

You, Me, and Dr. Sperm Makes Three

By John DiFelice

My wife Sarah and I sit in the doctor's office in front of a large mahogany desk. It looks like a desk belonging to a serious man who does serious deeds. Upon his walls hang citations and framed magazine covers that praise his brilliance at joining seed to egg in such a way that it very often results in the birth of a human baby. No alien DNA here, that would be cheating. The thought of alien DNA, in addition to its inherent coolness, is a fine example of how my mind copes with stress. Whenever I'm in a stressful situation, like awaiting the latest results in a series of disappointing fertility tests, my mind wanders far into the absurd. I envision Grey Aliens impregnating my wife as they deride me for failing at my one biological duty and sole reason for existing on earth. The aliens are short and bald and smell like cheese. What Sarah and I have gone through over the past year to get pregnant is as alien to me as this extraterrestrial vision, and nearly as unromantic. It certainly does not match the expectations of the blessed event that my parents had drilled into my head, right after they stopped scaring the bejesus out of me with tales of unwanted pregnancies and right before they started bugging me for grandkids. I have always imagined the act of conception as the very height of romance, complete with mood lighting and Hungarian Dance playing in the background.

Our names are spoken abruptly by a man standing in the doorway. It is a serious voice that snaps me out of my other-worldly reverie, a rich baritone that would be perfect for Schumann's *Ich Grolle Nicht* or other art songs.

Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht.

Roughly translated: I bear no grudge, even though my heart is breaking.

We had decided that it was time for a new doctor, and the man we are to see is supposedly the best. He walks into his own office and sits down in his command chair across the desk from us. He is really short, which I note because his voice does not match his stature. Despite this, he is what I guess women would consider handsome and has a powerful presence designed to win respect quickly. He has intelligent eyes, a full head of black hair, and very muscular arms. He wears scrubs like he was born into them, and his black chest hair pops from the V-neck of his scrubs unapologetically, reveling in its hairy, retro-style virility. My eyes cut to his eyes, then to his muscles, then to his chest hair, back to his eyes, to his head, to the Grey Aliens, back to his chest hair, to the orchestra playing Hungarian Dance, to his chest hair, and then to the door through which we can make a dash. Ultimately, my eyes come to rest on Sarah, who sits quietly awaiting the results of our tests. Her smile is soft and her face warm and hopeful. Her large brown eyes

look at me and then narrow into a little squint that raises the corners of my mouth. I fell in love with that face. She would make such a great mom. I know how anxious she has been about our meeting with the doctor, and the least I can do is control my thoughts and keep them positive. I have as much at stake as Sarah does, maybe even more. I donated a lot of sperm for this test.

“Let’s not waste each other’s time, shall we?” he says. That doesn’t sound good. Sarah shoots me a glance, her eyes already filled with anxiety. “With fertility, as with comedy,” he continues, “timing is everything.”

He pauses for what seems like too long and then lets out a booming laugh that startles me with its volume and inappropriateness. But Sarah laughs with him. I turn to see a look of relief on her face. He must’ve sensed her tension and made her relax with an icebreaker joke. Maybe this man is as good as all the magazine covers say he is. If that’s the case, then I should be smiling too.

I laugh, but by the time I do, it sounds out of place. The time to laugh has passed. Is this the comedic timing he spoke of?

“Now,” he begins with a controlled intensity. “Here’s what we know.” He lowers his voice so we’ll lean in close. The bush on his chest seems to increase as he speaks, the hairs multiplying as the promise of our own fertility. “We’re going to be upfront and honest with each other,” he says. “There’s no point in sugar-coating things. That would be a waste of your time, and of my time. Understand?” Sarah is nodding her head in complete agreement. She’s all in.

He tells me that my sperm have good motility (good swimmers) and good morphology (won’t be featured as circus geeks), but that there are too few of them. The doctor adds, “You’re playing in an arena, my friend, for a crowd of one hundred.” That inspired me to join in the fun. I crack a joke of my own, but there is nothing but silence except for the buzzing of the doctor’s cell phone. Sarah gives me her “you’re killing me softly” look, and the doctor becomes stone-faced, all traces of humor gone from his once jovial expression.

“This is a very serious matter,” he lectures me. “It is not a time for levity, and we never use slang when speaking about reproductive material. Please use the proper terminology, show some respect for what I do, or don’t talk about it at all.”

