

3 Endspec (2000—2004)

A Blessed sense of peace?

In the midst of last night's rereading the '*Final Solution*' chapter in the dog-eared '*Rise and Fall of the 3rd Reich*', I gasped in the horror of torture—the worst death imaginable. In comparison with death by torture, there should be no fuss whatsoever of death by any other cause, especially after middle age.

Still, at fifty I am very much in need of such acceptance. While even acknowledging that I am on borrowed time—the bald fact of morality still shocks to the marrow...

Turning over the book on the bedcover, I thought of the blind panic that must have seized one old man in the early morning of February 1st, 1997. That old soldier tried to struggle up from his hospital bed in the very hour before death pinned him down. I wonder just how many others die like that man—my father—believing that they are going to hell...

Is certainty of hell any less suffocating than the certainty of impending oblivion?



After a few more thuds of the heart, there flickered up a little consolation. In sharing the same finality with every human who ever lived—and shall ever live—why should there be fear in the end? Death is due to every living creature—from bacterium to whale. Maybe dying is simply doing one's duty—being a good soldier...

At the same time, there may also be consolation that the very instant of oblivion is not usually of suffocating terror—but of tranquility.

In that thought, I recalled David Livingston's account of his attack by a lion. Just as he was certain that the jaws ripping at his midriff were ending his life—he reported to have felt: "*a blessed sense of peace...*"

I also remembered the chickens dispatched behind my Nigerian bungalow. Their wild struggle always gave way to relaxation in the instant before the knife sawed into their necks... Perhaps endorphins normally flood brains at the point of inescapable death—a possible explanation for Livingston's '*blessed endowment of the creator*.'

That makes death by torture all the more unnatural—all the more evil!

The victims of the Nazis were certainly subjected to the ugliest possible deaths. But what of the passengers in a burning plane hurtling towards the ground? Just as horrifically, are they not subjected to torture?

All that is certain is that there will no remembering—no reporting back—of that instant of revelation before the darkness...



2001, October

fwt

Browsing obituaries:

In browsing the Saturday *Vancouver Sun* this morning, I found myself lingering in the obituaries section. I have little doubt that many of my age are increasingly drawn to these pages of their newspapers. All of us, on borrowed time, need a regular reminder of others who used their allotment more fruitfully and less selfishly...

The particular sobering of today's obituaries was that the greater number of departed listed were younger than me. Some were single ('*Survived by her loving felines Darling and Precious*') others had children. Particularly touching was the eulogy for a 42-year-old scientist with interests in '*global development*' and a desire to make '*a heaven on earth*'.



“Omigod, he died so young. I wonder what in hell happened to him?”

A couple of hours later, in walking Nikki around Lefarge Lake along with MH, I stopped before every bench to read out the memorial plaques.

“Terrible,” I shook my head before the ‘*loving brother, father and son, taken at the age of thirty-four...*’

“What do you think killed this poor guy? Maybe a car accident. Or cancer? If that was the cause, he died even younger than your aunt K.”

“Let’s hurry,” said MH nervously.

“Sorry, honey,’ I said, guilty in bringing up so flippantly my late sister.

Com’on, Nikki—just wait!”

I tugged the mutt’s leash just as she tried to squat against the leg of the bench. At the same moment, it occurred that a dog’s markings of a memorial or grave is no real defilement.

Flippancy in passing was something else entirely.

2001, December

Apparitions of crows:

Upon pulling into the college parking lot yesterday afternoon, I was met by several crows, hopping around my wheels. These appeared just moments after the van was tailed by a grey hearse for several blocks along Broadway Ave.

Whether these were merely grim reminders of the approach of my fifty-first birthday or portents more dire—their images were still flitting through 1:00 AM insomnia...

Sleep seems to come harder by the week... The anxieties range from matters entirely beyond control (e.g., the US military posturing against Iraq) to send-guessing of decisions (e.g., the ordering of a costly Seanix desktop computer). Most acute last night was the guilt for shouting at poor MH for giving his soccer coach his mother's number and address as his 'primary emergency contact'...

"Where do you sleep most of the time?" I railed. "Who paid for your soccer fees?"

