

4 Endspec (2004-2005)

Worse than death?

The news that paternal uncle DT was institutionalized for Alzheimer's has been pricking the conscience for weeks.

Although out of touch for nearly ten years, I cannot forget his friendly visits (always with a six-pack of Black Label beer) to our barren apartment in those first grim months we were settling back in Canada a decade and a half ago. While I have not seen him for nearly 10 years, the need to pay respects could no longer be ignored. After all, the nursing home to which DT has been committed is in the Fraser Valley just an hour's drive away...

Sunday afternoon's visit there, along with my girls, began with ringing into a drab apartment building overlooking the railroad tracks in downtown Mission, B.C. My uncle's formerly estranged wife, (reunited in recent years) answered her doorbell—her initial suspicion giving way to a harried smile. The withered old woman bade us sit in the living room amid her curios, stuffed bunnies and eye-stinging cigarette smoke.

"The doctors said I had no choice," she said, looking down at her ashtray, "His mind was gone. He thought John F. Kennedy was in the hall waiting to kill us. He coulda turned violent." She winced and shivered. "Then he couldn't control his bowels. It was just too much for me."

"You had no choice," I said, offering a little consolation whether or not deserved.

She then insisted we join her in her car, rather than following her in our van. We glumly drove to the Grand St. Lodge where the 76-year-old retired prison guard was confined.

We were buzzed into the barred outside door of the secure ward. A plump middle-aged woman in blue uniform led us down a dingy corridor. It smelled of Dettol with underlying uric and fecal notes. The door to Uncle DT's room was open but there was at first no sign of him.

"He must be in the bathroom, just combing his hair," said his wife.

We waited by the bed, scanning the photos of his daughter and her small children arrayed on the dresser.

"The doctor said that's good to help him remember," gruffed his wife.

The sight of the uncle stumbling towards us was a shock. Remembered as ruddy and hale—he was stooped and drooling. Hitching up his track pants, he gave the girls a yellow-toothed smile.

"Look at you! You were supposed to dress up," said his wife in a show of dismay, "They set out nice clothes!"

Most striking was my uncle's resemblance to his own father in his last years. Yet the wheezing grandfather who shuffled along on two canes was well into his eighties when he succumbed to dementia. Uncle DT was still in his mid-seventies.

"Look at those old pants. You have nicer clothes!" said his wife. "O, they probably had to change you because you had an accident, didn't you?" she chided.

Ignoring his wife, the old man eased shakily into the armchair. I shook his limp hand and looked into his rheumy eyes. He seemed to be blinking between sorrow and vacancy.

MT and TE both shook his hand and then stood back awkwardly. Although expecting the visit to be brief, I sat in the chair next to him. His wife sat on the bed.

"So how are they treating you, H.?" I asked.

For a few minutes, his lucidity flickered like a loose light bulb. He referenced certain mundane details ("Did you drive in along the Lougheed highway?") and recollected the distant past ("That was dad there in the background," he said pointing at one of the old photos). He even showed some wit ("Are those slacks painted on?" he asked MT).

Still, the cognitive deterioration was unmistakable. Along with mere forgetting ("So how's your dad doing?" he asked after his brother, eight years passed) were creepy hints of schizophrenia ("that's a worm crawling across my shoe.").

Moments later, his willowy daughter came in with her pair of pre-school girls, neither of whom were brought within arms' length of their ailing granddad. Meanwhile, it was hard to ignore the strange family dynamic in the little room: the wife's clucking anxiety about her financial burden and the daughter's subdued fear of her father's unpredictability.

"They'd better bring him his snack," tsked the wife, crossing her arms, "It costs me \$2400 a month to keep him here, ya know!"

A moment later, a meek-faced female attendant appeared in the doorway with a tray. Along with a cellophane wrapped cookie and a cup of apple juice was a plastic thimble of medication.

"Can you get him dressed properly?" said the wife sharply. Rising, she turned to TE and MT. "You girls don't have to stand up. They can take him down to the patio and the visiting room."

Although the afternoon light of late September was feeble, we waited on the downstairs patio until the same attendant came out, with arm around Uncle DT who was hobbling on 2 canes. As she eased him into the chair beside me, the old man scowled.

"Are you cold? Do you need a jacket?" I asked.

"O, they forgot to put on his undershirt," said his wife fussing up to his chair.

It seemed he resented a perceived condescension—but then the light sputtered out and his face went blank again.