I apologize to him in a stunned sort of way. He turns to Sarah.

“Naturally,” he says, “I will play an important role in your artificial insemination.” He turns to me. “Mainly, my job is to make sure your wife doesn’t bring a big blonde guy with her to mix it in.” People won’t believe me when I tell them about this later, which is the worst part. How inappropriate.

His laugh rings out and bounces around the small room. I look at Sarah, but her mind is somewhere else, probably planning her baby shower. I wish my mind could be anywhere else.

Ich grölle nicht.

As we shake goodbye, he tries in earnest to break every finger and metacarpal in my right hand.

“Come back next Tuesday, and let’s see if I can knock up your wife.” He laughs again

and slaps me on the back really hard and sends us on our way.

Sarah is silent in the passenger seat as I pull out of the hospital parking lot.

“Can that guy try any harder to be macho?” I ask, once I think we are a sufficient distance from the hospital, as if he could somehow hear us.

“I thought he was nice,” she says.

“Really? Did you hear what he said to me? Where did that guy learn his bedside manner? You want to deal with him for who knows how many months?”

“All I care about is that he’s good at what he does. He can tell as many bad jokes as he wants, so long as we get pregnant. Right?” Sarah has become very pragmatic during this whole baby-making process.

What Sarah doesn’t appreciate is that I will be interacting with him much more than she will. I will have to make several deposits of semen so they can be spun in a centrifuge to make one good, concentrated batch. That means lots of masturbating in Dr. Sperm’s lavatory for me.

I say “Dr. Sperm’s lavatory” for two reasons. First, I have nicknamed him Dr. Sperm because my main interaction with him will be handing him cups of my genetic material. Second, I have already decided that I will produce the semen samples only at the clinic. I don’t want to do it at home, even though it means doing it in a bright, stark hospital bathroom with people waiting outside who know exactly what I am doing inside. But it is better than doing it at home. At home would be all wrong. It is bad enough that I’ve had scheduled sex with my wife for the past year; having scheduled sex with myself in my own house is too weird to consider seriously. I also feel that, as a general rule, freshness matters, plus it will eliminate the chance of something terrible happening, like getting into a car accident on the way to the doctor’s office and police finding me walking around dazed and covered with my own semen. Would they believe I had done the deed at home and was simply delivering the semen to our fertility doctor? Surely they would want to know how the accident happened. They would interrogate me under a 120-watt bulb and deny me a moist towelette. The headline “Man crashes while masturbating in car” flashes before my eyes for an awful split second. Not for this man. No, this man will be safe within the confines of the white, tiled walls of Dr. Sperm’s bathroom. It’s like anything else in life: you pick your indignity and move on.

I complain about Dr. Sperm all the way home until Sarah tells me to shut up. I devise a million retorts that I should’ve said at the time until I feel that I’ve somehow redeemed myself.

Then something strange happens. I begin to empathize with Dr. Sperm. I begin to think I have judged him too harshly. Maybe there is a reason for his attempts to inject humor into the process, no matter how misplaced. Within the myriad sob stories and desperate pleas, perhaps he has lost sight of the humanity in his art. I can hardly blame him for that. He can’t dwell anymore on our particular misfortune as any other. All of his patients are deserving. Doctors need some distance between themselves and their patients. Without it, Dr. Sperm might empathize with us too much. He might hear what remains unspoken in our house, of lifting the toilet lid for the nth consecutive month and seeing the diffuse reddish tint that tells me we’ll have to try again. Next

month will be the one, next month for sure. The color red becomes the enemy, the sign of further disappointment in our attempts to have a child. It becomes the color of heartbreak. The doctor would have to walk down the steps with me to where Sarah stands in the kitchen, walk up behind her, gently place his arms around her, and tell her that it will be ok and that he loves her, all without saying a word. He would have to hear the sounds of a house filled with children as the pitch bends and drops as they move away from us, farther and farther into the dark distance until the sounds disappear completely. He'd have to see the lights in each bedroom, each one where a child would sleep—each the sole justification for buying a home with more rooms than Sarah and I would ever need—and then watch them go out one by one. The tiny socks and shoes, gone. The toys from birthdays that never came. Everything slipping into an uncertain, lonely future.

Months pass as I am ambushed by horrible thoughts, ones I must forever keep to myself. I envision the family I could have if only I had married someone else. I see the face I fell in love with become pixelated as I gaze at it too closely, deconstructing it, stripping it down to its base, genetic components. I fight the thought and I win; it dies, but not before it infects me.

