

1 Endspec (1988-1994)

Premonition in the bath:

"I have a terrible feeling." said T.

We were an hour away from the Friday afternoon drive to Harare when my wife called me into the bathroom where she lay in the tub. A little fear glinted in her eyes.

"What is it?" I crouched beside her. "T?"

She tsked and wrung the washcloth over her stomach. Looking aside, she mumbled. "You might think I'm stupid, but I have a funny feeling about today."

"A funny feeling?" Attentive to my wife's premonitions, I clasped her hand in the lukewarm water. "Tell me, please."

"Maybe it was that film we saw on TV last night," she said, still looking sidelong. "All those car accident victims – that paralyzed girl and the one with the terrible wound in his chest. Anything can happen on the highway..." She turned her head back, catching my eye. "Maybe we shouldn't go to Harare today."

Even in the ripple of alarm, I tsked. "Com'on, T. You know we have to get to the bank. Hund is driving. He's a careful driver— don't worry!"

She sighed. "We need to be *very* careful."



If T. did have a premonition, the close call was not to come on the highway. Except for the knee gripping moment overtaking of a load-leaning lorry near the Snake Park, the drive between Norton and Harare was uneventful.

T.'s warning was to be called back to memory in a more unguarded moment:

I was rushing back from Barclay's Bank on 1st St. just before the scheduled 4:30 PM rendezvous with Herr Hund at the Samora Machel Ave. parking lot. We were to pick up T. afterwards at the hairdresser's.

After crossing Cecil Square, I hesitated on the curb of 2nd Avenue. Seeing that the traffic robot was conked out, I did a quick check to my left and then stepped forward. Only as the foot came down, was I struck by the bowel-wrenching realization that 2nd Avenue was not a one-way street. In a dopplering honk and screech of brakes, I leapt back a split second before the taxi careened past...

Frozen on the curb, I glimpsed a fuzzy hovering consciousness spiraling up over a mangled body in the center of a pressing crowd.

I walked slowly along the final block. By bloody absent-mindedness, I nearly left two little girls fatherless!

I blinked in the fading image of the taxi hurtling past... That may be how the end typically comes— vaguely catching something shadowy jumping in from the periphery. A typical last thought before the darkness may well be: ‘*Shit, was that ever stupid!*’

1988, March (Zimbabwe)

fwt

Traffic inconvenience:

Getting stuck for 20 minutes in traffic from the Broadway Skytrain yesterday afternoon after another fruitless job search downtown seemed like a topping of the latest shit sundae. With the bus just a block from the Broadway Skytrain station, I was almost ready to smash the window and climb out.

Only in the last moments of inching along did I see the flashing lights of an ambulance. There then appeared beneath the rain-streaked window two white coated paramedics bent over someone. Rather than giving medical aid they seemed to be blocking the view from pedestrians... Still, from the bus window, there was a glimpse of a purplish face and white hair. It was an old woman, utterly still. Most striking were the outstretched legs in doughy brown stockings...

Even in the glimpsing of what was probably a corpse, I jerked up and nudged my way down the aisle. I was still in a hurry to get home...

A few minutes later, seated in the Skytrain skimming backwards above the cityscape of East Vancouver, the brown stockings were very much in mind... Looking northward towards the cloud-obscured mountains I thought of how the poor old woman pulled on those stockings this morning. Did she dress absently or might she have had some tingle of premonition?

When the robotic voice called out the approach of the 22nd St. Station in Burnaby, we curved along a sprawling cemetery—blurry green with rows of headstones jerking past. Did the poor old woman have a local family? Does she have anyone to mourn her?

In that moment, I was reminded of grave of T.'s grandmother in the Fort Victoria cemetery in Masvingo—the brown earth mound topped with flowers. In that simpler and sometimes kinder world—death is something quite other than a traffic inconvenience...

1988, October (Vancouver)



In anticipation of simple pleasures:

Stepping off the bus on a Friday evening at 10:40 PM with book bag swinging from shoulder and sixpack of Coors clutched to chest— I fairly itched for the first cold gulp before the 11:00 PM news.

Crossing North Rd., I swallowed back the thought of forgetting to look around the bus and stepping directly into the path of an oncoming juggernaut. *What would be the gut-rending terror of that moment before the impact? Would it be in screeching slow motion?*

As I strode across the empty Burquitlam parking lot towards the apartment block, the dread subsided. Strange, that the mind should choose to so torment itself at the instant of anticipation of the week's greatest pleasure. With the subsiding of that curiosity, I was thirsty again.

1989, September



fwt

Public spectacle:

The pedestrian light was on— but blinking— when I stepped from the sidewalk into North Road. Then came the shriek of brakes.

