

Snippets of Gratitude #3 (2001-2007)



A serendipitous appearance:

Once too often, in opening the car door at the end of his soccer game, MH had asked:

“Did you see my goal dad?”

Once too often, I had had to make an excuse as to why I had been taking a walk or waiting in the car.

Yet last night at Charles Best school field, thankfully, another recollection of paternal neglect was avoided. Despite the December chill, I dropped the ‘*New Yorker*’ magazine on the car seat and wandered over to the sidelines.

When I stepped in among the line of the team’s dads and moms, MH, was in mid-field running forward. Seconds later, he took a pass then foot-worked around an opposing player. Then racing forward, he kicked a long corner goal. Even as the ball bounced back from the netting, he glanced over to the sidelines. I raised my glove with a whoop.

He saw me! He ran back over the center line, grinning as much for his father’s witnessing his prowess as for the back pats of teammates.

Eyes moistening, I realized that my son’s acceptance that he did not have a sports-minded dad made my presence in such serendipitous moments all the more meaningful...

2001, November

Of a momentary peace:

7:00 PM was too early to go to bed, but last night I had no desire to play music, read or write notes. I had started watching a rented video of *'Baise Moi'*— a French movie that had been positively reviewed by the *Guardian* as “an erotic thriller”. Without appetite for eros or violence, I switched off the TV— only to be taunted by silence...

There certainly were weekend nights in the last 6 months in which I enjoyed the solitude. That was when I was free from worry about MH and TE who were at their mother's for the weekend after staying with me through the week. Yet this week, they had not shown up at all. Neither had they called. What was going on?

While I did not want to show any alarm, I left 2 messages on my ex-wife's voice mail. Neither were answered. Should I be surprised if the kids preferred a suburban bungalow to a frowsy apartment? Was this apartment a setting in which they would be comfortable bringing their friends? There was no need to be reminded that nothing matters more to kids than the impression of friends...

Still, I thought of just how faithfully the kids kept up the routines until a few weeks ago: usually Monday to Thursday here and Friday to Sunday at their mother's. TE and MH even coordinated to ensure that I rarely spent a night alone.

I thought of summer nights when I would be aimlessly web-surfing in the gathering dusk, waiting for their arrival. Just as anxiety was rising, through the open patio door would be heard a skateboard rolling on the sidewalk below. I would rush to the balcony to see 10-year-old MH on his last sure-footed glide up to the apartment door. What relief!

Unable to overcome the resistance, I picked up the phone. Again, there was only voicemail. Paced the carpet, I kept redialing. Either the phone was off the hook or they were deliberately not answering the call display number. What if there is some crisis under the roof of the ex-wife? Would I even be informed? If only I could be relieved of the torment of guessing! Tempted to drive over and ring the doorbell, I realized a display of desperation would only enflame any pustule of alienation— whatever its cause...

In a bid to calm down, I prepared for a walk in the dark. I was at the door when the phone rang. If it had been another fax machine wrong number, I would have flung the phone against the wall... Hesitantly, I picked it up. It was MH!

“Dad, can I have a sleepover with my friend?”

I exhaled. “Certainly, you can, honey.”

It turned out that the kids had not come over on Sunday evening because an “uncle” (actually a distant relative) of their mom, temporarily posted at the Zimbabwean embassy in Ottawa, had been visiting. So there had been nothing to worry about.

2 hours later, MH and his 11-year old friend, J., were eating popcorn and watching a video from sleeping bags on the living room. Momentarily at peace, I retired to my futon.

2002, October

Of the day's delights:

There were the customary irritations: TE's eczema prescription was again delayed requiring a return visit to the Superstore pharmacy. A notice on the mailboxes from the Post Office proclaimed that delivery was temporarily suspended due to a break in... Another door ding was noticed on the van—probably from the college parking lot...

Yet despite these petty annoyances and in defiance of the negativity of late—I am resolved to emphasize yesterday's extraordinary delights:



A cashier at the Superstore checkout who remembered me from previous visits was unusually chatty. With no other customers behind, in the 90 seconds she checked through my items and watched me bag—she mentioned that she had Saturday evenings off and said it was a long time since she'd been to a restaurant. I was not quite tempted to slip her my phone number (dark haired and buxom but probably 20 years my junior) but the little unexpected exchange still brightened the morning ...