Through all of this, I perform my many clandestine, lunchtime trips to the fertility clinic to “do the deed,” as I’ve taken to calling it, with pornographic magazines I’d never buy in a store without wearing a disguise. The sessions are taking longer, each one longer than the one before. I can’t feel anything anymore. I need more stimulation. A month later, they put a TV and a DVD player in the room. I pop a DVD into the player. I’m embarrassed to say I’ve seen this one.

Each time I slink out of the bathroom, I see Dr. Sperm walking down the hallway in his light blue scrubs.

“Hey, no Big Blondie last month.” He gives me a thumbs up. I can’t think of any one of those million retorts.

Another month comes and goes. Sarah and I have ceased having sex to save my sperm for the inseminations. The doctor said this isn’t necessary, that one week of abstinence is enough, but I don’t want to take any chances. Sarah was four days late last month, and we celebrated too early. We don’t want to do that again.

Surprise, there’s blood in the toilet, so it’s back to Dr. SperSm’s. I’ve decided to shake things up a bit. Today I choose to watch a fortyish social studies teacher instruct her ingénue about the ways of the natives of Lesbos. I have a meeting in an hour about the fee schedules for unified managed accounts, and I can’t concentrate. I walk out of the room forty minutes later with my cup. I hear a deep voice crack another joke that now seems filled with malice.

At home, things seem fine, but they are not. Sarah and I both have fertility problems, but I find myself thinking about how hers are worse than mine. The doctor can compensate for my problem, but little can be done about hers, making it the chief culprit of our conception troubles. Lately, that’s all I can think about when I look at her, that it’s more her fault than mine. I don’t want to have this thought, but I do.

More red, more porn, more samples, more jokes from Dr. Sperm, more Dr. Sperm trying to crush my hand.

I'm not sure how many more rounds of artificial insemination I can handle. It's expensive, it's time-consuming, and I'm having less sex than ever, which is completely counterintuitive considering that we're trying to have a child. Even masturbation has taken a nosedive since I only do it once a month for the sample. Worse, the whole thing seems pointless and has propelled me into existential despair.

That's why I've decided today will be my last session. Maybe it's the lack of positive results, or maybe it's the inappropriate remarks and jokes from my doctor, but I suddenly feel that this is all Dr. Sperm's fault. He is supposed to be the best, but instead of getting Sarah pregnant, all he did was hone his stand-up comedy act at my expense.

I know what's going to happen now: I'm going to walk out of here with my cup, and Dr. Sperm is going to walk toward me, chest hair popping out of his scrubs, with his perfect smile and perfect hair and perfectly tanned skin, as he nods to his nurses and patients and prepares to emasculate me with a well-timed zinger. I think it's time to find out if he really has a sense of humor after all. Right after I finish washing my hands, I put a dime-sized dab of soft soap in the center of my palm.

I know what I'm about to do is childish. It is probably the most childish thing I've ever done, even more than when I was five and convinced Richie Harvey that his mom's anus was the Sarlacc Pit on Tatooine, and he had to send in his Jedi Luke Skywalker action figure to kill it. My justification is that since having a child has become my single-minded obsession, and the word "childish" contains the word "child", doing something childish is inherently good.

I walk out of the bathroom and down the hall with a confidence I haven't felt since this whole artificial insemination thing started. Dr. Sperm walks toward me, teeth glistening, chest hair teasing the V-neck of his shirt, right hand clenching as a warm-up to our handshake. I walk toward him, grinning ear to ear, with my Soft Soap hand extended. He approaches and grabs my hand and squeezes. There is a pause. He looks at me, then down at our joined hands, and then back at me again without changing his facial expression. I look at him, feign surprise, and say, "Oh. Sorry, *dude*."

I had anticipated two reactions to my little prank. In the first one, Dr. Sperm really does have a sense of humor, and we both have a good old laugh about it.

In the second one, he completely ignores it, resulting in a situation that would be stupendously awkward.

I didn't anticipate how he would really react.

He turned to the people in the waiting room and held out his hand.

"You see, this is why I tell people to make sure they wash their hands after producing a semen sample. Can everyone see this? Hygiene is very important here."

A gasp went up from the room, and Dr. Sperm walked away to wash his hands.

