecture, threaten Beaver with punishment and then do nothing, knowing that my mother would disapprove. Well, one day, something happened that changed all of this forever and with it our lives. Here's what happened: Beaver came home from school. He was very excited. He showed my mother a notice that the school would be hosting a father-son kite contest. The father and son with the best and neatest kite would win first prize, which was a check for fifty dollars and a fancy

trophy that would be put on display at the school. Later my father came home from work, and Beaver showed him the notice and soon pestered my father about entering the contest. My father looked at the notice and with my mother looking on, said he would be glad to help Beaver win this contest. After dinner, my father and Beaver went to this store that sold sports equipment and brought back a box that contained parts for a kite. This box contained a lot of parts that needed to be put together, and I knew it would take a lot of work to put that kite together which meant nothing to Beaver since he wasn't the one who would be doing the work. At first my father didn't seem too happy about this. He was like someone who finds out too late that he has gotten into something that he would have rather avoided. But my father being a nice guy, he couldn't say no and so he went to work putting together that kite. Beaver said he would help, but to Beaver being helpful meant letting my father do all the work while Beaver watched. I saw this and could not believe that my father would put up with this garbage. For three straight nights my father worked putting together that kite. He never did anything like that for me but for a stupid ingrate like Beaver, he worked nonstop like it was the most important thing in the world. My mother would check in to see how my father was doing and would smile and nod her approval and occasionally would even bring my father a sandwich. Finally, the work was done. My father did a great job. The kite was a real beauty. It had four different sections each covered with canvas sails designed to catch the wind and lift the kite inti the air. It was his creation and he was proud of it. Even my mother was impressed as well as surprised, as we all were. Nobody thought my father could do this kind of work.

I always thought my father to be a klutz who worked in an office pushing papers, which to me wasn't real work, came home, ate dinner, went to sleep, and never did much of anything. He was just around. He'd yell at us, but we didn't care, and that went double for Beaver, because we knew it was all talk. Eddie Haskell once told me that we took my father for granted. That is, according to Eddie, we treated my father like a chump. I didn't know exactly what Eddie was driving at, but it didn't sound Ike a compliment and so I told Eddie to can that talk or else I'd clobber him. (Of course, taking after my father, that was all talk too.) Anyway, after my father finished building the kite, he told Beaver to leave the lite alone, not to touch it or do anything with the kite. My father explained that the kite was very fragile and would have to be flown very carefully. Beaver said he understood and promised not to touch the kite. Then all of us went our separate ways: my father to work, Beaver and me to school and my mother to the shopping mall. Later that afternoon, Beaver and I came home from school. We were hanging around the house when that horrible Gilbert Bates showed up. Gilbert was Beaver's best friend. Beaver showed Gilbert the kite. Of course, Beaver bragged how he helped my father build the kite. Gilbert asked if the kite could fly and told Beaver he should take the kite for a test run just to make sure the kite could fly. Beaver told Gilbert that he was told not to touch the kite. Gilbert assured Beaver that nothing would happen, he was just taking the kite into the backyard. What could happen? At that point, I could see that Beaver was already looking for trouble and so I spoke up. I reminded Beaver that he was told not to touch the kite. Gilbert told Beaver not to listen to me, that I couldn't tell Beaver what to do. I told Gilbert to

shut up but Gilbert told me that I wasn't his father and that I should scram. Right then and there I should have clobbered Gilbert but I didn't. I just stood there like a dummy. Beaver then told me that everything would be alright and that nothing would happen to the kite. I warned Beaver not to do it but didn't try to stop him. That was the worst mistake I ever made in my life. But I told myself there was nothing I could do and so watched Beaver and Gilbert carry the kite into the backyard. In the backyard, Beaver attached a string to the kite and launched it into the air. A strong breeze caught the kite and soon it was floating high in the sky. The kite looked great. We were all excited. Then the breeze stopped blowing and before we knew it, the kite came tumbling down. When it hit the ground, it smashed into dozens of pieces which were strewn over the back yard. Gilbert looked at Beaver and said he had to go home and left. I helped Beaver collect all the pieces of the smashed-up kite. We put the pieces into a box. I asked Beaver what he was going to tell dad when he got home form work. Beaver said he didn't know. In the meantime, he decided to hide the box in the bushes. Beaver said he would tell Dad that a crook broke into the house and stole the kite. I told Beaver that nobody would buy that story. By now I think Beaver knew he was in a lot of trouble, but he didn't know how much trouble. Then my mother came home. I told my mother what happened. She said this was something my father would have to deal with. Later, my mother wished she had never said those words. Anyway, my father came home from work and the first thing he did was go to the shed where he had stored the kite. Soon, my father called for me and Beaver to come to the shed. Beaver and I showed up. My father demanded to know what had happened

to the kite. Beaver acted surprised and said the kite was probably stolen. Then my father left the shed and walked around the backyard where he discovered the box containing the wrecked kite hidden in the bushes. He pulled the box from the bushes, opened it up and saw the wreckage of the kite. At that moment, my father's demeanor totally changed. His expression took on the appearance of man who was possessed by an evil spirit like you see in horror movies. My father closed the box, went back into the shed and asked us what happened. My father wasn't angry, he didn't lecture us, he simply asked for an explanation. At this point, Beaver told him what happened, the whole story, leaving out nothing. Beaver knew he was caught and so even a dodo like Beaver knew there was no point in lying. Plus, he knew he could always run to my mother. My father calmly reminded Beaver that he had been instructed not to touch the kite and had deliberately disobeyed that instruction and as a result all the work that went into making that kite was wasted. Then my father told me that he was disappointed in me for not stopping Beaver from destroying the kite. I thought laying that on me was unfair and started to complain, but my father stopped me with a waive of his hand. He wasn't interested in hearing any lame excuses. Then my father told Beaver that there was nothing more for them to discuss and then told Beaver to do whatever he wanted and left. I never heard my father talk to us or to anyone else that way before. He was like a zombie in some kind of trance. His face was totally expressionless. Of course, Beaver did what he always does when he was in trouble, which was to run to my mother. My mother told Beaver that she knows that he didn't mean to do anything wrong and would talk to my father. Upstairs in

