

The Loving Punch

The day my girlfriend punched me in the face was the day I decided that we should be married.

I didn't ask her straight away. I was going to wait until we got back from the hospital, where the efficient care staff had packed my broken nose with gauze and told me not to sneeze or fart, but then there was the emergency dental appointment to repair the broken tooth. So, even though I was pretty much in the mood to ask for a lifetime commitment, between the stuffed nasal passages and the drool-inducing numbness of the novocaine, I could barely mumble the words "I do."

Amid the pain, the buzzing in my right ear and the occasional blackouts, I was just happy Mae agreed to drive me to the appointments, though she did complain about the blood I dripped on the upholstery of her ten year old P T Cruiser that she had inherited from her grandmother

because the Salvation Army refused to take the vehicle in exchange for a tax deduction. Yes, it's a charity, and beggars can't be choosy, but even the Army of Salvation didn't want to be saddled with such a liability.

Still, I knew in my heart, that once the numbing went away and I was able to get down on my knee with the assurance I would be able to get up again, I was going to ask Mae to share the rest of her life with me.

There was never a question of her saying yes. She wouldn't have hit me so hard if she hadn't loved me.

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When your father is the manager of a traveling amusement ride company with a dubious safety record, and your mother throws over Scientology to become a Jehovah's Witness, you get to see a bit of the world, or at least the parts that a mobile second-rate deathtrap attraction could take you: towns forgotten, overlooked and completely forgettable. My brother Pickles (not the God-given name you would find on his birth certificate, of course) and I spent our fair share of summers in the back of the roaring Lincoln Continental with its sweat-inducing leather seats that drove like a Panzer tank, playing "I spy" as we bucked down the long boring highways of the American Midwest, asking "are we there yet?" though where we eventually arrived was pretty much the same as where we had been.

Dad was in charge of getting the contracts signed, picking up the permits at the local town halls we limped up to like a wounded dinosaur, and making sure no one was killed the week we happened to be in town, or if there were any fatalities, taking pains the local press didn't get

wind of it. Mom helped sell the tickets, threw out the troublemakers, and occasionally swung the sledgehammer to secure a stake into the ground like an experienced rail hand. Two young boys, devoid of friends and familiarity, Pickles and I were probably more a nuisance than an assistance, but it was a family venture and we were more or less committed. To fill up the seats and make things seem safer than it was, we could ride the amusements for free, but we were only so brave. We learned early on not to tempt fate with the coaster we dubbed “The Rattler” or the Ferris wheel known as “Old Creaky,” and as we boldly told our parents, we were not going on the carousel or teacup because those rides were for pussies.

Pickles was a chubby kid with a round face and infectious laugh everyone seemed to adore. I was gangly with terrible hand/eye coordination and persistent acne. I couldn't walk and chew gum at the same time or rub my belly while patting my head. In contrast to my older brother's perceived jocularly, I was dubbed “the serious one,” the guy who was certainly going to work for NASA. My friends called me Noodles, which I hated until I saw that my parents disliked the moniker even more, then I thought it was cool. Though Dad, with his short back and sides and Mom with her heaped bouffant, looked as conservative as a preacher and his wife, my parents were recovering hippies who named my brother and I Bob and Dylan, so was it any wonder we preferred Pickles and Noodles?

Being on the road was tough on our little family, but either because of it, or in spite of it, we coalesced in a weird way. Despite being the stoic and seemingly perpetually stressed parent, my father seemed to prefer Pickles' company. The two would often be side by side, having a laugh

at a joke they never shared. My mother, perhaps feeling sorry or even responsible for my awkwardness, gravitated to me, compelled to show pictures of the places she had been before being married, the summer a rich aunt took her and her sister to Europe: Paris, London, Zurich, and a host of other places she could no longer name, and encouraged me to chase my dreams.

Our typical exchanges were heartfelt silliness.

“Mom, can I be anything when I grow up?”

“Of course you can, Dylan. What do you want to be?”

“An archeologist. Like Indiana Jones.”

“That sounds exciting. I hope you find your mummy.”

Life on the road felt like perpetual motion. We were always rushing to get somewhere, and when we got there, we had to set up the rides and games before the crowds started rolling in. Then something was always breaking down, or someone was complaining; things were stolen, kids puked, or it rained the entire week and no one showed up, yet somehow we coped. We handled the people, we handled the money, we handled the equipment, and we handled one another. Meals were hurried affairs between going here, arriving there, setting up, and tearing down. We knew every burger joint, greasy spoon diner, and truck stop from here to eternity. It was a hectic and tiring routine. My brother and I were the lucky ones; we got to sleep in the car as we traveled, but my father had to drive and my mother was busy checking the receipts or doing paperwork, so they always seemed tired, restless, needing a nightcap before crawling into bed in some strange motel room that smelled faintly of mold and murder.