Even more unexpected was the reaction of woman encountered by the door of our apartment's underground garage. In bracing for a jolt of alarm, I was surprised when the attractive 40ish blonde lady in a slit batik wraparound gave me a warm smile.

In the afternoon while driving MH to his baseball game in Surrey, there was the unexpected delight of "*Flow Gently, Sweet Afton*" played on CBC FM. It is one of those old sentimental tunes like '*Danny Boy*' or '*My old Kentucky Home*' to which I'd never paid much attention. Yet hearing in the introduction that it was set to the lyrics of Robert Burns and that it was also a favourite of Mark Twain in his last months, gave it new meaning. Listening to its rendering by Scotswoman, Jo Stafford, I was visited by a glimmer of the comfort it must have given the dying literary lion himself...

Finally, after a twilight jog along the Coquitlam River trail, I came back to curl up with the *Lonely Planet South Pacific* guide, picked up last month in Value Village.

While I will almost certainly never experience the rapture of swimming in a turquoise lake in Palau—with more days like today, the imagining of it may suffice...

2003, August

Of masochistic joy:

Keys, glasses, wallet? Far too often of late, I perform this ‘*butoh*’ of panic. Most inexcusable is how I pull my kids into the grotesque ritual.

The latest performance was launched yesterday, just as I was about to head out the door for the evening shift. Glasses were on the face, keys in hand— but wallet? With no bulges felt in the pocket pats, I went back into the bedroom and looked in the usual spots. On the night table or on the dresser top? Nope. Under the bed? Negative.

In trill of panic, I checked my watch. Already, the plan to leave early for photocopying was shot. I had to leave within an hour just to make it to class on time.

I sat on the sofa arm and tried to visualize. Was it left it on the counter at Superstore in the morning? Might it be under the seat of the van or even lying under the car door in the underground parking? In fact, that was exactly where I had dropped it last summer when unloading groceries. MT had mercifully found it after I had already cancelled my credit card. Wincing, I recalled the stuttering call to VISA in which the attendant treated me like an Alzheimer’s senior. In failing to absorb that lesson, karmic debt could be due!

In the next frantic 30 minutes, I checked under and car, phoned Superstore customer service, and emptied all dresser drawers. I then made a frantic call to MT, who was at her mother’s.

“I lost my wallet. I need to leave for work with a half hour. You can probably think of places to look that I’m missing. Could you please come and help me?”

“You are always losing your wallet,” she said sharply. “Ask TE. It’s her turn.”

In the drone of the dial tone, I held the phone. There was no choice but to defy Murphy’s Law. Yet before driving to work without my license, I had to cancel my credit card again. I had just 15 minutes.

I was digging on top of the fridge for the VISA bill, when MH came through the door.

“What the matter dad?” he asked.

“I lost my wallet— again. You must think I’m losing my mind— but please. Can you help?”

A little frightened by my tone, my son nevertheless began turning over the cushions.

Down to just 5 minutes, with bookbag on shoulder I made a final swoop thorough my bedroom. In scanning the desktop, something caught my eye that had been previously missed: what looked like the stack of floppy disks had some black thing on top—

“My wallet!”

In my cry of joy MH rushed into the room.

I hugged him tightly, not the least perturbed by his lifted eyebrows.

“You’ve just got to always put it in the same place,” he admonished.

“I know honey— but you must have heard how good it feels when you stop beating your head against the wall.”

Indeed, I have given him and siblings ample evidence of the pathos of masochistic joy...

2003, November

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Yet another reprieve:

The clock-radio dial was a blurry 2:15 AM when I jerked awake. Romeo was not at the bottom of the bed. I had a fuzzy memory of letting the whimpering chihuahua out the front door around midnight. Could I have groggily closed the door, accidentally shutting him outside? In alarm, I rolled out of bed. MH's bedroom door was open and light from the bathroom showed he was under the covers. Yet the little dog was not curled up with him, either.

In a jolt of panic, I ran downstairs and opened the front door.

"Romeo!" I shouted into the blackness. I stepped outside in my underwear and peered around the corner of the building. I thought of the raccoons and coyotes that sometimes prowled around the dumpster. Was the poor little dog, smaller than a rabbit, already half-eaten? Running upstairs, I shook awake MH.

"You gotta wake up! Romeo's somewhere outside. We have to find him."

My loyal 12-year old, half-asleep, followed behind. "How did he get out?" he asked.

