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Midnight in a Perfect Life

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Midnight in a Perfect Life

MICHAEL COLLINS



PHOENIX

One

This all began at the precipice of forty, in a childless marriage, when I was left confronting the statistical fact that I had fewer years ahead of me than behind me. My wife, Lori, was facing the same dilemma – impending mortality – though, three years older than I, at the stark age of forty-three, her crisis was more ominous. With her biological clock running down, and having been unable to get pregnant the old-fashioned way, she felt compelled to commend our bodies and souls to science, to have us sit in open-backed gowns, submitting to an inquisition of being probed and prodded in an attempt to spawn life.

Needless to say, it was the most vulnerable year of our marriage. In all likelihood conception would take place, not in the warmth of an embrace, but in a petri dish, sperm gingerly pushed through the outer membrane of an egg like some awkward adolescent tentatively entering a high school dance.

I was against the whole notion from the start.

I still remember the Sunday morning in fall when we tackled the clinic's screening paperwork. I implicitly understood what was at stake – *freedom*, not in a wholly selfish sense, yet I was conscious that on any other Sunday we would have stayed in bed, languidly undecided, responsible to and for no one, opting for a late breakfast or buffet-style brunch, perusing, in an offhand way, the impossible thickness of the weekend edition of *The New York Times*.

Already, in scanning the paperwork, aside from the volume of medical and financial worksheets, I had come across discount coupons for *Elmo* and *Barney* bedding at $199 plus shipping and handling, along with a red wax sealed envelope, more given to a royal proclamation of yore. It contained an application for tickets to a taping of *Bozo the Clown* – estimated waitlist for ticket availability, circa five years. The entire process underscored the inanity of a journey into the gilded world of childhood want.

So, too, the moment of decision was temporarily halted as Lori, in opening a pre-qualifying form asking her to document her sexual history, went into meltdown, confronting an abortion from her high school days when she had seemingly been able to get pregnant at the drop of a hat. Apparently, she had been carrying that guilt inside her head all her adult life, irrationally attributing her current inability to get pregnant as a punishment from God.

In my mind the abortion held no real significance within our relationship. It was ancient history, something I had heard of in passing early on in our relationship, and yet the abortion melancholy got us talking about God, or, more exactly, it got Lori talking about penance, while I argued, if God could really see all, would he really *want to anyway*? I mentioned the Holocaust and starvation in Africa. I said, 'Do you really think God *cares* about premarital sex?'

We ended up getting into a minor fight.

Like I said, the abortion story wasn't new to me. A kid named Donny something-*kowski* had gotten Lori pregnant. I had heard about the abortion for the first time about a year after we got together, while we were driving through a no-man's landscape between Milwaukee and Chicago after visiting her parents. All evening Lori's mother had been eulogizing Lori's former steady, The Ukrainian Prince, who had

been a member of the state championship curling team the year a famed winter storm hit Eau Claire. Lori had 'carried a torch for him' through high school, that was how her mother put it, speaking with the unsettling pull of old world nostalgia, and she hinted that, but for unforeseen events, he would still have been part of their lives. Instead the Prince died less than a year later in the waning days of the Vietnam conflict in '71. Such was the short and bittersweet life of The Ukrainian Prince as far as the story went, except for the fact it had been the Prince who got Lori pregnant before pulling out for Vietnam.

But the real question facing us, beyond the philosophical and the spiritual, was, should Lori admit on the pre-qualifying form to the abortion? Did it have any bearing on how the clinic would proceed? The fine print talked about full medical disclosure.

Lori looked at me. 'Does admitting to an abortion when it was illegal mean I could still be charged?'

I said, 'Admit to nothing. Lie!'

She quieted. 'Sometimes I think it was maybe just a dream.'

I said, 'Maybe.'

I left Lori alone with the forms and used the phone in the master bedroom to put in my usual Sunday morning call to my mother at Potawatomi Assisted Living Suites (PALS).

The facility's claim to fame was its location, less than a mile from where Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper died in a plane crash in 1959, on what Don McLean described in American Pie as 'the day the music died.'

Whatever about the music, this was where my mother was supposed to die, though, in the string of broken promises that has defined my life, I was now confronting the prospect of defaulting on payment and unshackling myself of filial

responsibility, leaving her to the dogs of welfare.