I thought I could play a trick on him, but I was wrong. There are those who can prank other people, and those who are pranked, and there's nothing in between. It's all been one big trick on me. How can I not get my wife pregnant? It violates everything about being a man. It's

like forgetting how to breathe. What's wrong with me? What in God's name is wrong with me?

I arrive home, eat dinner, and go straight to bed. Sarah and I say nothing to each other because there's nothing to say.

I soon find myself asleep and in a strange dream. It is autumn and the weather has just turned. It's getting cold. Any hint of youth has gone out of my face. My skin is ruddy yet fragile, and my body is hunched over when I walk, surrendering to the arthritis that long ago invaded my spine and joints. Sarah lies next to me. Her flowing brown hair and figure that once made me walk two miles to her apartment across town at three o'clock in the morning on a Tuesday are long ago memories. Her presence now holds the more valuable feelings of comfort and security: the warmth of her body, the chill of her feet pressed against my legs, and how they draw warmth from me. Our aged bodies fit together perfectly, molded into our shapes by time and pressure. We are happy; our lives lack nothing because we have each other. All of the fears of growing old childless have passed into that space between a fearful dream and the waking realization of safety.

As I lie next to Sarah and drift into a mixture of past and present, I hear a voice, deep and low, a powerful baritone that calls to me by name. It is accompanied by music, a song I used to know. It is in German.

“Ich Grolle Nicht!”

It's true, I bear no grudge. I am perfectly happy. Society tried to convince us that we had to have a child to be happy, but we proved society wrong. We have led a rich and rewarding life without children. We've traveled the world, we've dined lavishly, we've taken language classes together, we've been involved with a local theater and performed other charitable works, we've never had to worry about baby-sitters, or cleaning diapers, or preventing another human being from committing suicide on a daily basis by drowning, drinking pipe cleaner, electrocution, or jumping out a window because he thinks he's Word Girl.

I want to stay where I am, but the voice will not allow it. I rise from the bed without waking Sarah, and I notice that I do so without pain. I stand straight and tall, like I did in my youth. I follow the voice out of my front door. I do not feel the cold. I feel nothing but warmth and an anticipation that something new and great is about to happen.

There is light streaming from the other side of the house. I follow it and turn the corner. The music crescendos.

“Ich grolle nicht, und wenn das Herz auch bricht!”

In the middle of my side-mulch bed, there is a burning chrysanthemum. Above it hovers a blinding light. When I shield the glare, I can make out golden hairs, more numerous than the stars, popping from a glowing chest under a V-neck scrub shirt.

“Abraham!” the voice booms. “Let's see if we can knock up your wife!”

“Sarah is ninety years old,” I shout. “You couldn't knock her up when she was in her thirties.”

He laughs a righteous laugh. “Was it my fault you have the Bill Buckner of testicles between your legs?”

Ouch.

“I can impregnate anyone!” the voice booms.

“How?”

“I mix in my own divine seed! Your son will have a flowing mane of chest hair and a lucrative career as a jockey!”

I wake. It is morning, and Sarah is not in bed. I hear the toilet flush. I prop myself up on my elbow. She turns the corner and looks like she’s been crying.

“Is everything all right?” I ask.

“Yes,” she says through a sob. “Abe, I have a surprise for you.”

“What?”

She holds up something which I can’t make out initially. Instead, I focus on her face: it is a look of joy and relief, but mostly joy. I look at what she holds in her hand. It’s a pregnancy test.

“It’s positive,” she says, through a giggle.

“Really?” I say. “But how?”

“I guess the man really is a genius.”

Genius? This is almost too much to bear. But then it sinks in. We’re having a baby. This is not a dream, this is not a construct of my imagination. This is the single greatest moment of my life. “Oh, Sarah!” I exclaim and run to her. I grab her and hold her and swing her around the small space near our bed.

“Thank you, Abe, for going through this with me...you know, all the treatments. You didn’t mind too much, did you?”

I don’t know if she realizes what an excellent question that is. I used to think that nothing could ever take the fun out of masturbating. Turns out I was right.

“There’s one last thing I want you to do, Abe.”

“What?”

“If I tell you what it is, will you promise to do it?”

“Yes.” There is nothing I wouldn’t do for her.

Sarah tells me to go back to Dr. Sperm’s office with a gift and a card and thank him for getting us pregnant.

Ich Grolle Nicht.