Can I avoid becoming ever pettier as space shrinks and possibilities narrow? Can I avoid visiting nightmares as a *pater tyrannicus*? I reminded myself that the absolute point of narrowed possibilities is death itself...

Thus, before sleep, I avowed to keep at a distance the crows and their apparitions...

2002 September



Weighing the actuarial odds:

I have always been superstitious about life insurance. Against the ‘peace of mind’ bought in the arrangement of a modest inheritance for my kids is the nervousness of creating a pay-out for my demise. Despite this unease, for more than ten years I have paid the premium on a term-life policy as dutifully as paying the phone bill.

Yet with the recent hemorrhaging of meagre savings, the lowering—if not eliminating—of insurance coverage has been tempting. Yesterday, I dug out the policy and spread it on the table before dialing CIBC. The insurance agent, who came on after the ten-minute muzac hold, was unusually frank. I asked about the difference between my current term policy and the Accidental Death Policy that was listed as \$20 cheaper.

“Well, honestly, I’ve been in the insurance business about twenty years,” he said, “The chances of going by accident are about 1%. You’re far more likely to go by sickness: heart disease, cancer. After you hit fifty, accidents are very rare.”

“OK”, I gritted teeth, “so you mean a term policy covers both death by sickness and accidents but the accidental death policy is more, um, limited?”

“It depends what coverage you are comfortable with... Sorry!” After a small cough, he continued. “If you have a dangerous job or do a lot of extreme sports the accident policy could be the better option. If you go with statistics—the choice should be obvious.”

Obvious? I flipped the paper. Yes, obvious that a middle-aged English instructor is statistically unlikely to trip on the cord of his overhead projector and smash his skull—however often I have come close to doing so. But what of commuting to and from the job? The statistical probability of being a victim of one’s absent mindedness was not to be dismissed as insignificant...

I let out a held breath. “I’ll think about it and get back in touch.”

Turning over the paper I tingled in the absurdity that I should be weighing the actuarial odds of dying violently over the attraction of saving \$30 a month...

2002, December



A grim postcard from Switzerland:

Inexplicably sore muscled and cold to the bone, I humped through yesterday like a 75-year-old...

Although I probably had only a touch of flu, a morbid article read on the BBC website made the symptoms seem more ominous. Titled '*Euthanasia Tourism*', the article chronicled the final journey of an old man suffering from bone cancer, from Luton, England, to the Dignitas Clinic in Zurich.

In the first of the two accompanying pictures, the old fellow was shown blustery faced in his wheelchair being pushed from the elevator of the apartment building adjoining the clinic where Dignitas clients are accommodated for their final hours. In the second photo taken a few hours later, two attendants in white are shown wheeling a coffin into the same elevator...

I was reminded of the sequence in the dystopian science fiction movie, '*Soylent Green*', in which the Edward G. Robinson character checks into the massive government clinic that provides the end-of-life service for the massively over-populated city. Under a white sheet on a gurney, he is wheeled into a softly lit room. After taking the potion, he slowly falls asleep amid recorded scenes of extinct wilderness set to the sublime strains of Tchaikovsky and Grieg...

Are the euthanasia clients of Dignitas, afforded such a blissful exit? It is sobering to be reminded—just as with the ethical issues around abortion rights—that authentic clarity on the morality of assisted suicide ought to exclusively belong to those who face the desperate choice themselves... May the gods well note others who dare judge!

2003, February



Headlong through Bardo:

In looking through the ‘*Lonely Planet Tibet*’ guide this evening, I was particularly intrigued by the artwork depicting demons, inspired by descriptions in ‘*the Tibetan Book of the Dead*.’ Apparently in Buddhist belief, the newly dead must pass through a gauntlet(s) of demons in *bardo*—the transitional state(s) between dying and reincarnation. By enduring the terrifying visions and sounds, the transition into death is hastened. A lack of courage only intensifies the hellish passage...