Things really came to a head the summer a little girl was abducted from the German-American festival gig we were set up at in some rural backwater. The child was put on “The Rattler” by her dad but failed to appear when the ride ended. The alarm was given, lights raised, and a frantic search undertaken, but the young girl was never located. The local police yokels were baffled and the fish wrapper press had a field day, rife with speculation and theories ranging from she ran off with Elvis to she was abducted by a UFO piloted by a crew of Yeti.

The girl was taken the night before the morning we were scheduled to leave town, so there was supposition that the child, drawn by the magic of the lights and strange attractions, might have run away to join our mismatched cadre, or that one of our oddball crew was responsible for her disappearance, even murder. Our trailers, vans, trucks, and hotel rooms were searched, but there was no trace of the young girl. The Police kept us in town for two days, seriously delaying the travel and set up at the next town, 300 miles away, and law enforcement hounded Mom and Dad for weeks afterward. It was a tragic situation that really weighed heavily on my parents and our family. There were lawsuits and depositions, meetings with lawyers in conference rooms that seemed to go on for years. In the end, Dad threw in the towel and went to work for Radio Shack, and Mom found a job at the Kingdom Hall of the local Jehovah’s Witness congregation. Thus ended our life on the road and return to a somewhat semblance of normalcy.

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The fat jovial kid got fatter, went bald, and became a dentist (I wonder if his patients call him Pickles?), while yours truly never quite made it into NASA’s esteemed ranks (or became an archeologist for that matter), though I did take an engineering class in community college but

failed the course miserably. The closest I got to the space program was painting the steel beams in a warehouse of a company that sold wire to a subcontractor who built rocket components. One of the rockets with the wires from the warehouse I painted went to the moon to collect samples of dust, so I'd like to think I never really escaped the high aspirations.

When I first set eyes on Mae, other than the shock of her radical appearance, I had no interest in her at all. I preferred more of the wholesome, curvy, next-door type of girl in tight jeans to this skinny, flat-chested, badass with a nose ring and the aesthetic style of a lumberjack. She was a curiosity among the pedestrian coeds who roamed the suburban campus where I idled away three years of life. The fact that she wore her orange hair short and spiky, with dripping black eye liner like something out of *A Clockwork Orange* was a complete turn off. The fact that this mismatched ragamuffin punk was a film student turned out to be a complete turn on. I crushed on anyone who could play a guitar, write a story, or make a film, and a girl walking around with a movie camera strapped to her chest was bound to attract my attention.

I watched her film a leaf blowing across the lawn, clouds drifting in the sky, a snake sunning itself on the sidewalk, bucolic scenes, she later explained, to establish tension for the horror movie she was making. Despite my taking a mild interest in her shenanigans on campus, Mae was the one to approach me on balmy spring afternoon. I happened to be wearing my "M" teeshirt, Peter Lorre's hangdog backward glance plastered across my scrawny chest.

"Cool shirt!" were the first words she spoke to me.

"Thanks."

"I really dig German films. Have you seen *Nosferatu*?"

“Hell yeah. That’s some creepy shit.”

“How about The Tim Drum? God, I love The Tin Drum!”

“Never heard if it.”

“It’s about a little boy who can’t deal with the stress of life, so refuses to grow up.”

“If that were only an option,” I said with a laugh that got no response.

“You should definitely check out The Tin Drum.”

“OK. Maybe I will.”

“No,” she said forcefully. “Definitely. Promise.”

“OK. I promise.”

There was an awkward silence, as neither of us quite knew what to say next.

“So, you’re making a film?”

“No, I always walk around with a camera strapped to my head.”

“I thought it was a fashion statement, to go with your shirt.”

Mae gave me a quizzical look, my attempt at humor lost in the fog.

“You wanna help?”

“Sure,” I shrugged.

And thus began my entry into the realm of film and television, which was not unlike my childhood career as an apprentice traveling carnie. I wound up carrying things in and out of cars, moving spotlights, smearing fake blood on victims, and generally watching other people enjoy themselves in a way I could not.

Despite seemingly not to be the other's type, it didn't take long before Mae and I became a comfortable pair. Our dates mainly consisted of eating greasy Chinese food, attending late night screenings of weird art house films in the seediest theaters you could imagine, and having sex in Dad's Continental, and later, my Impala. Mae liked the danger of sex in public spaces. Art museums and libraries took her to the greatest heights of ecstasy.

After taking three years of college classes that meant absolutely nothing to me, one day I pulled a number from the campus career board and took a job as a painter. I thought it would be a temporary thing, certainly better than working at Home Depot or the Dollar General, but found a strange comfort in the exacting and repetitive motions, plus I didn't mind smelling the paint and solvent fumes. I started off as a mixer, but soon graduated to be a roller, before becoming the cut-in man, because I had the steadiest hands of the mostly alcoholic group of guys I worked with.