After the interlude of fresh air, we stepped back into disinfectant stink and then, at the old aunt's bidding, ducked into the downstairs recreation room. Some residents were assembled to watch a Sunday afternoon musical performance. A pair of middle-aged volunteers playing mandolin and guitar were warbling out a version of the bluegrass-gospel classic, '*I'll fly away*':

*When the shadows of this life have gone
I'll fly away
Like a bird from these prison walls
I'll fly away*

Some inmates watched stonily in walkers and wheelchairs. A few stretched back dreamily on lounge chairs, while others rocked or stared at the spiders on their hands...

Back in the corridor we passed metal tables stacked with adult diapers. A fat and grey-haired care attendant loading her cleaning cart, greeted us in what sounded like a Newfoundland accent. Another care attendant, emerging from the elevator appeared to be an African immigrant.

When she smiled in passing, I thought of how my old uncle would be treated as an enfeebled elder in a Zimbabwean village. He would be gently fed and cleaned. His grandchildren would be put in his lap. Still, with scarcity of medical care, how many Zimbabweans even make it to the advanced senility of some residents of the Grand St. Lodge?

The first attendant brought the old uncle to the metal screened doorway for our goodbyes. DT was still looking through that screened window as we walked out to the curb where the old aunt's minivan was parked. Even as we belted in, my uncle was still staring from behind the bolted door. Behind the thick-screened window, his face appeared to be mutely pleading.

That was the last glimpse of him as we pulled away...



In front of her apartment, we gave awkward goodbyes to the old aunt then walked back to our van for the drive home.

We drove in silence back along the north side of the Fraser River. Whether DT has weeks, months or even years remaining—it was difficult to imagine a more miserable end than that my poor uncle faces... As a prison guard, he spent his working life walking dim corridors past

locked cells. In his flashes of awareness, he might well fear he is trapped in a cell if not in the Twilight Zone...

I broke the silence only halfway to Maple Ridge. "There's no way in hell I want to be kept alive like that!"

MT gravely nodded.

So, both the girls now know that if I ever be stricken in any manner similar to that of my uncle—the cost of my maintenance should not exceed that of the administration of a Kevorkian cocktail.

2004, September

fwt

Desirable modes of exit?

Thursday afternoon:

5 minutes before I was heading out for work yesterday afternoon, the phone rang.

“This is Dr. CF’s office,” I instantly recognized the Chinese secretary’s voice. “The doctor wants to see you about your electrocardiogram.”

The first reaction was to laugh. At the very moment the phone rang, I had been thinking of the CNN piece on medical tourism. It featured an American who got a \$100,000 heart valve replacement in India for \$10,000 after which he visited the erotic friezes at Khajuraho.

“Is it, um, about my tests?”

Since the annual physical a week ago, I have jumped every time the phone jangled.

“It’s not urgent, but he needs to see you...” She then read slowly in her heavily accented English. “You have a borderline risk for mitral valve prolapse.”

“Mitral valve prolapse?”

“You ask the doctor. I can book you for next Monday. I have 10:00 AM or 2:00 PM.”

‘I can also come in tomorrow.’

“Nothing available tomorrow.”

“I’ll take the 10:00 AM appointment on Monday, then.”

Of all the worries about the results—the last organ of treachery expected was the heart... I put down the phone with another snort of weird laughter.



An Internet search before bed somewhat reassuring. Heart attack was not imminent. Yet there remained a queasy new awareness of the flimsy pump upon which every instant of consciousness depends. It also occurred that negative thoughts to which I am prone could further jolt irregular heart rhythms.

At the same time, the diagnosis was definitely preferable to one alerting to some disorder in groin, gut or brain. A heart attack would be clean and swift compared with the growth of deadly tumours. Fearing a heart attack seemed rather like worrying about nuclear war—utterly beyond one’s control...

Of course, all this reasoning, will do nothing to ease sleep over the coming weekend...



(four days later)

As expected, there were four nights of insomnia before the visit to young Dr. CF confirmed what I'd already found out on the internet: that mitral valve regurgitation, while not dangerous in itself, still needs to be closely monitored for signs of deterioration.

“You have a light statistical risk for a sudden fatal stroke,” he said. “If the valve continues to weaken—at some point you might need heart surgery. But I wouldn’t worry about it for now if I were you.”

‘*If I were you...*’ How easily that ontological contradiction slides off the tongue!

2005 January

fwt

In waiting for the barbarians:

While waiting to pick up MH after his school ski trip, I watched the library DVD of Denys Arcand's *'The Barbarians Invasion'*. Although I was not as moved as by his earlier *'Jesus of Montreal'*, a few scenes did moisten the eye.

