

*Ken Spillman*



The Most  
**Natural**  
Thing

**The Most Natural Thing**

**By Ken Spillman**

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# 1.

Nicholas pushed the aluminium pole into the white glare of the Millsons' pool and netted another leaf. Dazzling ripples nudged the perimeter of lightly stained tiles, riding up and then washing back, defeated. He considered jumping the fence to get his sunglasses from home, but decided he couldn't be bothered. His mother would make some comment, for sure, before he had a chance to explain.

'Back already?' she would say. 'Think we've done enough for one day, do we?'

Nicholas felt his shoulders tighten. It was the way Mum said things. The way she assumed that he was lazy and selfish, that he only responded to threats, that he always needed watching. She could have just asked him to help Mrs Millson, reminded him that things were difficult next door, with Gary up north at the mines, but she hadn't. Instead, she made it sound as if he should really have thought of it himself. If he was a half-decent human being, he'd have just woken up, realised it was Saturday and decided: I'll go next door and do a few jobs for Mrs Millson.

'The poor girl is at her wit's end with that baby,' Mum had ranted. 'And I'm not too old to remember what *that's* like, either.' She watched disgustedly as Nicholas poured another bowl of Nutri-Grain.

'It isn't my fault.'

'You kids don't even know you're alive. If you're expecting me to let you go with Quentin to that party, you'd better get all your homework finished because I'll be blown if I'll have a repeat of what happened in Year 8. And you'd better make time to help out in Mrs Millson's yard.'

Nicholas munched his breakfast and watched the tail of their red setter, Fiery, bob past the dining room window while his mother proceeded to list all the things people did for him, starting with herself and Dad. Whenever he tried to reason with her, she said he was back chatting. When he went quiet, she accused him of being sullen.

'Don't you dare get into one of your moods,' she warned. 'Anyone would think you had the weight of the world on your shoulders! Today is going to be way too hot to have to put up with a sulky teenager.'

As far as Nicholas was concerned, helping Mrs Millson was okay. Already the back of his Nirvana T-shirt was soaked with sweat, so he dipped one bare foot into the water and felt the cool zap his leg. With his mother on the warpath at home, the longer he stayed, the happier he'd be.

Through the patio flyscreens Nicholas heard the murmur of Mrs Millson's voice on the phone, and it suddenly occurred to him that she might be talking to her breastfeeding counsellor about the baby, Anna. According to an account given to another neighbour by his mother, Mrs Millson had once spent five hours on the phone while two different counsellors told her two different things about nipple shields. Nicholas had wondered what nipple shields were, visualising defiant little thimbles which worked like bottle tops, keeping bacteria from the milk.

Standing on the pool steps in the February sun, he strained to catch words like 'bra', 'breast', 'sucking' or the one that was definitely his favourite, 'nipple'. But the only words which carried were those projected away from the phone to Mrs Millson's older child:

'Toby! Don't touch! Stop that!'

During the school holidays Nicholas had watched from his upstairs bedroom as Mrs Millson took Toby through the squeaky gate into the pool area, sunscreen glistening on her plump arms, the swell of her breasts in saggy orange Speedos. As she moved carefully about in the shallow end with her delighted child, Mrs Millson's voice carried over the fence, throaty cooing and animated baby-talk. Each time Nicholas saw her, he thought of Anna, sleeping inside the house, knowing she would wake and cry and receive those breasts. He liked to remember the summer the Millsons moved in, Christmas before last, when Toby was only tiny and Mrs Millson brought him over to talk to his mother about her problems. She had sipped her tea shyly and called his mother 'Mrs Steyn', like a kid talking to a teacher, and over and over she was told: 'Breastfeeding Association, you must join the Breastfeeding Association, it'll be an absolute lifesaver. I was in it, years ago, and I'm telling you, if I hadn't joined, I wouldn't be here to tell the tale.'

Then, with Nicholas sitting right opposite on a kitchen stool, Mrs Millson had opened her shirt and dropped one side of her bra, lifting the breast toward Mrs Steyn to display her wide brown areola and stubby, cracked nipple.

'For goodness sake, Nicholas,' his mother scolded. She waved her hand like a wand commanding him to disappear and said to Mrs Millson: 'Look at the colour of him! As if it isn't the most natural thing in the world!'