"It was my fault. I let him out to pee. I accidentally closed the door."

"How long ago?"

"I can't remember. Jesus, it could have been as long as 3 hours ago." I moaned, "My god, if anything happens to him, MT will be heartbroken."

Grabbed the penlight from the kitchen drawer, I swallowed back images of hair tufts and blood splotches in the flashlight beam.

"Can you check around the side, honey? I'll check the back."

Turning on the living room light, I jerked open the drape over the sliding back door. Immediately revealed was the huddled form of the little dog shivering outside.

In a pang of joy, I slid open the door and swooped him up. "Omigod, Romeo, poor little guy—I am so very sorry!"

Kissing his ears, I ran outside where MH was just coming around from beside the dumpster.

"Hallelujah, M., he's OK. I let him out the front door, but he made his way to the back. It was stupid, stupid. Thank god, it's not cold or raining."

I hand over the little dog into MH's hands. Along with the profound relief was the sobering sense of a reprieve for carelessness, undeserved. How many more shit lucky shakes of the dice can be expected—how many more clicks of the roulette pistol?

2004, April

A promise at the zenith of spring:

The spring air early this morning triggered an excitement for the season unfelt since boyhood. At the moment of greatest intensity, I was walking through the alley back from CM's apartment...

I was thinking about how sweetly the introductions between CM and the kids had gone last evening, despite the apprehensions. All 3 fledglings helped in preparing the special meal of baked ham and roasted potatoes, which happened to coincide with Easter. When CM's knock came on the door, I was nervous. Yet with her warm smile, she immediately put the kids at ease. Despite my protests, she insisted on helping to set the table. Through the meal, she chatted comfortably with MT and MH. Only TE, (who is often said to take after me), was a little reserved.

Meanwhile, I sipped at the sparkling wine, deeply relieved. How many other women would so readily accept a relationship with a 55-year-old separated guy in which 3 kids were part of the 'package'? I could hardly believe my luck that for the last year this amazing woman has lived just 2 blocks away...

After dinner, CE and I stayed at the kitchen table sipping more wine while TE and MH watched TV. When she left at 8:00 PM, I went up to my cubicle and set the clock for 3:00 AM...

As I have done several times in the last month, I crept downstairs and slipped out of the door. Going out the back gate and down the dark alley, I entered CM's apartment building with her extra key. Thereupon I enjoyed the warmth of her bed until the first chirpings of pre-dawn...

So, in that moment, coming down the alleyway between our streets at 5:30 AM, I stopped up, closed eyes and filled lungs with the mild spring air. In the scent of unfurling leaf, I avowed that if the joy of the moment be as ephemeral as the season—I will not be bitter... Even if CM should have second thoughts tomorrow—I will be grateful for the unexpected gift of this last month...

2006, April

Uneasy deliverance:

The X-ray of my shoulder that came up on the computer screen at the Royal Columbian looked no different than any other taken since the accident. There was still a visible gap in the collar bone on one side of which the broken bone jutted slightly up.

“How does it look?”

The X-ray technician gave a stiff smile. “You’ll have to wait for Dr. Petrie.”

Just as in the previous X-rays, I could only brace for the worst.

Yet again I cursed my stupidity for the tumble on Burke Mountain, 2 months ago. I knew how harshly the mountain dealt with the unprepared and foolish. Yet before hiking back down along a muddy creek, I foolishly took off my new hiking boots to keep them clean. When my old sneakers slipped on a patch of ice, my hiking pole was foolishly tucked under my arm...

At least I didn’t panic. Even in the searing pain, I made it down the mountain alone. I avoided becoming another hapless hiker whose rescue was covered by the local TV news...

The penalty for my foolishness could have been much harsher. I had to be grateful for not having been rendered helpless as I would have been with arm in a cast. I had the privilege of sick-leave benefits. Still, 8 weeks in a sling were among the most demoralizing ever endured. There was no waking hour in which I could forget that a tolerable quality of life was dependent on the knitting of that slender bone.

I did find some distraction in the websites and chat-groups of others impatient with the healing of broken clavicles. Still, the predicaments of young jocks eager to get back on their trail bikes offered little solace for a middle-aged man desperate for the restoration of even 80% functionality of the arm upon he was 100% dependent...

At 8 weeks, I had reached a critical juncture. No sign of healing would necessitate surgery. With that procedure the nightmare of helplessness, however temporary, would be unavoidable...

