

Snippets of Gratitude #1 (1989-1993)



Resisting casual voodoo:

Waiting for the transferring bus home late night, it occurred that I might already be as familiar at the Lougheed bus loop as the red-haired mentally handicapped fellow who imagines he is directing traffic there. In that very thought, I was jolted in the tap on the shoulder.

"How are you doing?"

I flinched around to a familiar owlish face. It belonged to the fellow applicant for the Public Service Commission with whom I had first chatted one dark morning about a year ago. In the hour wait in a corridor of Simon Fraser University before taking the entry-level exam, we had spoken of comparative difficulties of our job searches. He said that his bachelor's degree in Political Science wasn't helping him much. After the 20-minute exchange, I was left feeling vulnerable for talking too freely—especially about having lived in Zimbabwe.

Sometime last winter I ran into the fellow again at the bus loop where, more curtly than the first time, we exchanged updates. He was still searching for a decent job while I had just started substitute teaching. A couple of times thereafter, we'd nodded in passing in bus aisles. Last night at 10:30 PM, both waiting for the #156 bus, there was no avoiding talking again.

"Geez," he grinned, glasses glinting in the amber light, "you can't be teaching this late!"

"I'm on an evening shift," I said, taking a sideways step under the shelter awning.

"Really? It seems awful late."

There was no mistaking his suspicion that I must be lying.

"Yep, it's a late shift," I resisted a compulsion to pull out worksheets from my book bag for evidence.

"Geez, I'm coming from a circus. Can you believe that?"

Ignoring the opportunity to hear about dancing elephants, I asked: "You still working at the, um, the telephone survey job?"

He seized back the offensive. "Yep. Did you ever hear back from the Public Service Commission?"

"Naw," I lied, blinking away a particularly painful letter of rejection. "I never really bothered following up. I suppose you have to keep after them. I really wasn't that interested, anyway. I was just—"

"—just looking at options?" He said, finishing my sentence.

"Yeah. For a guy my age with a family it would be hard to get by on a salary of an entry-level civil servant. Especially since promotions are so slow in the Public Service."

Just as after our first chat in the corridor of the university, I had the same sinking sense of revealing too much. After his query about how my "African wife" was adjusting to the climate, I lapsed into silence... That 2 strangers waiting in line would both remember the precise details of their encounters, was in any case, revealing...

Moments later, we shuffled together onto the nearly empty #156 bus and obligingly took seats opposite one another. As the bus headed out, I closed eyes to avoid conversation across the aisle. Ignoring my feigned weariness, he yipped over the aisle above the roar of the bus:

"You might not want to hear this— but your language classes for immigrants are a waste of taxpayers' money. It's such a farce that they're getting them for free. I know you're benefitting by having a job— but honestly, how many of those guys would bother taking English classes if they had to pay out their own pockets? The government's just trying to get immigrant votes. But that's not the worst I'm heard! Did you know that some artists are getting paid by the government to go off to live in Africa or somewhere? It's freakin' crazy!"

With half-closed eyes, I nodded. Fortunately, I had only 5 minutes to endure.

One stop before mine, I was already standing in the aisle. Pulling the cord, I gave a gruff farewell and scrabbled towards the rear door.

I hopped down onto the sidewalk, in a stab of unease. How is it that this guy was able to make me feel guilty for getting a luckier break than him?



Before dawn, there was another distressing phone call from Zimbabwe. The latest news is that Sister-in-law R. is severely jaundiced and waiting to get a blood transfusion from the Macheke hospital.

Even as I began taking these notes, T.'s sobs were echoing from the bathroom. When I came to the bathroom doorway, I could not fail to be reminded of the questions of the owlish fellow last night at the bus stop.

"So how is your wife liking Canada?" he had asked.

"Not bad." I had said looking across North Road towards McDonalds' golden arch.

"She must be awful depressed about this cold."

"Not really."

"Are you guys going to stay here?"

"It's our home."

"Heh, your wife probably doesn't feel that way. She probably gets awful homesick."

At that point my frown shut him up.

Just a couple of hours ago, I watched my wife's milky tears dropping into the gray tub water, unable to give her comfort. Yet even in that desolate moment there was consolation that our situation is immeasurably better than it was a year ago. It will take a lot more than casual voodoo from a stranger at the bus stop to pry loose our fingerhold...

1989, Oct.