Mae's movie was a resounding success and even won top prize at a local film festival, gaining her some notoriety, which is everything in the business. After finishing school, she interned for a local news program and got a job with a small local production company, making commercials. If you've seen the one with the Chinese lady riding the bull through the car dealership, that's hers.

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So, here I was, in my mid twenties, with a steady job and a steady girl and I was not exactly sure what love was. Since about the age of 14, I knew what my hormones told me it was, but that feeling always seemed to involve trips to the doctor over mysterious rashes, which were

prone to fade quicker than the rashes themselves. My parents remained married after 53 years, and for the life of me, I could not understand why. They bickered all the time, didn't like the same foods; one preferred raucous action movies, in which the more things that blow up the better, while the other craved noir melodramas with pacing so slow a snail would get bored. They were on opposite sides of the political spectrum (growing more radically polarized with each election cycle) and even further apart when it came to religious beliefs; one finding a form of miracle everywhere, the other finding divinity nowhere. I don't think I have met a more mismatched couple, yet, they have stuck to one another for over half a century, dare I say, complimenting one another, or at the least, offsetting the differences between them. Was that love? Or simply stick-to-itiveness? To say nothing else, it was a hell of an accomplishment.

Which brings me to the day Mae hauled off with a right hook to my unsuspecting face.

It was a hot summer afternoon. I remember the sound of the cicadas in the trees, so it was definitely summertime. The fact that we were both wearing shorts and sunscreen was another dead giveaway. At this point, we'd been together about four years, around the time when things start to get a little stale, and you begin to question whether you want the relationship to continue. I had been having those kinds of thoughts (she could be pretty annoying at times, especially when she had a few sips from the bottle with her film crew), though I hadn't acted on any impulses I might have had, I could only assume it was the same with Mae. I could be tedious myself, so it wouldn't have surprised me if she were the one to say things had run their course and we should go our separate ways.

I was trying to explain how happy I was, that I was surprised we were still together almost half a decade, and that we might have a future, but I got the words all wrong, as usual.

“What, so you want to dump me?” her tone incredulous, accusatory.

“I didn’t say that, Mae. I just asked if you thought we should stay together.”

“We have done. Four and a half years, right?”

“Right.”

“So yesterday it was cool but today it’s boring?”

“I never said boring.”

“Stale. Flat. Moldy. Whatever you didn’t say, I knew what you meant. Your tone says it all.”

“It was a philosophical question, like: what is life? Why am I here? Are we happy?”

Then it came, in a proverbial flash, the knuckle sandwich to the face. But this was no ordinary punch you might throw at a friend’s bicep a few dozen times on their birthday; this was a full body, MMA-style hook with the momentum of her 140 pounds behind it. It landed with a sickening pop and crunch of a car accident, and I literally felt myself being propelled into the next week.

For most people, getting knocked out by your partner would be a deal breaker, but as I lay on the ground, in pain and bleeding, I knew right then and there, that any woman capable of throwing such a devastating punch was someone I wanted in my corner for the rest of my life. But there was all that trouble with the blood, my passing out, the trip to the hospital and dentist, and all the awkward questions that went along with the treatments. At least we were able to keep the police out of it.

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The day came when my mouth was only full of the typical tooth decay and my nose dripping the usual snot, such that I could spew the odd word with the reasonable hope of being understood, so I picked my moment—just as she downed her third Jim Beam neat on a sultry summer’s night by the pool—and asked Mae to marry me.

“Are you serious?” she asked, her spiky hair now black.

“I was.”

“Was?”

“I was. Before you came out with that question, in that tone.”

“So, you’re no longer serious?”

“I haven’t decided,” I teased, our humor worlds apart, even after all this time.

“Did you or did you not ask me to be your wife?”

“Lawfully wedded. Yes, I did.”

“And it’s not a joke?”

“After making all the effort to get down on my knee, why would you think I wasn’t sincere?”

“Does this have anything to do with me punching you?”

“It most certainly does.”

“Well then, how could a lady refuse?”

“Is that a yes?”

“I believe that it is. Yes. Ja. Affirmative.”

“Wonderful! Now, can I get up?”

“Isn’t there something else?”

“Uh?”

“Forget anything?”

“Of course!”

I fished in my pocket for grandmom’s wedding ring, which mom had lovingly passed on to me.

That was five years ago now, and here we are. Even after the disastrous honeymoon in Mexico, where we both got food poison, the house fire caused by the dog bite, and the week she had to spend in jail for driving a car she borrowed from a friend that happened to be stolen and linked to a major drug dealer, Mae and I are still married. And for all our differences and inconsistencies, we are happy. My time as a carnie, film intern, and painter notwithstanding, being punched in the face has been one of the highlights of my life.

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