The image of a green skinned demon with jeering tongue, suddenly triggered the memory of what still seems the most narrowly averted sudden death:

As recorded in my journal, it was on January 2nd, 1978, when I sat squeezed on the back seat of a Peugeot 504 shared taxi whizzing between Onitsha and Enugu in southeastern Nigeria. The heart was in the mouth through most of the high-speed zigzag past slower traffic along the narrow road winding through Igbo villages. Then in rounding a curve, an overloaded lorry was suddenly dropping from the crest of a hill, straight into our path... In a smoking screech of brakes, I shut eyes and braced... In that split second in which the driver bounced onto the laterite shoulder, the lorry hurtled past a hairsbreadth from the driver’s side...

More than once since that moment—it has struck me that I actually *did* crack up in that Nigerian taxi. In which case, everything since could have been a chimera of images rushing past in a time-warped headlong fall through *Bardo*...

2003 April



Of the comfort of a hidden nest:

Faced with a daunting pile of weekend marking and the unseasonable 35° heat, I shelved the plans for the daylong climb up Burke Mountain and opted instead for the hour and a half circuit of Minnekada park.

With the scent of fecund growth thrilling to the very loins, I detoured from the main path and clambered through ferns up the slope. At the bottom of the north side cliff, I reached the cool shadow of a rock overhang. Crouching under it, I relished the feeling that I was hidden from the sight of anyone who might pass on the trail below. For several minutes, I sat there as calm settled from sweating forehead to pounding chest.

Closing eyes, I remembered the story of the ‘old timer’ who lived year-round in a lakeside cabin near the boyhood village. Well into his seventies, the old fellow was stricken by what was probably cancer. One summer morning, when it became more certain to him that he could no longer take care of himself, he disappeared from his cabin along with his rifle. The surrounding woods and bog were thoroughly searched. It was not surprising to the searchers that not a trace of him was found. Because he knew those woods so well, it was surmised that he had probably crawled into some secret recess where his body would never be found...

That story always held a certain appeal. The old timer had escaped the indignity of doctors, hospital or rest home. His acceptance of inevitable end was as practical—almost as instinctual—as that of the injured animal that crawls away and dies in a hidden place...

In the tingling reverberations of that recollection, I enjoyed the delicious privacy of my perch. Might I even be tempted to return here at some uncertain juncture when the thought of becoming fertilizer for the mossy cedars was even more comforting?

Within a few minutes I shook myself and rose from the cozy little nest. Carefully stepping down through the rocks and undergrowth, I made my way back onto the trail...

2003, June



Of a heroic challenge at fifty-two:

After a bad day at work yesterday (students glum after the return of the in-class composition test) I crawled along Hastings St. An earlier hunger had given way to pangs of nausea. With both TE and MH staying at their moms' for the coming weekend, the prospect of microwaved chili before CNN, did not arouse any eagerness to get home.

With the forecast of rain, there was little likelihood of a weekend hike. The weekend would probably be spent diddling around the apartment, avoiding any creative engagements... Yet here in the middle of June, days away from the summer solstice, ought to be the most joyous time of the year. Why this emptiness?

In the grimness of the moment, I remembered an even drearier afternoon in June, in the southern hemisphere, nearly twenty years... It was near sunset after a chilly afternoon hike behind the Gokomere Mission when I stood on a *kopje* [rocky outcropping] looking towards the silhouetted hills of the eastern highlands... Later in my flat, I made a detailed entry in my journal, describing that disturbing sense of emptiness...

As I finally passed the green light onto the Barnet Highway, I resolved that I would dig out that old journal and transcribe it... There could be something insightful therein for the present.



After supper, I pulled out the black hard-backed journal from the rusty file cabinet, lay back on the futon and marked in yellow highlighter what seemed the most urgently written passages. Before sleep, I transcribed the following excerpt, written exactly twenty years ago this week:

'However long I spend in the southern hemisphere, the internal mechanism is fixed on the northern cycle. Thus, even in this depth of the austral winter, the internal clock marks the summer—rather than the winter—solstice.'

'Nearing my 32nd birthday, I feel that I am at the zenith of my creative powers, however modest they be. Now is the hour when all the illusions must be laid bare, and any important work of which I am capable, must begin...'

'In acknowledgement of this challenge, the dream images of late give ever-sharper clarity to recurrent imagery in the personal 'quest':'

'Thus, the brook serendipitously discovered in the wilderness is followed upstream to a hidden dead-water overhung with foliage. Never fished before, it is roiling with hungry trout...'

