

A Tiny Perfect World

by [Larry McCloskey](#) (January 2025)



California City Scene (David Atkins, 1978)

A life should not be so filled with detail. There had been a crisis at the office yesterday. The power point presentation had not been finished until almost 7 p.m. He had promised Catie that he would finish building her playhouse before leaving, so he had not been able to pack until 9:30 p.m. He had promised to call his sister. The leaky toilet had not fixed itself. Constance was upset that he had to leave while she had report cards to finish. Garbage and re-cycling remained undone.

And there were worrisome issues to occupy his mind. Interest rates were going up. The stock market continued downward. The neighbour who had seemed so friendly was threatening to sue. Stephanie's tuition was due, Emma's braces pending. Constance had her heart set on a trip this summer, the one they had never taken.

Robert shifted uneasily in his seat. He repositioned his glasses and folded his newspaper into view, just so. The first sip of coffee was a bit too hot. A moment of burning on his tongue gave way to a pleasant sensation as the strong coffee permeated his gut.

There was nothing more to be done so it was time to stop worrying Robert told himself. Usually, Robert surrendered himself to the ritual of the airport. But distraction saturated the opinion piece he had started, all the cleverness and insight lost. Still, his eyes followed the print line by line unaware of the separation between mind and body—until a child laughed.

Robert glanced up from his dissonance half expecting to see Catie. And for a moment the expression staring back at him over his reading glasses was his daughter. But no, Catie lingered silent and motionless hugging Geoffrey the giraffe under warm blankets in her bed at home. This little girl's laughter began to expand, from a giggle to a squeal, and soon into an infectious roar. Laughter followed in her wake as the

little girl ran, wildly swinging her arms while an audience of passive morning travellers followed her every move. People watched, uncharacteristically as one, intent upon the little girl bursting with delight so early in the morning. People watched the little girl as she reached towards the caregiver and gave her a mischievous tag. The care-giver and the child were playing a familiar game fully known only to themselves. Then for an instant, in a serious mood, the little girl stretched up as far as she could reach and touched her caregiver tenderly on the cheek. People watched, some shyly, as if unintentionally they were witnessing a scene of great intimacy.

The child played with boundless energy and held the audience captive with her surprisingly agile movements. The caregiver responded with much care and some boredom, as adults tend to do. Robert folded his newspaper into his lap, abandoning the pretence of reading. He watched the little girl, so much like his own little girl. Now she was circling around the caregiver, falling into her arms with the completion of each lap. A thought percolated through the minutiae of Robert's mind and his lips formed two barely perceptible words, "she's happy."

Once the boarding announcement was made the caregiver handed the little girl over to a waiting flight attendant. Though she was travelling alone she didn't lack for attention from almost everyone she met. On board a succession of flight attendants visited the little girl who seemed comfortable with pleasant strangers in official roles.

Robert's seat was two rows behind the little girl. Normally, during one of his many flights Robert would indulge himself and read a novel. Often, he began reading from where he had left off the previous flight. Today Robert's novel lay unopened. Instead, he listened to the hurried conversation the little girl had with the cluster of visitors in her orbit, and he began to wonder.

Only once the plane thundered down the runway and into the air, was the little girl left alone. Even then she talked wildly mostly to herself about the thrill of it all, while passive passengers smiled to themselves.

When the plane reached its flying height, an attendant explained to the girl that the staff would all be busy serving refreshments for awhile. The little girl said that she understood and continued talking about how well she understood long after the attendant had gone.

Robert reached into his wallet and pulled out a small picture of Catie. He moved tentatively from his seat and sat beside the little girl who responded with a warm smile.

"Hello, my name is Robert."

"Hello, my name is Erin."

"I'll bet that you are just about six years old."

"Hey, how did you know that?"

"I have a daughter who is six. Her name is Catie, and you remind me of her."

Erin's nose and forehead wrinkled as she asked, "She does? Is she missing her four limbs too?"

Robert hesitated only for a moment. "No, but she likes adventure just like you."

Erin grinned.

"And look, she's missing her front teeth like you."

Erin carefully held the photo with her prosthetic fingers. She studied Catie's features and wrinkled up her nose when she spoke. "She does look like me."

"Her hair is the same colour as yours, and she wears it in a

ponytail just like your do.”

“Cool. Does she like to fly in an airplane?”

“She sure does.”

Erin sighed. “I wish I could fly like a sparrow. Do you think Catie would like to play with me?”

“I’m sure she would. I’ll bet you two would have fun in her brand-new playhouse.”

“There’s a playhouse in the hospital I go to sometimes.”