In dream-like slow motion, I jumped backwards. Losing balance, I jerked out my hand just in time to cushion the fall. I landed on one knee with the other leg splayed out. Inches from my shoulder was the front grill of the braked car. Bolting up, I swooped up my book bag from the pavement. The first thought was: had anyone been watching? I looked into the windshield.

"You okay, buddy?" the driver yelled, craning out the open window.

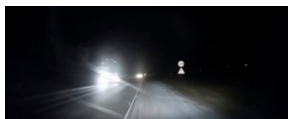
"I had the light, goddammit," Even in shock, I shook my finger in a show of indignation.

"Sorry, buddy!" The potential agent of the Reaper was a perfectly innocuous fellow in black-framed glasses.

"You could kill somebody," I yelled. With a shake of the ruffled ragged tail feathers, I crossed the street. The driver screeched away—probably feeling lucky that I hadn't taken down his license plate number.

Moments later, in the rear of the #151 bus, my skinned knee began to throb... Another close call? If I had been hit, what a sight that would have made, my body flopping around like a headless chicken. What could be uglier than dying in public?

1990, March



Dreams of old age:

Amid the smell of an over-heated photocopier, I tore open the envelope from the employee pension bureau left in my mail slot. Therein I read that as of August 1st, 1990, I had contributed \$899 toward the pension plan. After eleven years of service, I would be eligible for 4% of my gross earnings based on the average of my highest earning five years of service.

I chuckled and looked out the north window overlooking the silhouetted cranes of the Port of Vancouver. So, if I can endure 10 more years of shuffling on and off buses in stinging rain, there may be sunlight— maybe even a plateau of ease in which I might engage in projects of my desiring...

Why not even 'freedom 55'? Yet the flutter of that hope was immediately snuffed in irony... Just a few short years ago in Africa, I would have cringed to think that before forty I could be excited by the prospect of being pensioned off...

Tightening stomach, I pushed the letter into the flap of my bookbag and snatched up the set of hot copies from the output tray.

1991, January



Foreshadowing of the end:

"Dad, did flowers really grow up on the grave?"

MT's voice yanked me back from nodding-off by the side of the girls' bunkbeds.... It took a moment to register where I was.

"What's that honey?"

"What kind of flowers grew up?" MT's softly repeated her question.

After a muddled moment, the clues came back of the bedtime story I had been in the midst of when I'd drifted off. I had been telling the girls about a pet turtle I had had in my early boyhood— but what did that have to do with flowers?

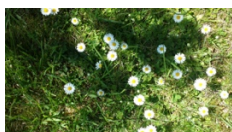
"Were they daisies, dad"? MT tried again.

The details reassembled: I had described the peculiar yeasty smell of my house by the railroad tracks just unlocked in the middle of summer afternoon when my family came back from a camping trip. I told the girls how the family dog, a fluffy American Eskimo, bounded from the car straight into the door; how he jumped up to the plastic terrarium on the kitchen counter and snatched from within it the tiny painted turtle. With the turtle protruding from its muzzle, the dog ran across the floor until halted by my mother's kick. As the dog yelped, the tiny dark green shell went spinning across the linoleum. As the shell rolled over, its glyphic yellow markings were revealed, scored by two deep fang marks.

Given MT's question, it occurred that I must've got farther with my story. I must've told her how I buried the dead turtle in the back of the house. I must have told her how in the following spring, a patch of dandelions grew on the burial spot.

"Yes, they were daisies, honey," I whispered. Then even half asleep, I did not forget the expected fairy tale ending. "The daisies grew up the next spring and every year after."

1991, April



Filling in the blank after the dash:

"Do you think you'll ever go back to Zimbabwe?" asked my worldly colleague and generous host, JR.

We were on our third beer in his living room. The girls were in the den with JR's kids watching a video. T. and JR's Indo-Canadian wife were sitting across.

I turned to T. It seemed a more appropriate question for her. She patted her stomach— now in the fifth month of her pregnancy.

"Say what you really think, T.," I laughed. "Be honest."

She sighed. "I'd like to. But I don't think so. Life is just getting too tough there now. People are really struggling."

Pleasantly surprised by her answer, I chirped in. "Yes, it used to be a beautiful country, but the economy has gone to hell. Even if we did go back for a while and then changed our minds— we would have to leave penniless. You can't take anything with you."

"Sounds like life in general!" JR smiled, dabbing his moustache behind his uplifted can of Fosters'.

I looked back at T. "Who knows? ten years from now, maybe if things get better in Zimbabwe, maybe we could retire there. Yeah, now I just hope I can hang on at the college long enough for a pension."