I think my advancing age, and general sense of indeterminacy as a struggling novelist, exacerbated the callousness of the decision, though I allowed myself a complicated process of rationalization that the relationship between a parent and child was the only type of love that naturally grew toward separation. Still, I was aware of what I was doing – forsaking the living for the unborn. I had seen enough so-called darling offspring, so many alleged little geniuses, to understand I was simply abandoning my mother for the medically-assisted prospect of furthering the species, producing assholes who would most probably, likewise, forsake me in the future.

It wasn't the most fatherly of sentiments. I felt about as suitable for fatherhood as King Herod.

Of course, I might have begged Lori's understanding of my mother's circumstances, or been more forthright all along about my professional crisis, but I saw no measure of dignity or hope in such an appeal. Early on in our relationship, I had overcompensated in a way that worked against any measure of honesty with her, cavalierly spawning a series of lies concerning my financial success as a novelist and Hollywood script doctor.

The reality was otherwise.

Despite having had two books published, and a New York Times Notable Book of the Year to my credit, I was making less money than the secretaries at the colleges where I adjunct taught on occasion. Though, what was more troublesome and ominous, was that by the time I met Lori, my third novel, a work I'd slaved on for four years, had been summarily rejected by every publishing house in New York.

Of course, as our relationship developed, I eventually had to backtrack on my alleged access to vast wads of cash, entering

into a protracted double-talk about art with a capital A, about not selling out, and pushing a resurrected version of my failed novel that I'd simply begun to call The Opus.

If I can find Lori guilty of anything early on, it was her gullibility, or maybe her wanton decision not to want to see through me that hurt the most. She never challenged me directly. Maybe I lied too well. It is hard reassembling the past.

I can still remember one of our first official dates, watching her scan a book shelf in my apartment that held the numerous translations of my two novels. She had been genuinely awed at the prospect of what she described as 'being in the presence of a living writer.' I distinctly remember a feeling of pride, at being thought of in those terms given the reality of where my life was. She set my career in contradistinction to what she described as 'the peanut butter and jelly reality of ordinary existence.' At one time, she did see something in me that I hadn't seen in myself.

In fact, she was the one who pursued me. We had met, not once, but twice, before I got to know her. The first encounter I hadn't remembered specifically, until she relayed the circumstance. I had been on assignment for a men's magazine, profiling an Adopt-a-Dog-for-a-Day Program run by the Humane Society, an alleged way of picking up guarded, professional women at dog parks, when Lori's Doberman, Brutus, on furlough from Hell, looked up from lasciviously licking his man-sized balls and had a go at the mutt wire terrier I had adopted for the day.

All I could remember was the dog's balls.

The second occasion was at a Cancer Survivor Benefit. One of the survivors, Denise Klein, had taken a memoir night class I'd taught. Denise had been a personal friend of Lori. On seeing me again, Lori bid an exorbitant $950 to assure a place

in a six week writing course I had donated to the benefit's silent auction.

We were into the third week of the course before I really took any notice of her. In the interval between our weekly meetings she had cropped her hair short in a style made famous by Mia Farrow in *Rosemary's Baby*. A week later, after I had effusively over-praised the emotional depth of her work – a clichéd ode to a childhood cat named *Toby* – in a post-coital embrace at my apartment, she owned up to the self-deprecating details of our first meeting at the dog park.

In retrospect, I understand it was her attraction to me that attracted me to her. She validated me in that sad and pathetic way all artists eventually come to define themselves – audience reaction.

It was after one of our first amorous encounters at my apartment, while spooning against me, she revealed her age and essential vulnerability. At thirty-seven, she openly admitted to feeling a sense of personal and spiritual confusion, of being emotionally lost, intimating, too, some less than spectacular relationships and confessing to a selfishness that had seen her focus too intently on her career. She described herself as 'Damaged Goods.'

In many ways, I was looking for something just short of perfect.

Through these early encounters, in the quiet space two adults can create for themselves in which Truth should surely live, I got the sense of her wariness of men in general, wrought specifically because of what happened to 'a friend of a friend' of hers, a divorcee who'd been tied to her bedpost by a one-night stand who'd sodomized her before leaving her bound to the bed. The woman's kid found her the next morning.

Against that apparent darkness within the male psyche, with that understanding of what human beings can do to

one another, she had more or less withdrawn from dating. As she admitted, the good prospects had paired off one by one, or, as she wryly put it after we had come to know one another, all that was left were 'fags, and now, seemingly, writers.'