“Do you live in Ottawa?”

“No, I’ve been visiting my dad here. I live in Halifax with my mom, cause it’s best for kids to live with their moms.”

Robert looked serious for a moment. Erin smiled and changed the subject. “Do you know how this works?” She pointed to the prosthetic hinge at her right knee. Erin didn’t wait for an answer. “It moves like this, cause my artificial leg starts above the knee on this side and below the knee on this side. See?”

When Robert did not say ‘I see’ right away, Erin touched his arm. Robert could feel slight movement within her prosthetic as she repeated, ‘see?’ Robert felt a thrill of tenderness and said, “Yes, I see.”

Robert tried to reason how Erin’s mechanical touch could be as expressive as a concert pianist until she pressed onward. “Will you play a game with me?”

“Sure.”

Erin squealed and turned in her seat. “OK, we’re going to play house like we’re in a playhouse only we’re going to be in the sky and we’re going to pretend that our house is the one that we are passing over and you’re the dad and I’m the mom, except

we live together, and we 17 kids and lots of pigs and cows and horses and a skunk cause we love animals, because, because..." Erin paused, either out of breath or temporarily out of words before pointing far, far below, "... it's so beautiful."

Robert looked out the window at the passing fields, shades of green, deeper green and greenest green. And then tiny houses, surrounded by evenly shaped fields, all ordered and still.

Robert played his part well for the duration of the flight. Erin was amused by the tiny, perfect houses, until they became big and imperfect once again. Erin had enjoyed the company and the game, but when Robert had said goodbye she did not answer because she was busy telling an attendant about their 17 children. Erin was used to people entering and exiting her life. It had always been so. Robert felt silly for feeling a pang of disappointment, but he felt it nonetheless.

Robert's presentation at the conference went well enough. There was no thunder, but the information was given, and had been received with some interest. He had not had time to edit the slides as he had intended, but after twenty years he could fake it.

Robert's novel was not opened on the flight home. Usually, he reserved an aisle seat, but on this flight he sat a window seat looking down. He watched the tiny houses and perfectly ordered green fields and thought about Erin. In fact, Erin had never left his thoughts. He thought of Erin with sadness and then felt ashamed of himself. Erin didn't need him to feel sorry for her—there would be too much of that in her life. Robert decided he wasn't feeling sorry for Erin exactly, for she had seemed happy. It was fear that Robert felt. Fear for a future when she would not face each day, as she now did, swept up in the moment and by the beauty of life. Fear for how she might change the way she saw the world and herself. Robert knew how teenagers could agonize about their body image. Robert feared that Erin would stop loving herself and that she

would not believe that anyone could love her.

Robert decided that he had always lived in fear. He had made decisions out of fear, had insulated his life out of fear, and yet fear had never left him. Until he met Erin.

Robert had stopped thinking about the minutiae of his life, and for that he felt grateful. He leaned forward in his seat and placed his face on the windowpane, absorbed in the details of the tiny, perfect world below. And only slowly did he become aware of the panic and fear inside the plane. A passenger screamed as the plane's wing dipped dramatically to the left. A flight attendant attempting to inspire calm looked more terrified than the screaming passenger. Other passengers began screaming as it became apparent that the engine on the left side of the plane was on fire. The airplane became increasingly turbulent and soon began a steep descent from which it would never recover.

Robert gripped the seat in front of him and gazed out the window. He thought about his family. Memories, thoughts long since buried, came back into his mind. Ice cream on Stephanie's nose when she was four. Emma, age five or six, burying her bleeding face into his shirt after being hit by an errant swing in the park. Catie grinning, arms in the air, after scoring her first and only goal in soccer, just two weeks ago. He thought of Constance, the way she had looked at him in the restaurant on the day they had met. And he thought about Erin as the plane's wing dipped unnaturally low in the sky. Robert looked at the perfect fields and the tiny houses where 17 kids might live, and mouthed the words, "Yes, it is very beautiful."

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Larry McCloskey has had eight books published, six young adult as well as two recent non-fiction books. *Lament for Spilt Porter* and *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (2018 & 2020 respectively) won national Word Guild awards. *Inarticulate* won best Canadian manuscript in 2020 and recently won a second Word Guild Award as a published work. He recently retired as Director of the Paul Menton Centre for Students with Disabilities, Carleton University. Since then, he has written a satirical novel entitled *The University of Lost Causes* (Castle Quay Books, June, 2024), and has qualified as a Social Work Psychotherapist. He lives in Canada with his three daughters, two dogs, and last, but far from least, one wife. His website is larrymccloskeywriter.com.

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