

Snippets of Gratitude #2 (1993-1999)

But for the grace:

“How are you today sir?”

The man in the plastic poncho who rang the doorbell in the midst of my late afternoon lesson planning, smiled meekly.

Holding the door, I frowned. "Can I help you, sir?"

"I'm just doing a survey..." His eyes darted sideways as he stuttered out his memorized script. "Um, where do you get your oil changes and tune-ups? Minilube is offering a special oil change discount coupon."

Normally, I would have shut the door before the sales pitch. But then he caught my eye in a look of beaten down desperation. He was about my age, hawking coupons on a miserable afternoon. Maybe it's just an excuse to get out of a crummy room; maybe just to keep sane he has to pretend that he has a job. Having once walked in his soggy shoes, how could I fail to show a bit of heart?

“It's worth 15 bucks but we're selling it for only \$5.” He said, digging beneath his poncho.

“Hold on. Where's the location?”

“Um, let me check. I'm pretty sure your nearest one is on Lougheed highway.”

Wouldn't he know for sure? Suddenly, it seemed too much of an effort to go back upstairs for my wallet.

“I think I'll pass for now, sorry.”

Even as I closed the door, he caught my eye again. Perhaps he sensed just how much guilt I was prepared to bear for saving \$5...

1993, December

Of karmic debt:

I was poking about my bookshelf listening absently to the Friday afternoon CBC talk show, when I was jolted by a familiar name.

It came in the interview with a local filmmaker about his just-completed documentary honouring the life and legacy of JG, “a passionate activist for social justice.”

So young! First there was the shock of realizing that someone I had met, however briefly, was no longer among the living. I then thought of my encounter with JG a few years ago in the office of the IDRC (International Development Research Centre) in toney Kitsilano, Vancouver. I had no idea at that time that he was also a leading activist for AIDS almost to the hour before the dread disease took his life.

I crouched down and listened more closely. An issue of particular concern for JG, apparently, had been AIDS victims in Africa without access to drugs available in the west. In his final years, he had even moved to Ottawa to network with NGOs and pressure government in that cause... By the end of the interview, I was humbled by the evidence of a man who had so heroically lived his truncated span.

Still, the memory of our short encounter remained troubling:



It had been in my first month of desperate job searching after landing back in Canada from Zimbabwe. Initially keen for a career change, I was following up on letters sent to a score of development agencies from CARE International to Save the Children. My phone call to the local IDRC office was answered by JB. He accepted, however tepidly, my request to drop by for a chat.

Thus, one drizzly morning in October, I landed before the desk of a 30ish Keith Richards lookalike with gold earrings. The interview did not do well. I haltingly told my story (a decade of teaching secondary school in Africa; recently back with immigrant wife and 2 small kids; eager to volunteer) while he grew impatient.

After hearing my introduction, his brusque reply was memorable enough to later note down verbatim:

"Sorry, we don't encourage volunteers. First of all, volunteers have to be trained if they are going to do anything at all effective. In any case, we don't have a budget to pay people, so we don't like to exploit trained people or waste their time."

It seemed plain that he took me as a missionary type too naïve to grasp my complicity in neo-colonialism. I neither had any doubt that immediately after that 15-minute interview, my resume was in his wastebasket. I hunched out towards the bus stop, intimated and angry. *'What an arrogant bastard!'* I fumed, *'How dare he stereotype me?'*

At the same time, I was undeniably envious of a cool-looking guy in the kind of job for which I had imagined qualifying. Yet there was no mistaking his contempt for what he assumed me to represent...

But yesterday afternoon, that encounter in October '88 came back into focus in an utterly different light.



After hearing the CBC interview, I saw myself back in in the chair facing the Guatemalan workers' solidarity mural overhanging JP's desk. In that imagining, JB was still narrowing his eyes at the nervous bald fellow before him, but his thoughts were as follows:

'O, sure—you think of yourself a tough luck case. But you don't have a fucking clue, buddy, how it feels to be haunted ever day by your T-cell count!'

In that imagining, the sudden curling of JB's lip, was from a jab of cosmic irony. It was quite conceivable that for an instant, he looked at the nervous man before him not with contempt—but with something like envy...

I turned off the radio and blinked out at the feeble March light though the slats in the blinds... What does it take to satisfy the karmic debt of blessings undeserved?

1994, March

The travails of line up duty:

"So, what are you readin'? Herodotus?"

In my first day in the church basement ESL department to which I have been seconded, it seemed apt that I shared "line up monitoring" duty with a security guard. What was unexpected was that the blue-uniformed guard would be keen to show that it was only cruel luck that our roles were not reversed.

I had been counting the line-up of students registering before the first day of term when he nodded towards my pocket. Therein was a paperback of '*The Histories*' for the lulls in the make-work duty I had been assigned. With a smile, I lifted the book to show him the title.

