

From Route 66 Chapel
By Michael Lund
Seventh in the Route 66 Novel Series

Prologue: the Lady or the Tiger

Thirty years ago, my husband stole the story of birth, traditionally a mother's property. Now I'm going to take it back.

Accounts of childbirth belong to women, after all, because we are the central players in that event. Men have been kept out of--or chose to keep out of--the maternity ward. So grandmothers told mothers who told daughters the secrets of labor, the miracle of new life.

My first pregnancy, however, came in the 1970s, a time of social change. Men had begun taking La Maze classes in the weeks preceding the trip to the hospital; they donned masks to coach their wives through delivery; and they put on rubber gloves in the delivery room to receive the child right out of the mother's womb. Mark took advantage of this new approach to an ancient rite to establish his story of pregnancy and birth. He has used it for years to challenge those feminine accounts which so often take over social gatherings of married couples. I accepted his insertion of a masculine voice into such girl talk--until now. No doubt, Mark will come to resent this repossession.

The truth is, I was out cold at the climactic moment of Nelson's delivery and have only a partial narrative of my own to offer. But I must cross the line into the father's experience in order to prepare you for the chapters to follow. In that story of choices--the lady or the tiger--I hope to break down the sometimes tragic barrier between ourselves and others.

We had no clue throughout the nine months of Nelson's gestation that his birth would be anything but normal. When the time came, however, just minutes after my arrival at the hospital, an alert nurse noticed unusual rhythm in the fetal heartbeat. My obstetrician, called in promptly, acknowledged sufficient signs of stress to recommend an immediate Caesarian.

The cord had wrapped around Nelson's neck, and he would not have survived a natural birth. Now past thirty, healthy and the father of two, our son's destiny is not the subject of this story. In just a moment, I'll move beyond Mark's small moment of crisis to, for me, an uncharacteristic project in storytelling. All alone in the traditional "New Father's Courtesy Room," Mark waited several hours to hear the result of the operation.

"After all the training we'd done," he explains, "I felt like I'd fallen back in time. This was the kind of place where my father waited for word that I was being born, as his father had paced before him." If there are women listening, they'll often cluck in real or mock sympathy: "Poor guy!"

"Maybe I'm really not liberated, after all," Mark continues, "but one of those throwbacks, a unregenerate chauvinist."

He's baiting his audience, of course. Those who've heard the story before (like our children) roll their eyes, a sign to others.

"So there I am, hour after hour, all alone, not knowing."

It isn't hours and hours, of course, as Dr. Lincoln, taking no chances with me or Nelson, proceeds swiftly with the Caesarian.

"Is the love of my life OK? Is my child-to-be safe? In these primitive days, we don't even know the sex ahead of time!"

He'd been reassured by the doctor and several nurses that there was little danger to me or the baby, the problem having been spotted so early. But Mark wants the drama to build.

"Finally, I can't stand it in the waiting room. Every old issue of *Life* magazine has been read cover to cover. I'm on my second time through the Bible--well, the Old Testament, at least."

Some of us know *Life* had stopped publishing years before. And the Bible detail usually causes even gullible listeners to suspect that Mark has begun to lace his tale with hyperbole.

"I start pacing the hall, back and forth in front of the elevator. I figure Doc will reappear here with the announcement. Finally, the little arrow above the elevator doors that points to the floor number begins a descent from 5 to 4, from 4 to 3 to 2--ding! Dr. Lincoln, poker-faced, emerges."

Rather than linger on the doctor's report, Mark moves quickly past that good news (a healthy boy!) to concentrate on an unanticipated dilemma he faces next. This skipping over my and Nelson's condition is often disconcerting, especially to women.

"Doc tells me I can come with her to the third floor. I follow into the elevator, relieved to find that all is well. When we step off on that floor, though, I find my trials are just beginning."

He always pauses here to generate suspense, but the crisis toward which he's been building is really not confined to the hospital setting. What he reveals concerns another step in that prolonged transition between childhood and adulthood, between being a son and becoming a father.

"When we come out of the elevator, Dr. Lincoln, who stands beside me, waves her hand to the left and says, 'Your wife is down the hall in 213. It's a private room; you can see her now.'"

Again, listeners feel temporary relief.

"If only she'd stopped there, though!" Mark continues. "I would have known what to do. I would have turned left, marched down the hall, entered room 213. This was a direct, clear, meaningful course of action."

His audience can only nod.

"But then Dr. Lincoln waves her other hand to the right!" Mark waves his hand now as well. "'Your son is in the maternity ward at this end of the hall.' I can see the large glass windows on the other side of which, it is certain, Nelson Landon, only hours old, rests in his little bassinet. He's surely all alone, since there were no other pre-fathers with me earlier."

Most listeners see no problem here; the story has a happy ending. But Mark insists that he's in an untenable position.

"OK, my friends, what am I supposed to do--go left to my wife, the mother of my child, who needs my love and support? Or go right to the family heir, who also demands my love and concern? I can't, you see, go both directions at once! And whichever way I turn, I abandon someone to whom I owe total allegiance."

He will bask in his listeners' sympathy now as long as he can get away with it, though he knows--and everyone in his family knows--the resolution is swift and precise.

Dr. Lincoln sees his hesitation and, a hand on his shoulder, pushes him gently toward the room where I lie in a semiconscious state and says, "You go to your wife; I'll bring your son to you both." And there it is: a neat solution, courtesy sensitive and wise Dr. Abigail Lincoln.

What Mark doesn't see is how his perception of this problem reveals something larger, a habit I consider characteristic of him, his generation, and his region of the country. He sees every choice as being between the lady and the tiger.

Mark could be husband *or* father in this situation, he thinks, not both. To become one is to deny the other. So much for him, and for others like him, is either/or, left or right, yes or no, on/off. Behind one door is a tiger; behind the other is a lady.

Yet, surely this is not so. We are all in this world young (to our parents) and old (to children); we have both public and private identities; we are good and we are bad. We don't have only two doors to open. Sometimes we choose not to open either.

I believe the story I'm about to tell is peculiar to a region and to a generation--the Midwest and the children of the Cold War; but I suspect it applies in quite a few other contexts as well. Shortly, we'll see the principle of either/or embodied in one of the 1950s favorite symbols, the famous highway, Route 66. Such norms enabled great accomplishments like the Mother Road, but they also created unrecognized restrictions, boundaries for travel.

Mark, one of that group of either/or believers, appears here, as I say, to introduce the dilemma of others you will meet shortly. And I, a Southerner of the same age, but shaped by different forces, hope to be the outside observer who can depict their struggle objectively. As I see it, even their favorite symbol, Route 66, is made up of opposites: east- and westbound lanes. "America's Main Street" is one road. Its traffic just goes in two directions.

Now, how did I, a counselor by profession, come to be recounting this tale instead of some experienced, award-winning author, one of NPR's famous voices, or an investigative television reporter? Well, after many months working with one special group I've been inspired to--and they've approved--an attempt at presenting their story. (Of course, I've changed the names and some details, preserving client confidentiality.) "Route 66 Chapel" is about opposing choices. But it's also about the joining of opposites. I'm convinced that men, who don't give birth, and women, who do, can form unions that renew the human spirit. While people take contradictory positions in what follows, their tales come together at the end into a single story. I can only hope it's a good story, and that I tell it well.

Bel Landon

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