Then there are talismans in the battered suitcases in the bed-setter room on the east coast abandoned after I dropped out of school. Those bits of coloured stone found deep in the woods in early boyhood might conjure the magic that alludes me... What hope is there is getting them back? Perhaps in arriving incognito on a midnight flight I can sneak into that old room and gather up those precious bits...

With my restored talismans, maybe I can find the one of the hidden caves in the woods behind the favourite summertime lake of boyhood. If claustrophobia can be stifled, I can wiggle though a wormhole and emerge on the slope of Kilimanjaro...

An alternate escape route is eastward from Newfoundland across the North Atlantic. With aid of my talismans, I can cross the ancient causeway secretly used by Vikings—yet built long before them by the Druids. Having passed my youth, now is the time to undertake that journey to the ancestral homeland...

Still, a child is trapped in the turret of a stone tower, with back pressed against the clammy wall. From the small window across , he hears a scratching of fingernails and a rasping of breath.

Suddenly, there appears on the ledge a pair of white gloved hands. A moment later, a head pokes up into the opening —a clown-face against the grey sky... The clown lifts himself though the opening and hops to the floor, grinning. He is ready to exact his long-sought revenge... ’

1983, June (Gokomere Mission, Zimbabwe)

In writing that entry two decades ago, I would never have believed that twenty year later I would still be reasonably fit. It would have been more unimaginable that I would be a divorced father of three children... Yet it would have been crushingly disappointing to realize that I would never have taken those hidden pathways—never undertaken any *real* challenge...



After that short transcription, I did more highlighting before flopping back down on the futon. It was nearly 10:30 PM but there was still light in the patch of western sky visible between the high-rises across the street. Staring at the night-table in the dusk, I realized that the lonely restlessness of the 31-year-old— even his terror of premature death— was countered by a belief in a well of creativity untapped. It occurred that were the young man visited by a vision of his fate at fifty-two, he might well have preferred an earlier, and presumably more honourable, exit...

2003 June

Timely advice from a Hare Krishna pamphlet:

After the evening run around Lefarge Lake, I flopped on the sofa still feeling the surge of adrenalin. What drug can produce the euphoria of a strong pump in a well-oiled machine?

Yet even as I relished the momentary ‘runner’s high’, I realized that break from the gloom was no less temporary and chemically induced than a snort of cocaine... Whatever the inducement, the sense of well-being was still only a phenomenon of brain chemistry...

I was then reminded of the words in a Hare Krishna pamphlet, handed to me on Granville Mall, back in the 1970s. I rediscovered it a few days ago inside my old paperback of ‘*The Magic Mountain*’... I had first kept it due to a queasy fascination with one line, which I’d checked in red pen:

‘Ah, that beautiful body—which you so worshipfully soap and perfume—it will one day putrefy and turn into dung—disgusting even to carrion!’

I took a deep breath and mindfully pounded the rib cage. After fifty-two years, this vehicle of delayed putrefaction is holding out tolerably well...

Rising up from the sofa, I knelt down at the bookshelf beside the computer desk. Pulling out the roughened-up copy of the Thomas Mann classic, I dug out the old four-page pamphlet tucked inside. The cover illustration of two semi-naked and voluptuous *apsaras* dancing—certainly seemed at odds with the presumed asceticism of the cult... I turned over to the back page which had the San Francisco address of ISKCON, the ‘International Society for Krishna Consciousness’...

As easy as it is to wave away a Hare Krishna pamphlet as one from a Jehovah Witness, just when I hesitated before the trash can on Granville Mall a quarter century ago, I was struck by the final lines:

‘Don’t sleep! Don’t sleep! Be awake! Be awake! Get up! Get up from this sleep! Utilize the boon which you now have. Don’t be foolish.’

An excellent reminder for a mind-body on its passage to dissolution...