"That's about the Peloponnesian Wars isn't it?" He nudged up his oversized black glasses.

"Yes, that's part of it."

"I know. I read the whole thing for a Classics course in university. My favourite book for that course, though, was '*The Odyssey*.'

"Right. I enjoyed that too. At least the English version of it." I looked down the line, pretending to continue my count.

"So, what are you doing here?" He pushed up his sliding glasses again then crossed his arms.

"O, I'm one of the teachers in the programme." I smiled more stiffly.

"Hey," he leaned closer and asked *sotto voce*, "do you *really* think students learn English quicker with ESL classes? Immigrants used to learn it without any classes."

It was certainly not the first time that such a statement in the form of rhetorical question had been posed to me by a timid white male in a shitty job. I turned half-round.

"Well," I started, "In the 1990s, immigrants to Canada come with different skills and different needs than most immigrants did in the old days. Actually, giving them language training is a kind of social investment that pays off when—"

"Over there, please."

Before I was able to complete the standard defence of my job, the security guard had stepped away to nudge a document-clutching student into the line-up. With a frown of authority, he then slowly began to circle the line up as if in demonstration of a gross injustice. When a \$7-an-hour security guard took assigned duty more seriously than an ESL teacher on a comfy government-subsidized salary—what in hell had the country come to?



"My wife's a convention refugee."

After the guard and I resumed mutually ignoring one another's presence, I was approached by a silver-haired fellow with a limp. Because full payment of fees was required in advance, he was unable to complete his wife's registration. The Salvadorean wife stood beside, straining to understand the exchange.

"Any cheque I wrote now would bounce," said the doleful husband.

"You could pay by VISA," I lamely offered.

"When you're unemployed, your credit cards are about the first thing you get rid of," he said.

"You could always try social assistance," I said, shifting eyes from his abnegation. "I really don't know the rules," I added, "But it wouldn't hurt to try."

"I've had enough of the social service run-around. That'd be a waste of time." He dropped his eyes and clicked his tongue. Perhaps he felt betrayed by someone who initially looked like he may share a common cause.

"Well, it's possible they could pay fees for ESL classes," I said. "You could make the argument that she needs language training for work."

"Thanks anyway. By the way, what's your job here?"

"I'm, um, one of the teachers."

"Really? That's nice." After a long moment staring at the wall, he limped away— his game leg possibly grown heavier.

With a helpless smile, the Salvadorean wife followed her improvident husband.

Back at the front of the line, the security guard was holding back the line with the gestures of a traffic cop. Yes, our situations could certainly be reserved. Still, there will always be a sting in the intimation that I am a beneficiary of something more than a dice roll. In the shiver of irony, I stuffed the paperback deeper in pocket and resumed counting...

1996, September

The following vignettes are set in Dubai, UAE, where I worked for two years during a leave of absence from my Canadian job.

Of budding integrity:

In the middle an otherwise lazy Friday afternoon, MT who had been at the apartment pool with her siblings, was frantically banging on the door. She was pulling along little MH who was holding a towel on his head, stunned.

“He’s got a bad cut,” sobbed MT. “It’s my fault!”

I lifted the towel. The cut was deep but fortunately not badly bleeding.

“I pushed him down—I didn’t mean to!” MT cried.

“What’s the matter?” said T. rushing in from the bedroom.

“Get dressed. We have to take him to the clinic.”

“O my god!” she put her hand to mouth.

“It’s not that bad. He wasn’t knocked out.”

“I could have killed my brother!” MT wailed.

T. gasped at the cut. “You play so rough with him! My god, he’s only 5 years old!”

MT continued to cry as T. wrapped a fresh towel around little MH’s head.

“Calm down, it was an accident,” I said. “Just stay here with your sister. Your mother and I will take him to the clinic. Don’t go back to the pool.”

T. carried little MH in arms into the elevator. Mercifully, a taxi was waiting just below the entrance of the Oasis Residence, so we did not have to stand in the blast-furnace heat. By the time we reached Al Riffa Clinic, the towel T. held to our little boy’s head with soaked in blood.



Minutes later, we gravely watched a Keralan doctor stitch his wound.

“You’re sure he did not lose consciousness?” asked the doctor.

“My daughter, said he didn’t.” I said.

“Just don’t let him fall asleep until tonight.”

“We won’t.”

“He’ll be fine,” the doctor wagged his head in reassurance.

Despite the used dressings spilling from a steel wastebasket and surgical instruments soaking in yellow liquid (presumed to be antiseptic), T. and I exchanged a glance of mutual relief...

Meanwhile, though the treatment, MH shivered but did not even cry.