On the strength of those cocooned moments of intimacy, after dating for just three months, and with an understanding that one cannot live in a state of emotional isolation, I, at thirty-five, and Lori, at thirty-eight, committed our lives for better or worse in a quiet weekend elopement that saw us stand before a justice of the peace at the famed locks in Sault Ste. Marie.

Lori took just the Monday off work. There was no honeymoon.

I thought what developed over the following years was self-sustaining; we lived as adults, our wants minimal, immune to the dictates of fashion and impulse buying.

There was a hiccup in Lori's work, a brief period of unemployment due to a hostile take-over at her company that led me to forge her name and take out a line of equity against her condo to cover ourselves and my mother's care, though, in the end, Lori was rehired and promoted within the new structure.

Meanwhile, in the intervening years, I was left alone to write, unmoored from so-called real life on the back of Lori's resources, venturing further into the morass of The Opus, edging inexorably toward a quiet professional failure Lori graciously did not talk about, or did not fully understand.

However, providence did intervene early in the second year of our marriage, when my agent, based on material I'd sent him years before, secured a job for me as a ghost writer for the venerable crime writer Perry Fennimore. It was a position that

potentially breathed new life into my career, and my bank account.

I think our lives could have remained even-keeled, seeing us through to retirement, but then our mutual friend, Denise Klein – the cancer survivor – had a relapse. After being denied an experimental bone marrow treatment by her insurance, she embarked on a quest to have another child, an elusive son, via a surrogate. She already had three teenage daughters.

It was a plaintive story she chronicled in a moving daily journal for *The Chicago Tribune* on love and the meaning of life, a memoir that was eerily poignant, including letters to her unborn child. She invoked God and Family as the great eternal, her teen daughters equal in their faith. They were the kind of family that would have cheerfully swapped out organs with one another, such was their love.

In the end, of course, Denise could not forestall the inevitable. In October of 1996, she became a footnote in the annals of medical journals, as having been the first woman to have her own fertilized egg implanted into a surrogate after her death.

On the way back from the funeral, I quipped about having half-expected one of the daughters to have been the surrogate. It proved a tipping point. Lori put her hands to her face and began to cry in inconsolable sobs. At the time, I'd not known the extent of her desire to have a child.

There had been talk of getting a cat, but never any mention of children. I thought as rational, modern adults, we had come to some unspoken agreement we were never going to have children, especially given our advancing ages. Philosophically I'd also connected our decision to a larger socio-historical view of pregnancy as nothing short of biology's way of controlling women as well as men. Hadn't we conquered pregnancy?

Trying to get pregnant seemed to me about as absurd as trying to get Polio.

In short, I'd assumed Lori was on the pill. After all, I knew about the abortion saga, but over the next year, the talk of downsizing started, of abandoning the condo for the experience of stay-at-home parenting, the desire to push a stroller through suburban parks at noon, to host play dates, to slave away on home-cooked meals, until one day Lori put it bluntly, with a slight tinge of hysteria: 'If The Opus is your intellectual destiny, the thing that will outlive you, then children are my biological destiny.'

She had equity in her condo. That was her mantra – the ace up her sleeve. The eventual disclosure regarding my having forged her name on the line of equity nearly destroyed our marriage. I had '*deceived* her, *lied* to her', her words delivered in an emotional torrent of pain, hurt, and indecision.

It took all my efforts to atone, and it was my job with the crime novelist, Perry Fennimore, that saved me. Improbably, after his own waning success, the novel I'd helped ghost write a year earlier had shot him to the top of the bestseller list, due in no small part to my work on his book, or so I'd been contending. I'd fortuitously lodged a cheque just a week prior to Lori discovering the irregularity with the line of equity, and I had begun, prematurely, to talk up a foreseeable big payday.

Still, what the entire episode did was subtly tip the balance of power in her favor, making me vulnerable and provisionally willing to ejaculate into a Dixie cup at some outpatient clinic.

Such was the complicated history of my relationship with Lori that colored my conversation with my mother, though I use the word 'conversation' loosely.

The call lasted five minutes and twenty seconds: two of those minutes spent as my mother was wheeled to the phone,

another minute with her asking who I was, and another minute as I waited, listening to a nurse showing my mother a photograph of me.

I took a solace in her dementia. She would never really understand my betrayal. It was an uneventful call. At the end I said simply, 'I love you, Mom,' and hung up.