2003, August



Heavenly exits:

In glorious April sunshine, I jogged from the Coquitlam River trail touched by the ephemerality of the height of spring. In looping back along Ozada Ave., I passed several cherry trees, all of which were already shedding blossoms. A carpet of pink blossoms was forming beneath their branches. Following the pang of ephemerality, an odd idea popped to mind: Imagine, lying under a cherry tree a tree on a day like this with blossoms falling softly onto one's face: *would that not be a beautiful death?*

Working up a sweat in the steepening grade up Ozada Ave., I whimsically imagined a business opportunity. For those legally choosing to die, there certainly should be alternatives to exiting in a hospice or even peacefully in one's own bedroom...

If given some options for the final impressions of the world: what could be more appealing than blue sky, twittering birds and soft wind? If one preferred favourite music, of course, that could be facilitated with comfortable headphones...

Potential clients could choose from a portfolio of locations befitting the seasons: one could feel snowflakes falling on face, lie in a field amid the green twinkle of fireflies or look down from a mountain vista...

So, what might such a service be called? In a rueful snicker, I veered leftwards from Ozada onto Inlet Drive. '*Heavenly exits*' would certain work better than '*Heaven's Gate*'...

2004 April



Of what came before the Slurpee:

In the drive back from a walk along the Kanata Creek, MH told me that during his recent visit to New Brunswick, his nana had insisted that he accompany her to a Sunday church service. It struck him as odd since even his mom, a devout Catholic, had never pressured him to attend church.

“So. What was your impression?” I asked my 12-year-old.

“O, it was pretty boring. Mostly old people. I really didn’t see the point of it.”

“A lot of old people like ritual—going through the same Sunday service they remember from childhood. It gives them comfort, I guess. I don’t know, Christianity never worked for me.”

After a short lapse, he asked, “so what do Christians really believe in?”

Eagerly, I launched into a lengthy reply: “Well, that’s complicated because they are so many Christian groups with differing beliefs. I guess what most of them have in common is believing in one God, an almighty being who supposedly created the universe and who has a son called Jesus Christ. No daughters—just a son...”

I glanced over. He seemed to be listening, so I went on:

“I suppose all Christians also believe in ‘souls.’ The idea that a person has a soul is pretty strange when you think about it. The ‘soul’ supposedly exists inside of us all but is invisible. It supposedly lives on in some form after we die.”

Still staring straight ahead he asked. “Do you think people have souls?”

I shook my head. “I believe in science. I think mind and body are inseparable. When we die? I can’t imagine how death is anything other than permanent dreamless sleep. Of course, no one can come back to report! No, really, even with our wonderful minds we are still animals. Like every other living creature, our dead bodies decay and become fertilizer for new growth. Even if we’re cremated, the ashes are still organic fertilizer.”

“Would you want to be cremated, dad?”

A little jolted by his bluntness, I chuckled. “Really, I don’t care. It doesn’t make any difference to me whether what’s left of my body is a mummy in a pyramid, or some ashes scattered in a garbage dump. I suppose cremation is a sanitary way to dispose of human bodies.” I tsked. “Yeah, but it takes a lot of energy. Maybe the best disposal would be to put a body, without any chemicals, in a cardboard box and then bury it in a forest. After a few months, it turns into rich soil as nature intends. Getting your body recycled back into dirt isn’t such an unpleasant thought, is it?”

He sighed. "I want to be cremated. I hate the idea of waking up in a coffin."

"I think a lot of people have that nightmare, honey. A famous writer, Edgar Allen Poe wrote a scary story about it called '*The Premature Burial*.' Of course, back in the 19th century, before embalming, a person suddenly waking up in a coffin was greater possibility than it is today... Actually, I'm more creeped out by the thought of being embalmed than being buried alive."

"What's 'embalmed'?"

"O, that's when they pump blood out of a dead body and refill the veins with a preservative called formaldehyde. It's completely unnecessary but morticians do it to pad their billing for funeral services." I shivered.



For a couple of minutes, we zipped along the Lougheed highway in silence. Then near the golf driving range just 10 minutes from home, I could not leave the creepy bits dangling.

"Death is nothing to be scared of, M... That's just it—it's *nothing*. You have a long and interesting life ahead of you. Think about how you can make the best of it. That's what's important."

"Can I get a Slurpee, dad?"

So it was that before we turned into a 7-11, the topic of mortality was reconcealed.

2004, September