Was that me speaking wistfully about retirement?

I suddenly remembered the tombstones erected by some New Brunswick villagers with birthdates etched in, followed by a dash. Only the four numerals of the expiry date remained to be filled in...

In a shudder, I took a warmish and sour swig.

1992, January



Dream sequence (re. holographic skull):

I submit to a holographic ultrasound imaging technique which allows me not only to see— but to effectively hold— my own skull...

Moments before, amid a sparse gathering behind the roped off archaeological site, I watched a demonstrator hold up an ancient skull:

"This was a funeral rite of antiquity," he boomed. "Behold!"

With a tap of his archaeological hammer, he cracked the skull like an eggshell. Out of it, a blue toy galley rowed itself across the floor...

"This man, we presume, was a Roman Legion Captain. If he were a poet—perhaps a manuscript, would have been embedded in the skull cavity... Now," he beckoned, "though the wizardry of technology, each of you can partake of the same ancient rite though an authentic out-of-body experience..."

Ears tingling, I observed on a low pedestal lit by dancing laser lights, my own skull. There was the same gap in the upper back right molar; the familiar forehead bump; the same bulge of the brow. Was it a replica or might it be the real thing?

Preparing to take a photo, I lifted it up, gingerly holding the movable jaw. Pressing it backwards against my forehead, I reached around and pushed the camera lens into the left eye socket. If this is not just a simulation and really is my skull— how could it possibly be taking a picture of itself?

1992, July



Of Disney eschatology:

"So, what happened to the little mermaid?" asked MT from under the covers. "I didn't understand." Propped beside her, TE demurely blinked.

Closing the glossy cover, I slid the '*The Works of Hans Christian Anderson*' to the side of the sleeping bag.

"Well," I said, "she failed to win the heart of the prince, but she didn't want to hurt him. So, what happened was— like the witch warned her would happen— she was turned into sea foam."

"So, she died?" MT stared gloomily at the cover.

"Right."

"I like the cartoon better," she muttered.

"What's sea foam?" smiled TE.

"It's frothy stuff like soap suds in a bubble bath. It floats on top of the ocean. Does it make sense that the little mermaid got turned into foam?"

"That was too weird!" scoffed MT.

"Well, her body was gone but you can still imagine that her spirit lived on. Maybe that's what the story was about— how she traded her mermaid body for a human soul. Do you know what 'soul' means?"

"Naw," said MT.

"What's a soul?" asked TE snuggling closer.

I chuckled in the absurdity of being asked a question more appropriate for her devoutly Catholic mom.

"Well, some people believe that there is an invisible part of everyone that is the 'I' that everyone feels inside. They think that this part even lives on when our bodies die. They call this part the 'soul'. Some people believe that the soul goes to a place called 'heaven.' You've heard of 'heaven before, right?"

"Yeah, like in the movie '*All Good Dogs Go to Heaven*,'" says MT authoritatively. "And you know, some people think that when you die you come back as another person."

"That's right, honey," I smiled, "That's called 'reincarnation.' People who believe that think that we come back to the world again and again. As different people, as animals— even as insects."

"Insects? Yucch!" TE rolled her eyes.

"How about you TE, I shifted on the bed to face her. "Do you believe in heaven or in reincarnation?"

"I don't know", she lowered her eyes.

"Well," I continued, "a lot of people who believe in heaven don't think that *all* people go there. Only good people. Bad people, they say, go somewhere else, to a place called 'hell.' Have you heard of hell?"

"Hell?" asked TE.

"O, it's supposed to be a place where bad people are punished for the terrible things they did in the world. Some people believe hell is where the devil is. I think you're probably heard of the devil."

"The devil," quipped MT, "I saw a cartoon where Donald Duck went down below the ground and met the devil."

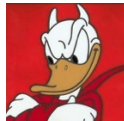
"Did you see that, TE? The cartoon about the devil?"

"Stop," she buries her head under my arm. "I'll have bad dreams."

"Daddy," says MT, a little condescendingly. "Can we change the subject?"

1992, September

fwt



Potential job loss in sobering perspective:

"They're now talking about as many as twenty lay-offs!"

At 8:30 PM last night I was on the telephone to fellow beginners' instructor, LM, engaging in our customary exchange of doom and gloom rumours. As LM talked, I kept watching a Knowledge Network documentary on TV. It was a home-video diary of the last weeks of the life of a man called Bob, suffering from full-blown AIDS. Most of the video was shot and narrated by his gay partner.