The blessing of the bath toys:

Rounding the corner in front of the apartment complex after walking up Smith Ave. from the bus stop, I scanned across the parking stalls. The spot where the brown AMC Eagle should be was empty. At the top of the stairs, I was further jolted by a siren in the distance. It was a shuddering reminder that T. has had her driver's license for only a few months.

Turning the key, I pushed open the door to an eerie stillness. The scattering of toys on the carpet looked pitiful in the absence of the girls running to the door to meet me.

Edgily, I slipped off shoes and peered over at the telephone answering machine. There was no blinking light. Neither was there a note on the counter which T. usually left when she was in a better mood than she was this morning:

'I can't put up with any more of this... I'm saving for a ticket home. One of these days you're going to come back and find me gone!'

The kitchen smells and unwashed dishes stirred a little hope. Hopefully, she'd just gone to the mall. I glanced at my watch. But it was nearly 5:00 PM. She's never been out driving with the kids this late in the afternoon!

I thought of the old car— wheezing, smoking and leaking oil. I should never have bought that piece of junk! It was T. who urged me to accept the offer from her apartment friend who was moving away. To think we'd trusted that woman enough not to have it checked over by a mechanic! Now our babies— still without car seats— are strapped into those flimsy seat belts. Would T. even call me if she ran into trouble?

Swallowing back the panic, I peeked out the window over the balcony rail at the parking space. It was still empty. I swung my bookbag on the desk and pulled off my sweaty jacket. Too upset to start on the lesson plan, I decided to run a bath...

Moments later, I leaned over the bathtub, watching the swirling water lift up bath toys before plucking them out. Family was everything. It would be impossible to do my dreary job without kids to come home to. It would be impossible to live here alone!

Suddenly there came a faint rumble, followed by MT's voice. "Can we have ice cream after supper, mum?"

In a breath-catching swell of gratitude, I grabbed up the blue toy whale from the bathmat. Winding it up, I dropped it back in the water to turn a few happy circles...

1990, January

In the eagle's censure:

At 3:30 PM, exactly at the end of class, Lam Thanh rushed forward with a Red Riding Hood basket of flowers. In the midst of it was a greyish eagle with spread wings.

A little stunned, I tilted the basket to better view the eagle. It was molded from what appeared to be soapstone.

"Why thank you," I faltered, "this is incredibly thoughtful."

I blinked into the eagle's glass eyes.

Just then Janusz, the young Pole, stomped out of the classroom, muttering: "Tomorrow, tomorrow."

He was obviously upset that Lam Thanh had not waited to give the gift until tomorrow during the class wrap-up potluck. It seems there was miscommunication between the Asians and Europeans.

Within seconds after the gift was handed over, all the students had scurried out the door except Juraj, the Pole with a punk haircut. He shuffled forward with a smirk: "Can I help you carry this, Mr. F.?"

"Thanks, Juraj. Just to the staff room."

Moments later near my desk in in the office area, CD, the lanky department old timer held aloft my yellow-eyed eagle. A few other instructors, just out of class, turned in amusement.

"That deserves a kitsch blue ribbon," said one of the ESL blackbelts.

"It could be an excellent garlic crusher," offered newbie AB, vying to be known for his wit.

"I think we need start a shrine," said up-and-comer DH, "Just like they have down at the main campus— a shrine of kitsch gifts."

Although I smiled in the requisite collegiality— a bitter bile rose in my throat. 15 minutes later when I clomped down the back steps, I dared not look down at my shoulder bag from which the head of the soapstone eagle protruded, the fierce eyes accusing...



"Dada," chirped MT, later in the evening, "look, I made a bed for the eagle!"

On the living floor, my 5-year-old crouched above the soapstone eagle which was swaddled in a scarf and a woolen toque.

I crouched down beside her. As always, I was touched by the generosity of those who didn't even have jobs. I could only hope that there was coercion of those students who would rather not have contributed to the gift— for whatever reasons.

"Daddy, look," cooed MH, "the eagle is sleeping!"

In an upwelling of guilt and gratitude I touched the beak. There was still no hint of forgiveness in the unblinking yellow eyes.

1990, December

One more miracle to be propitiated:

This morning around 2:00 AM, amid in the fevered circlings of flu-fevered insomnia, a disturbing memory surfaced:

It was from August 1988, in the final days before the departure from Zimbabwe:

T., our 2 baby girls and I were waiting with our luggage by the main highway across from her uncle's bottle store in Topola. We were circled by T.'s tearful sisters and their solemn-eyed children bidding us farewell.

