

A Man in the Middle of Time

A Novel

By

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Chapter 1

The mirror looked back at him through half-closed eyes. An advancing ache pulsing through his temples, over the top of his head and down to the base of his brain. He put his head down, ran his fingers through his hair and watched the white porcelain sink fill up with black and gray flecks. He could no longer rely on the things that defined him: His job, his family, his mane of perfect hair.

Drawers creaked open, slammed shut. Cliff's head shot toward the noise, his wife's taught body passed between the small opening of the bathroom door. He froze, leaning heavily now on his thin arms.

Rarely did he and Jamie cross paths before dinner. Most days he was out before she was up and when he returned from biking, she had already left for her early morning fad: kick-boxing, Zumba, boot camp, all forms of yoga, weight training, spinning, private trainer, private masseuse, wax, color, blow out.

"What the hell are you still doing here?" she said, catching sight of him. Her gaze stayed on him for a mere second before moving back to her destruction of the drawers and their hinges, colored contents filling up the floor.

"I fell asleep on the couch," he said, his right hand grinding in a circular motion over his temple.

“At some point you made it to bed because it was like sleeping next to a fucking mule,” she said without looking up. “I’m surprised you didn’t wake the neighbors.”

They didn’t do mornings.

“You drank too much at that dinner, didn’t you?” she said, stopping for a breather. The bathroom door swung open all the way, her right arm clinging to the frame. Clad only in a sports bra and panties, Cliff admired the body he’d been sleeping with for almost twenty years.

Although there’d been more sleeping than anything else in recent months. Recent years?

“Shit,” she said looking at her watch, returning to pick through her drawers of shirts and shorts, tanks and tops, sweatshirts and pants. She had so much stuff she couldn’t find anything. “Don’t forget about dinner tonight,” she said. “I don’t want to hear how you’ll be late. The deal is over. You did your job. You made everybody else money.” A final drawer slammed and she was gone.

Cliff walked over to the closet, the door failing to latch from her force. She never managed to close closet doors since he installed automatic light switches. He knew better than to remind her of the energy-saving device. Alone in the quiet he replayed the discussions.

“If you leave it open the light stays on,” he’d say.

“This is what you’re choosing to argue about?” she’d answer.

“You’re wasting energy,” he’d tell her.

No reaction.

“It costs money.”

No reaction.

“Your clothes will catch on fire.”

“Are you trying to be funny?” she’d finally respond.

He looked inside the closet, the heavy price tags hanging on their threads for dear life above a sea of colored shoes. It wasn't a closet but a clothing store, perversely reminding him of the back porch of his childhood home. After his father's "financial reversal," as his mother called it, they were the only ones on the block without a dryer. And so on the days his mother could get out of bed, she would hang the clothes on a line. But mostly it was up to him, if he wanted clean, dry shirts for school.

She warned him about letting the neighbors see their dirty laundry, a pun lost on young Cliff. She showed him how to hang a line close to the house, right inside the porch, making it invisible to the neighbors, but within reach of the breeze. It would take hours to dry a t-shirt, and by then the elements or an errant bird made a mess of it. So Cliff would do his homework by the back door, one leg in the house and one hanging out, half reading and half watching the clothes blow in the dead breeze, a stack of rocks on the table, ready to pounce a predator.

His wife's huff had blown an ill-wind through the closet and all he saw were dancing price tags of every shape. Rows and rows of them hanging like opaque chimes from high-end blouses and over-priced t-shirts. He smiled. Yep, nothing to wear.

She was a buying, spending, consuming monster. But she was his monster. He took pride knowing he could afford to be her enabler. She was his and that was enough. They had a shared history, if not a shared present. This knowledge helped him when he knew they were going in different directions, even if they were on the same path.

Twenty years earlier on the night before their wedding his mother told him to watch out for her. "I'm just trying to hold on, Ma," he said with a big grin.

"She's a winner," Lila Thomson told her son, "I'll give you that."

"Well, isn't that a good thing?" he asked.

“It just means she’s gonna win,” Lila added. “It doesn’t mean you’re going to win. It doesn’t mean she’s right. But somewhere, somehow, by God, she’s gonna find a way to win.”

That was the team he wanted to be on. He was tired of losing.

The house shook as the front door slammed, urging him back to reality. He was late. Toothpaste hung from his lip when he noticed the blinking red light of his cell phone. A dying heartbeat, slower and slower. He listened to the two voicemails. The first was Vic’s slurred speech from the night before, an out-of-character unintelligible rant from his trusted deputy. And then there was the solemn message from Vic’s wife, who quietly told Cliff they were at Suburban Hospital. Vic wouldn’t be coming to the office today.