But Nicholas remembered the unnatural way his breath stuck in his chest, the warmth in his groin and the mouthful of saliva he dared not swallow.

That was his last summer before high school, when Quent McKay found a stash of *Playboy* magazines belonging to one of the older McKay boys, and the two of them spent a whole afternoon poring over the pictures with loud interest. Nicholas read out letters by anonymous men who had seized the breasts of young women like Mrs Millson, or licked and teased nipples till they were hard and the women became helpless with desire. He and Quent screwed up their faces, appalled by their mischief, compelled by the filth of this unseen world. At night, Nicholas thought of the women spread across those glossy pages, and he thought of Mrs Millson and that one raw breast which had been exposed to him, and he wanted to hold it, to know the feeling of the most natural thing in the world.

Nicholas heard a screen door slide open and watched Toby, naked from the waist down, flounce across the patio and lawn. Nicholas hunched his back and distorted his mouth into a comical growl. He advanced with lumbering strides toward the vertical bars of the gate, and the little boy hesitated, thrusting a fist into his dribbling mouth.

'To-by! You little waas-cal! I'm a bi-ig tiger in a cage. Rah!'

Toby's face relaxed and he giggled. He pointed to the pool and labelled it, showing off his vocabulary. 'Pull,' he indicated grandly. 'Me fwim pull!'

Nicholas rattled the gate to show Toby that it was staying closed.

‘Look, Toby, locked! All locked. You swim with your Mum. I’m allowed in here because I’m a big boy. A big tigerrr!’

‘Ti-guh. Pull, me fwim pull!’

‘Not pool,’ Nicholas shook his head. ‘Tiger’s cage.’ Then he remembered his mother’s horror when the Millsons were having the enormous, sky-blue basin lowered by crane over their house, and he echoed her words for Toby. ‘Death trap,’ he pronounced, gesturing around at the water.

‘Defdap, defdap!’ the child imitated gleefully.

Mrs Millson had walked out through the open door, unnoticed. Dressed in long shorts and an oversized shirt, she folded her arms and eyed him with mock suspicion.

‘Now, what are you teaching my son?’

Nicholas felt himself blush, as he always did when she spoke to him, and frantically tried to think of something to say.

‘I was telling Toby he couldn’t come in here, not unless you were with him.’

Nicholas looked at the small boy’s hands gripping the pool fencing and tried to deflect the mother’s attention. ‘I said it was dangerous, didn’t I, Toby-Toby?’

A sputtering cry carried from inside the house.

‘Anna,’ Mrs Millson stated with resignation. Looking past Nicholas at the sparkling pool and exhaling so that her voice was almost a sigh, she added: ‘You’re a real angel for doing this. And I know your Mum dobbed you in for the front lawn, but our mower’s a cranky bloody thing, so please don’t feel you have to.’

She leaned forward to pick up Toby, who stubbornly hung on. Nicholas tilted his head and looked into the shadows of Mrs Millson’s ballooning shirt, marvelling as much at this unexpected reward as at the sight her voluminous white bra cups.

‘No-o-o!’ Toby protested, his hands prised open.

‘It’s no hassle, I’ll get Dad’s mower over for the lawn,’ Nicholas said, while Anna screamed.

Like Anna, the mower woke with a grudge and worked itself up to an insistent wail. Nicholas strode back and forth in the shimmering heat, watchful for pop-up sprinklers. He pictured the baby somewhere inside, positioned across Mrs Millson’s chest with a mouthful of the cherished, goosebumpy flesh.

The most natural thing.

Momentarily, the engine’s noise warded off inhibitions, and Nicholas entertained the thought of telling Mrs Millson how lovely she was, politely asking whether he could touch her, just once, naturally like the baby. He could explain to her about the terrible weight of being a boy, Year 9 and still not knowing, and it seemed vaguely possible that she would understand.

Fiery greeted Nicholas with a lightning tongue to the elbow. Mrs Steyn heard the wheels of the lawnmower rumbling home and slid open her bedroom window.

‘Nicholas! You may as well do our lawns too, now you’ve got that mower out!’

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