In the first scenes, Bob (seen wearing a rainbow shirt) is defiant: *"When people stare, I want to say: 'screw you, I'm still alive!'"*

The scene then cut to Bob sitting on his porch wrapped in blankets: *"Just to feel the sun on your neck— what a miracle it is!"*

That scene was followed by the camera tracking though the house and inside the bedroom where Bob lay under the covers: *"I know there are miracles,"* he says, *"but I am a realist. I have a sense that the wall is near."*



For several minutes I switched back and forth between listening to the TV documentary of Bob's worsening condition, and LM's voice on the phone:

"So, there is a chance that even if we do make the cut, we'll be bumped back to half time. That would be tough for a guy with a family, wouldn't it?"

In speculating on what my options might be on a half salary, I turned attention away from the screen... By the time I looked back, Bob's partner had taken over the narration, with poor Bob muted by the ravages of the disease. The camera, aimed by his partner, spares no details. Bob's chin dribbles as he is spoon fed. Blue-black lesions of Kaposi's sarcoma blotch his face. One eye is gummed shut.

The view then blurs before jumping to a slow panning of fluffy clouds... It abruptly cuts back with a close up focus on Bob's one good eye, unblinking. The narrator is sobbing. *"Bob just died,"* he cries, *"I just held him and sang 'You Are My Sunshine.'"*

"Well, at least they have to follow seniority," said LM, "Maybe we'll just get outplaced. Shit, though— I'd hate ending up in one of those church basement classes!"

Across the end table on the TV screen, Bob's skeletal remains, naked but for a diaper, are being zipped into a body bag...

The scene then jerks to a close up of a black cardboard box. The narrator is withdrawing his hand from the plastic bag inside it. Tentatively, he licks his fingers and sobs. The camera wobbles for a long moment in a close up of the grey-white ashes— some of which have spilled from the top of the opened bag. *"You're all over the place, Bob!"* the narrator cries.

“So, we’ve got the big union meeting coming up, next week,” LM said. “Then we’ll know the score.”

Nearing conclusion, the film shows close-ups of garden flowers and the narrator himself, thumbing through a self-help manual. *"I'm in the anger phase right now,"* he says. The documentary ends in an eerie prequel, wherein the narrator and Bob are dancing and passionately kissing.

“Well, we’re had a good run at the college, anyway,” said LM. “What has it been for you now: about four years?”

I squeezed the phone, wrung of the least interest in further workplace gossip...

1993, January



fwt

A chastening from the dreaming:

At 2:00 AM I woke from a dream sequence about TM, a lad who had been an acquaintance in my final year of high school in Saint John, N.B. We scarcely knew one another apart from the few times we smoked cannabis among other friends. Still, there remains an indelible memory of his revelation to me one night when we squatted in someone's basement smoking hash. TM told me how he came to be adopted by his uncle and aunt.

He said that among his earliest memories were flashes of the car accident in which he and his older brother, sitting in the back seat, barely survived. Both his parents in the front seat were killed.

"I just remember the flashing lights," he said, "and later playing in the hospital..."

That snatch of conversation leapt back a couple of years afterwards, when in the midst of taking a summer session class at university, I was on an afternoon break in my residence room, lying back on a cot reading the daily *'Telegraph Journal'*. Absently turning to the back page, I was at first baffled to see the high school graduation photo of TM between photos of two slightly lesser-known acquaintances. Then the headline sunk in: *'Three victims of crash on Rothesay Ave. identified.'*

TM had been in the back seat of a car struck and then crushed into the side of a building by a reckless driver. Along with his two friends in the front seat, he had been killed instantly...

So what has spurred this ghostly visitation of poor TM nearly twenty years unremembered? Little coincidence that this recollection should come hours after I was whining to T. about my "gruelling" split shift.

"Just be grateful you have a job," she said.

Along with acknowledging my wife's intuitive wisdom, I need to honour the memory of the gentle lad who did not even make it to the age of twenty... At this moment of writing, I can almost hear his whispery voice as clear as the night he told his story— chiding me of the obscenity of cursing my luck.



This afternoon, when flipping through the *'Guardian Weekly'* before starting the evening's lesson plan, I was reminded again of last night's dream of TM.

What caught the eye was an article about 'mystical' experiences often attested to by those who recover from near-death. The article offered a neurological explanation:

The dying brain, starved of oxygen, merely builds "a model of self"—as it is hard-wired to do— even with impaired input. In this state of fuzziness, the inhibitor cells, twitch with "excitatory" electrical impulses creating what may be later remembered by a survivor as an "out of body experience"...

A neurologist was quoted: "Death is more of a *process* then an *event*. Our research is only beginning to scratch the surface of understanding brain chemistry in regard to the death process..."

Any less the mystery?

1994, June



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