The deathbed reconciliation between Remy, the Quebecois nationalist, and Sebastian, his stock-trader son, was a searing reminder of my crucial reconciliations waiting. It was particularly jarring that the dying Remy was somewhat reconciled in having had a 'full life' : numerous lovers amid vigorous political and intellectual engagements. Still, there was a painful scene in which Sebastian has to pay one of his father's CEGIP students to visit the terminally ill college lecturer's bedside.

Most memorable was the climax in which Remy submits to assisted suicide via a fatal injection of street heroin. His consciousness fades out with his boyhood memory of a girl wading into the St. Lawrence River, demurely lifting her skirts...

It was particularly jarring that the character of Remy was only fifty-one years old—three and a half years younger than me...

In reflecting on this as the end credits rolled, I remembered the digital clock outside the Kearney Funeral home in East Vancouver. When I passed that sign on the way to work every morning, staring out the bus window, I would remind myself: *'It's much later than you think!'*

That was more than fifteen years ago...

2005, February



Of the lumpy and leaky:

On the euthanasia/assisted suicide debate listened to on CBC radio during the drive from work yesterday afternoon, the defrocked MLA, Svend Robinson, referred to: “*my friend, SH, a former teacher and multiple myelitis victim who cried out for the mercy of assisted suicide...*”

The name triggered the image of a gaunt— yet very pregnant— woman who worked in the same cohort in the settlement ESL program as did I in the winter of 1989.

“*I’m in exactly the place I want to be,*” she had said. Yet failing to please a literacy class, SH was not rehired in the summer. The next news of SH was a pathetic story, republished in the union newsletter. She was frantically searching for an adoptive parent for her youngest child before her impending death. That was the same child with whom she had been pregnant in the winter of 1989.

On the other side of the CBC radio debate was an articulate spokesperson for the rights of the severely disabled: “*There is evidence that when assisted suicide becomes a legal option*”, she rasped, “*some disabled people will feel pressure to consider the option. Even those who are merely incontinent. Let’s face it— Human bodies are lumpy and leaky.*”

Impeccable logic undiminished by her wheezing breath, the quadriplegic activist went on to insist upon the right to live as long as available technology allows her to, since she has “*work to do*”.

Turning off the freeway, I blinked in the brightening light of mid-February.

That’s exactly what it’s all about: having work to do...

2005, February



First signs of spring at Lefarge Lake:

While Romeo sniffed and cocked his leg in every clump of crocuses around the Lefarge Lake perimeter, I thought of Kubrick's visually stunning '*Barry Lyndon*', watched last evening.

One of the most stirring moments came just before the rolling of the final credits. Against the funereal strains of Handel's '*Sarabande*', the quotation from Thackery (whose novel Kubrick masterfully adapted), appeared on the black screen:

'All the personages depicted herein, high and low, all loved and quarreled, lusted and pined in the days of King George... All are equal now.'

It was a reminder that for every human still breathing—upwards of a dozen others have already paid their dues. I imagined a worn-out slave of ancient Egypt writhing on a straw mat, gasping his last. Did he slip away calmly or struggle in terror of the realm of Anubis?



In the shiver of these thoughts, I watched Romeo. The little chihuahua snuffed and scratched at the shoots of daffodils and even stopped to sniff towards some ducks mating in the lake shallows. As the ducks nuzzled and mounted, an octogenarian couple behind us stared wistfully.

It struck that in a sense—a world really does end with each final obliteration of a selfhood.

Yet I wondered: is fear of the thought of death universal? Of course, every living thing instinctively recoils from dying. Meanwhile, humans cling to a myriad of imaginings of afterlife—none of which deny that bodies die. Heaven or hell aside, perhaps the inevitable disintegration of the body is more dreaded in cultures which sanctify individuality. Without a sense of selfhood—without a linguistic 'I'—is it possible that there would be no fear—no sense whatsoever of inevitable death?

As Romeo on his leash tugged towards home, I was strangely comforted in that possibility.

2005, March

Beware the howler in future dreams:

I arrived at Bramblewood playing field ten minutes late to pick up MH from his baseball practice. I walked around the darkening field in a chill wind, before hearing from one of the moms that he had got a ride home with his coach. Still, back in the door beside the green dumpster off Pipeline Drive, I found only TE at the computer desk.

“Where MH?” I barked.

“I don’t know,” she frowned. “Maybe at mom’s.”