Swallowing back the panic in that thought, I took a seat in the hospital corridor and awaited the verdict of the orthopedic surgeon. I was aimlessly flipping a through an old golfing magazine from the nurse called my name.

Grimly nodding, I followed her to the examination room. She closed the curtain around the bed on which I perched. After 10 minutes of psyching up for bad news, the curtain was pulled back by a middle-aged woman in a white gown.

“Are you Dr. Perrie?”

“No, I’m a nurse practitioner,” she said, “he’s behind.”

The blonde man about my age, was looking at a clipboard while the nurse practitioner wheeled up a trolley mounted gizmo with a video screen.

“Take off that shirt and let’s have a look.”

The doctor stood back until the nurse fiddled the X-ray image onto the screen.

“So, what do we have here?”

At the same time as he felt along the injured collar bone, he squinted at the screen.

“Humm, this looks pretty good.” He pointed his pencil. “You see where the callus is forming?”

Indeed, in the gap between the edges of broken bone there was a milkiness unnoticed from across the X-ray room.

“It’s healing.”

“Are you sure?”

He pointed again. “You should be able to resume most normal activities. Just avoid anything too strenuous or lifting anything heavy for a while.”

“Can I drive?”

“That should be fine. After 3 weeks the arm should be back to normal. No restrictions.”

“100% for sure?”

“Nothing is ever 100%.” He half-winked at the nurse. “But you can stop worrying.”

I could have been a kid just given a pony...



Back to normal in just 3 weeks! Crossing the walkway to the Skytrain station, I whistled and chuckled to myself.

The incredible mercy brought to mind emerging from the doors of the Royal Columbian 16 years ago. On that early fall morning, a year-long torment of a mysteriously swollen node was solved by an exploratory probe that confirmed its benignity.

Just as this morning, deeper than the joy of deliverance was the uneasiness of slipping back to the blindness of normalcy...

2006, August

Deliverance from snapping jaws:

In walking little Romeo back up Inlet Drive from the river trail early this morning, I was thinking of yesterday's performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. As in so many Bard on the Beach productions, I felt patronized. I did not need glitzy costumery and hamming up to draw me in for *haut culture*. Not that the local director is no less patronizing than was Shakespeare in his day in throwing bawdy tidbits to the groundlings...

Lost in these thoughts, I failed to hear the first throaty growl of Romeo who was a few paces behind me on his leash. When he growled again, I looked turned in curiosity.

For a second, it looked like another dog following on Romeo's tail. Then came the shock that the grey brown creature delicately nosed towards the little chihuahua was— a coyote!

"Romeo!"

I swooped up the tiny dog. Even as I held him tightly to chest, the coyote, crouched barely a meter away, looked directly into my eyes. *'That's my meal'*, it seemed to message for 3-4 hypnotic seconds, *'let it down NOW!'*

Snapping out of the frozen moment, I yelled.

"Get to fuck away!"

For a few more seconds the coyote was poised to leap up. Suddenly, it jerked sideways, nonchalantly turned and trotted down the opposite sidewalk. Clutching the little dog tighter, I rushed back to the dumpster doorway.

Most disturbing about the close call, was that I had not taken the extra effort to put on Romeo's harness. He was attached only by a loose collar. Did the coyote, lurking in the underbrush, sense that opportunity?

Shuddering, I imagined the sudden tug on the leash from behind. Before I could even have wheeled round, the coyote would have been lopping away with the shrieking Romeo swinging from its maw... MT would never have forgiven me for not putting on his harness. Meanwhile, Romeo's shriek would have haunted me to the last blink of my eye.



After that thought, I recalled my late father's rum-soaked telling of his intended mercy killing that went terribly wrong:

Sadly, the family mutt— a gentle spaniel cross— became chronically incontinent in the era when few villagers took sick pets to vets. So it was, one late September afternoon the old soldier took the poor creature into the woods along with his shotgun. Only when the dog ran far ahead sniffing the fallen leaves did he work up the nerve to shoot. Yet he was shaking so much that his buckshot blast went awry. So it was that he was forever haunted by the scream of poor Queenie running back towards him with her muzzle half torn off...

I kissed little Romeo's nose still quaking in our deliverance. Unaware of the brush with death, I still wondered if he scented in my sweat— some primal fear. Still, his dark little eyes looked into mine with the calm sentience of the eternal present...

2007, August



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