When I came back, Lori was waiting. She said, 'You look upset.' She wanted to know if everything was OK.

I said it was.

Lori went back to looking out the window.

I could see she had completed the form. She was waiting for a real estate agent to arrive and appraise the condo. According to the pre-qualifying paperwork, a provisional cost breakdown seemed to suggest services rendered could top $70,000.

She turned and looked at me again. 'You've not gotten any work done in days. I'm sorry.'

I knew a question was being asked of me. 'It's the peril of being a writer, living where you work.'

Lori hesitated. 'When you were on your trip to New York, did that publisher say anything about money?'

She was referring to the book deal I had told her was supposedly under consideration, given my work for Fennimore. Lori had been counting on the alleged deal money as we moved toward the prospect of having a child. It became part of the economics of our new life, and yet, the more she talked the harder it was to tell her the truth.

I said cautiously, 'A writer never talks money with an editor. It's a major faux pas within the industry. It betrays desperation.'

I could see her tensing up.

'Look, it's under review. These things take time. It's a cat and mouse game, figuring the relative worth of an intangible, working out what may potentially succeed or fail.'

Lori mouthed the word, 'OK.'

But it wasn't OK at all. There was no deal. In a meeting I had fucked up royally, and against the advice of my agent, Sheldon Pinkerton, I'd ended up having lunch with Fennimore's editor, armed with an *L.A. Times* review mentioning the renewed vigor in Fennimore's work. The reviewer had cited a passage, describing it as 'exemplary of an inveterate craftsmanship hewn of years of life lived . . . a writer who has rendered the starkness of his characters with a precision devoid of judgment, capturing the essential coldness that may describe the human condition in the late twentieth century.'

The passage the reviewer quoted was something I had taken verbatim from my Opus. These were *my* words. I had underlined the passage in the unpublished Opus, pointing to it with a sense of vindication as the editor leaned forward over a $150 bottle of Bordeaux.

I wanted to stick my genius to him.

The next day I got a letter from the publishing house's lawyer accusing me of plagiarism, of grossly exaggerating my assistance to the writer, the letter outlining in legalese that all work produced or written for the writer was the copyright of Fennimore.

There was serious doubt I would ever write for the guy again. My agent wasn't returning any of my phone calls.

I heard Lori say something in the background, and looking up met her gaze with a coldness that underscored my growing depression, lost in a deeper and darker lie that I could not bring myself to admit to her.

There would be no deal.

Lori said quietly, 'Maybe you should call them tomorrow, just to see?' then bit into the softness of her lower lip, an anxious trait that still, despite everything, endeared her to me.

I gently stroked the side of her face and whispered, 'OK . . .'

Sometimes our escape is not away, but further into something.

I could see Lori was trying hard. She raised her voice slightly, her brow furrowing with a determined expression. 'You're going to make it. I can feel it!' She put the flat of her hand over her stomach as if she were touching something sacred.

I staved off saying anything, and taking a step toward her embraced her in the jaded way a boxer might in the latter rounds of a fight, for, if things had been different, if I'd had a greater sense of life-long security, maybe I could have been the husband she seemed to think I could be. Love wasn't something I categorically rejected, but rather something I thought should be earned and not simply bestowed. Her enduring faith in *me*, or *us*, cut two ways. At times it felt like love, at other times, entrapment.

I had a sense of being disembodied, within and outside everything, as Lori turned us both toward the lake, our attention drawn to a solitary runner. She put her face to the cold window, her breath fogging the pane as she whispered, 'This is the second biggest city in America, and I can't hear a sound. This isn't living, up here in the sky. This is a glass cage.'

Further out beyond the runner, I saw the waves break against the shoreline, and in that moment, understood this was more than just a yearning in her, it was something deeply biological, something hardwired millennia ago. It was the kind of yearning that drove migration, that sent salmon swimming against currents, the kind of bewildering mating spectacle you saw on cable TV, the ardor of a black widow drawing her mate to union then killing him post coitus.

I might as well have interviewed a wildebeest on its existential sense of why it procreated, why it did not spare its offspring the terror of the hunting prides on the savanna. Of

course the answer lay in that nihilism is a male disease of the soul, because we are not the bearers of life. Men do not carry hope the way women do.

In retrospect, this level of introspection constituted a mental breakdown, a foreshadowing of things to come, for one cannot dive so deep for so long and remain sane, or connected to so-called normal life. I know that now. We all have a breaking point.