Finally, a white Peugeot was flagged down. The burly Harare bureaucrat driver and sole occupant was at first reluctant to take all four of us to Harare. It was only with the wheedling of T.'s brother and a \$5 note slipped into his hand that the driver submitted. Gratefully, we squeezed into the backseat. We felt lucky to be riding to Harare in a car instead of on the metal seats of a fetid and slow-moving bus. That was until the fumes of alcohol wafted into the backseat.

In the four hours that followed, the driver weaved between traffic lanes overtaking lorries on blind corners. He screeched to booze refueling stops at every bottle store along the 200 km. stretch of sizzling highway. Though the long waits, we huddled in the sweltering backseat with MT on my lap and 10-month-old TE in her mother's. When we bulleted forth to the next bar, I could only grit teeth in the hot wind.



Now I shudder in that memory, filtered through a northern sensibility. Putting ourselves at the mercy of a drunk speeding driver on a busy road filled with careening overloaded lorries— many of them with drunks at the wheel. What responsible parent would put his infants at such risk?

Swallowing repeatedly on raw throat, I acknowledged just one of many miracles that has delivered us to the safety of the grey north. Some sacrificial offering in obliged!

1991, March

Of molten tin and liquid gold:

With lip still tingling from a whipping rendition for the girls of ‘*Jimmy Crack Corn*’, I lay back on the bed tapping my Marine Band harmonica against the blue storybook.

Checking my wrist to confirm that it was already 8:00 PM, I cleared throat and began the bedtime story. Selected by TE, who lay with her head cradled against my right shoulder, last night’s tale was Hans Christian Andersen’s: ‘*The Steadfast Tin Soldier*’.

While reading in a grave tone, I remembered just how I was enchanted with the melancholy Danish tale the first time I read it in a grade 3 primer.

Long before any understanding of “unrequited love”, the one-legged tin soldier’s hopeless love for the delicate ballerina seemed intuitively relatable. The ending in which both the tin soldier and the paper ballerina are cast into the fireplace by the jealous Jack-in-the-Box was heart-rending. The discovery of the heart shaped blob of melted tin among the ashes by the charwoman was as empty a consolation as the rising of Jesus from the tomb. From death there can be no return! Even the 8-year-old grasped that the melding the tin and the paper ashes was no meaningful consolation for the tin soldier’s unconsummated love...

The same haunting was to come in adolescence in first reading of Quasimodo’s love for Esmeralda in ‘*the Hunchback of Notre Dame*’...

Still, in remembering that child’s intuition of hopeless love, could I possibly have imagined that one day I would read ‘*The Steadfast Tin Soldier*’ to two daughters more beautiful than either the ballerina or Esmeralda?

For a moment, I dropped the book on my chest and took a deep breath of liquid gold...

1991, April

Alone on the playground:

Amid squeals of delight from MT and TE who ran back and forth between us, T. knocked away the multicolored beach ball from my dribble. With a schoolgirl's agility, she jumped and took a clean shot at the basketball hoop. I caught the rebound from the rim.

Meanwhile, a blonde jean jacketed woman alone on the nearest bench pretended not to gawk. Cross-legged, she glanced back towards the little girl who was sitting forlornly on the swing. The girl, a couple of years older than ours, looked like she might have a daddy who was black.

The blonde woman turned back towards us, absently flicking her cigarette. In the next glimpse she was staring sidelong, in unmistakable gloom. Was she raising that little girl alone? The coffee-skinned girl was looking at MT who was waving her arms for a throw.

I rolled the ball towards little TE, tingling in gratitude, immeasurable.

1991, May

Marking the fortieth:

“OK, sing for daddy!”

On the bus ride from work I had been despairing about turning forty.

Yet I came home to a smiling partner, and the aroma of spaghetti sauce, one of my favourite dishes. At my place at the table was a bottle of Beck’s deer and a homemade birthday card drawn by my 6-year-old.

After supper, I was on my second Becks’, leaning back on the sofa listening to the library tape of blues master and Reverend Gary Davis singing: *‘How Happy I am.’* Even for someone who had no desire for his soul to be washed in the blood of the lamb (“*Glory, hallelujah!*”) the joy was infectious. Indeed, when T. and the girls came down the stairs singing ‘happy birthday’, my heart was already soaring.

All 3 were wrapped in towels, still dripping from the bath.