our bedroom, I told Beaver that I thought this time he had gone too far. Being fundamentally stupid, Beaver had no idea what I was talking about. All he knew was that he was in trouble, but that mom would take care of everything. I told Beaver that it wouldn't be as simple as that. At dinner no one said a word. My father ate his meal, then got up, put on his jacket, and left the house. That was the first time my father ever left the house without telling anybody where he was going. I wasn't sure if he would be coming back. Later that evening, he came back. His breath smelled of liquor; he had been drinking. That was the first time I ever saw my father tipsy or drunk. It was kind of scary. I was seeing this man who I thought I knew transforming into somebody else, like in the movies when some guy turns into a monster. My father went into my parents' bedroom and shut the door. Soon I heard my father bawling out my mother. Beaver heard it too but didn't say anything. I couldn't make out what my father was saying but soon I heard my mother sobbing. To my relief, I didn't hear anything being smashed. Then my father left the bedroom and went to the guest room located downstairs next to the garage. From the bedroom I could still hear my mother crying. Nobody slept that night. From time to time I looked at Beaver. I felt like clobbering him, but I didn't. In that respect, I guess I wasn't the only chump in the house. In the morning, Beaver and I went to the kitchen for breakfast. For the first time in our lives, the table was bare. My mother looked like she had just been through the ringer. Her hair was a mess, her robe was hanging lose from her shoulders, and her eyes were red from crying all night. It was obvious that this morning she would not be serving us breakfast. (Of course, being rotten spoiled kids, all

Beaver and I thought about was ourselves. It never occurred to us to try to comfort our mother.) Then my father showed up. He wasn't wearing a suit. Instead, he was wearing slacks, a tee shirt and a spring jacket. He was carrying a valise. It looked like he was planning to skip work today. He said good morning to Beaver and me and glared at my mother who seemed to cringe and said nothing. That was the first time in my life that I ever saw anyone cringing in fear. It wasn't a pretty sight and I knew I'd never forget it. Then my father said he had something to say, and this is what he said: "Boys, I'm leaving this family. Your mother and I are getting a divorce. I am tired being taken for granted and being treated like a doormat. I am not a doormat. Now for me to be an effective father I need your respect, but since I do not have your respect, I cannot be an effective father and if I cannot be an effective father there is no point for me to continue being part of this family, so I am leaving. From here on, your mother will be in charge of the two of you. I will of course continue to provide financial support but starting now I absolve myself of all responsibility for your upbringing. As far as I am concerned you can do whatever you want. I no longer care. Your mother will deal with the consequences." I was shocked. I knew that my father was steamed over the kite but not to the point that he would walk out. That never occurred to me. I began to speak but my father said that the time for talking was over, that the decision was made and it was final. Then he turned around, grabbed his valise and left. My mother looked at me and then at Beaver. Beaver said it was only a kite. I told Beaver that this was not just about the kite. It was about the way we treated dad like a jerk. My mother said that my father wasn't a jerk. "Then why did

you treat him like a jerk," I asked, and then demanded to know why she let Beaver get away with everything. Then Beaver told me to shut up, jumped up from his chair and ran out of the house. This was the start of the first day of my life without my father and it only got worse. My parents soon got divorced. It was a quick divorce; my father gave my mother everything, the house, the car, the furniture, you name it. In return, my mother waived alimony and child support. She was too devastated to haggle over money. None of it mattered. Beaver started acting out in school, getting into fights and bad mouthing his teachers; I dropped out of high school and joined the Navy (where I later earned a GED and was discharged as a petty officer first class) and my mother got a job as a waitress in a diner where she met a retired divorced cop named Ernie, who had four kids of his own, and who my mother married. Then my mother sold the house. Unlike my father, Ernie refused to put up with Beaver's antics and with my mother's approval, shipped Beaver to Ernie's sister Millie who owned a dairy farm outside of Fairbanks, Alaska. Up there, even a screw up like Beaver would find it hard to get into trouble. With my mother remarried, Beaver in Alaska, me in the Navy and my father gone, the House of Cleaver ceased to exist. (I later learned that after my mother sold the house, the house was demolished.) As for me and my father, we stayed in touch. As an old Navy man himself, my father was pleased that I chose to join the Navy and not the army. In the past, my father would have regaled me with stories about his naval service, but now none of that seemed to matter to him anymore. He had no intention of ever resuming his role as father. Dealing with the likes of me and Beaver was enough. He quit his job, traveled the

world, made friends with prostitutes, poets and drunks, stopped moralizing, never asked about Beaver, who my father tried to disown but was told by a court that he couldn't, and never built another kite, which is too bad, because he could have been a heck of kite maker. But the weirdest thing was my father becoming friends with Eddie Haskell who my father had detested. My father told me that he had misjudged Eddie and wished that he had been more like Eddie, a wise guy who understood what people were about, because it didn't pay being a nice guy in a world full of Beaver and Wally Cleavers who think only of themselves and couldn't care about anyone else, even their own parents who wind up paying the price for their children's' thoughtlessness. It was this lack of gratitude from his own family, the people who my father thought cared most about him, that drove my father to give it all up and become a bum living in drop in shelters and often in the street. The way my father figured it, it was better to live in the street than go through life being treated like a fool which is a million times worse than being a bum who has nothing that anyone wants and who simply wants to be left alone.

PWW 10/24/2026