“When your stitches heal you can use my mask anytime,” I said, squeezing his hand. It was wrenching to remember that just an hour before the accident, I had scolded him for taking my ‘precious’ snorkelling mask to the pool.

“I didn’t mean to get angry with you honey. I’m sorry.”

“That’s OK, dad,” he said.

Amid remorse and relief came a stirring of pride. How many other parents have such early assurance of a fledgling’s budding integrity?

1997, September (Dubai)

fwt

A birth at the Burami Oasis:

"It's a very good family."

"Good bloodline?"

"Yes, it has a very good bloodline," said the Emirati acquaintance of fellow Canadian teacher, JR. With the sunset deepening the ochre of the fossil valley outside of the Burami Oasis, Oman, along with our gaggle of kids—we watched the camel that had just given birth. The fuzzy newborn stood unsteadily under her. A bluish sac still dangled from her bloodied under-quarters.

Its proud owner directed his assistant to bring out from the back of a land-cruiser, a silver coffee pot. Filled from a thermos, the offering of coffee in tiny cups was a gesture of hospitality in the tradition of the Bedu forebears of the date farmer and businessman. While we sipped, the Emirati's own 2 boys, in *dishdashas* as immaculate as their father's, swung on the stunted acacia tree behind.

Meanwhile, the sensitive-eyed beast moved up to the fence, drooping her long neck over to smell each of us—even MH, who was tying his shoelace when his head was sniffed.

"This is her first birth," said the owner. "She still needs to bring down," he motions with his hands, "You know get rid of the, um—"

"The afterbirth?" I said.

He nodded. "Yes, that needs to come out before her baby can drink."

As the baby camel, nuzzled the mother's underside, I looked over at MH.

"Is this more interesting than the Cartoon channel?" I whispered, patting his shoulder.

His eyes widened.

Just a handful more of such moments and it will seem worth the heavy sacrifice of sojourning in this country...

1998, February (Dubai)

Of stick figure happy faces:

“Look what MH drew at school,” said TE when I came into the apartment, exhausted from another long day.

She held up a drawing of a stick-figure bald guy whirling with a happy-face smile along with two smaller stick figures, also with happy faces. ‘*Fun on the bumper cars*’ was his caption.

It was 3 weeks ago that we went on an excursion to Safa Park where we rode the bumper cars. Since then have I given him so much as a half-hour of undivided time?

Despite the usual excuses (“*I’m tired... I’m busy... wait until the weekend...* ”) he hasn’t given up. Just yesterday, while I was sitting in the usual place at the computer, he asked me to make him a paper airplane. My sloppily folded sheet of paper somehow succeeded in swooping across the carpet. The mere 10-minutes of attention earned me a heart melting smile.

“Where is he now?”

He’s up at Javen’s apartment,” Said TE, dropping to her knees to poke at the tiny buttons of her ‘pet’ Tamagotchi.

It takes so little! It doesn’t matter to MH that he doesn’t have a sky-diving jock dad like his friend, Javen. But just because I am *his* dad—he is unconditionally devoted to me. What more could any father ask for?

For a moment I thought of another father, long ago. A smile, such as that he once offered an otherwise inept son who lifted a flopping trout into a creel, was rare. But that was a smile that was fixed in memory...

“Do you have batteries, dad?” asked TE.

“I’ll look. Just wait a few minutes, OK, honey?”

She glanced over, reminding me of an equal vulnerability.

1998, May (Dubai)

Of the mysterious sources of mercy:

"I almost drowned at the beach, dad." said MH, as I stepped through the door. He was toweling himself, still dribbling from the shower.

I dropped to knees. "My god— what happened?"

"I was with Javen and his dad at the beach. The waves knocked me down. Javen paddled over and saved me."

I sucked a sharp breath. The undertow of Jumeirah Beach is well known to be deadly.

"MH, what in hell were you doing in the water on a windy day? Where was Javen's dad?"

"He was way out deep."

I hugged him close, brushing the stubbled crown of his head. "Listen, you must *never* go into the water unless there is an adult close by, watching... If a wave ever does knock you down—you mustn't panic. You've got to keep calm. Keep calm—you got it?"

"I got it dad."

Patting his back, I trembled in the fleeting shadows of the darkest imaginings:

...I would probably have been paged in the midst of the teacher's meeting... The call would have come from Javen's dad.... I would have screamed in the middle of the buzzing hallway... I would have come back to the inconsolable wailing of T. and our daughters... The presence of neighbours would only have intensified the nightmare... With T. under sedation, I would probably have gone alone to identify the tiny cold body, still salty wet...

"My god, honey," I choked out. "Let's just make this a lesson— more important than any lesson we've ever had. OK?"

"OK, dad,"

Still holding him—warm and wet—I offered a silent prayer to the mysterious sources of mercy...

1999, April (Dubai)