"How many men," asked T. grinning broadly, "have 3 half-naked girls to sing them happy birthday?"

The girls giggled and hid faces in their bath towels.

I shook head in an instant of wonderment: all the lost opportunities and screw-ups aside: I really have won the cosmic lottery!

1991, September

Of the rare pinches of envy:

At 7:00 PM, the girls and I trudged along the Forest Grove Pipeline trail back from the corner store. 6-year-old MT and her 4-year-old sister were tugging between them, the paper bag of penny candy purchased along with the carton of milk.

“Com’on, girls,” I tsked, “share like you promised!”

A moustached man standing on the path beside a black dog glanced over at us. I knew he was a neighbour, living in one of the bachelor apartments of our complex. Although we have never spoken, many mornings at 6:30 AM I have seen him walking his dog. Sometimes he followed his sniffing dog with a flashlight.

Just as in his morning appearances, he was scowling. His grey-muzzled dog sniffed at us as we passed. Hands in pockets, the man turned and stared into the bushes.

"That's mine! That's mine," cried MT, "The red one was mine. Daddy, she took my Twizzler!"

"Shhh, shhh. I'll take it all away if you don't share. I'm serious."

I glanced back towards the man. I'd seen him driving out of the complex in a jeep with a fancy touring bike racked on the back. Having a decent job here without dependents puts all kinds of fancy toys within reach. Maybe like some of my colleagues, he has a time-share in Mexico...

For a moment I felt a pinch of envy.

"Let's go right home, dad, I'm cold!"

MT and TE grabbed at my sleeves. Behind us, the dog's nails rasped in the gravel.

I shivered. With children as beautiful as these, only a fucking fool would even for an instant—envy a lonely man waiting for his dog to shit.

1991, December

All is vanity:

The living room of the immaculate house at the end of the *cul de sac* in the leafy Capitol Hill neighbourhood of Burnaby was hushed as an art gallery.

With the owner away for the weekend, T. and I were getting a brief tour of the house from WS, the older brother of the German engineer who lived there alone. WS, who taught at Kutama Secondary in Zimbabwe where I had once worked, was visiting from Germany with his brother, who was recently bereaved.

Holding our little girls' hands in the living room, we gingerly passed the nooks filled with fine old porcelain and rare German etchings in mahogany frames.

"Careful, now, don't touch!" T. said softly to our 6-year-old as we stopped to admire the furnishings. There was a table of dark oak with filigreed legs and French settees with red velvet cushions. It was definitely not a room designed to accommodate children or pets. The museum-like silence was only faintly disturbed by the tick of a Bavarian cuckoo clock.

"So, your brother and his wife didn't have children?" I asked my former colleague.

"She didn't want," he said in his brunt fashion, "My brother had a son from his previous marriage. He did want another. A daughter. She didn't."

"How old is his son?"

"27."

"Where is he?"

"In Calgary."

"Married?"

"No, he's a failure— just does odd jobs. Sometimes works as a waiter. My brother invited him to live here in the basement, but he refused. He hates to listen to his father's admonitions."

With a grim nod, W.S. slipped around me to withdraw a book from the mahogany bookcase.

"This— *this* was my late sister-in-law's child."

He handed it over. '*Ribbons of Steel: The Story of the Northern Alberta Railways.*' I leafed through. The photos were sharp, and the paper was high-quality. On the overleaf of the dustjacket was a bio-blurb of the author: '*E.S., widely travelled in Africa and Asia...*'

The accompanying photo showed an attractive woman, late-30ish, with a glint of sensuality in her eyes. It was impossible to connect the photo with the pink plastic invalid chair in the bathtub.

I closed the cover. "So, what kind of cancer was it?"

"Breast cancer", said WS in his cheery grimness. " She let it go too late. She thought she could be tough."

I slipped the book back beside its leather-bound companion, a German title.

"Some of these antiques must be priceless," I marvelled.

"For more than 20 years my brother worked hard," said WS. "He started as an electrician. Worked himself through his engineering degree. He had a very stressful job, few vacations."

"Well," I shook my head, 'He certainly surrounded himself with beauty."

"But you see," said WS, in his schoolmaster's tone, "'All that glitters is not gold.'"



Looking out the picture window at the panorama of Burrard Inlet and the North Shore mountains beyond. *All is vanity*, I silently intoned. Never again will I curse the dirty laundry and toys scattered amid our particle board furniture. Not even will I lament the poetry, never to be written...

1993, August