He knew, goddammit!” I fumed, “He knew I was driving all the way up to the Westwood Plateau to pick him up from practice.”

“Don’t yell at me,” she scowled into the monitor.

I pulled out my cell phone and poked in the ex-wife’s number. After several burrs, MH answered.

“Where the hell were you!” I roared. “You couldn’t wait for ten goddam minutes. And why didn’t you get the coach to drop you off here?”

“I had to pick up my geography textbook at mom’s,” he said.

“You know I would have stopped off there while you picked it up.”

In his silence, I lashed out: “Admit it— you were *embarrassed* to be dropped off here.”

“That’s not true,” he said.

“Forget it. So, are you still staying here tonight?”

“If you want me to,” he said.

“So, I suppose I have to go and pick you up now.”

“If you don’t mind.”

“See you in ten minutes,” I mumbled, as I flipped the phone closed.

Still tasting gall, I turned to TE. “Maybe I shouldn’t be surprised that MH doesn’t want any of those kids from up on the plateau to know that his father lives in this fucking dump.”

“You don’t have to swear like that— it’s not fair!” the seventeen-year-old scolded.

Too late, conscience jolted awake. “Sorry, honey,” I touched her arm. “It’s just that I’m having bad dreams about searching for you kids. I’m always going around when it’s getting dark calling your names.”

“Just stop shouting and swearing.” She tsked. “That gives *me* bad dreams.”

She turned back to the computer, leaving me with dire questions: Are the last remembered traces of my passage to be nightmarish howls of obscenities? Is there time enough to avoid this?

2005 April



fwt

The Grim Reaper's bell curve:

I am not quite sure what to make of the latest email of FPR—whose featuring in poignant memories of adolescence led to a discovery of a divorced sax player in Anchorage, Alaska.

Since sending her an out-of-the-blue Christmas greeting, our exchanged emails have largely been about music. Yet yesterday's message from the "mysterious dark-eyed" American girl who once bewitched the imagination of a sixteen-year-old boy from across the border, included a link to the cemetery of my natal village. Even if intended as a reminder of roots, the gesture jarred.

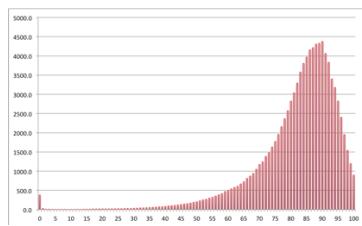
Still, for upwards of an hour I browsed the village cemetery site. In every section and again on the alphabetized general list of inhabitants, I recognized names:

Each evoked a freeze frame face from the village as I left it thirty years ago. Most were of the previous generation to mine. In reading names unheard for decades, there wavered forth images of railroaders with black lunchboxes walking home from their shifts and women in curlers exiting the grocery store with runny nosed kids in tow. Among the ghostly parade were a smiling grocer, a stern customs officer, a drunken barber, and a peroxide-haired slattern...

Most of the inductees had been in their thirties or forties in my childhood, and those of their age-group yet among the living were now in their seventies or eighties. The Grim Reaper's bell curve will soon precipitously drop. Apart from a few outliers who might make it into their nineties, it was plain that within the next decade most of that generation will be gathered in....

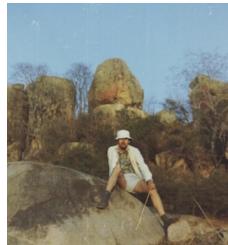
Each name was read in a shiver of acknowledgement of the merciless progression of actuarial odds. At the same time, it stuck me that an insurance agent would attest to how closely the village morality rate conforms to statistical tables. In some manner, the bald predictability of mortality rates is more chilling the fanged demons of the *Bardo*...

2005 May



Of prospective scatterings:

In the quietude of the drive to work yesterday (radio switched off), I recalled just how much I loved walking among the *kopjes* around Gokomere, Zimbabwe. Although I spent only two years of my six years in Zimbabwe there—no other landscape exerted such a visceral pull. To climb up into the balancing boulders (some with prehistoric Khoisan paintings) and whiff flowering succulents in shimmering heat was almost hypnotic. There was even comfort in the thought that my bones might eventually mingle with that reddish soil



As for the terrain of my boyhood—the northeast fringe of North America—there were only a few days in the year in which I felt any semblance of a visceral love for it.

That happened around the last week of June. In those exotic days when spring transitioned into summer, it seemed like the tropics briefly touched the northland. Steamy days with rumbling thunder were followed by short nights that winked with fireflies. The frenzy of vegetative growth during that ephemeral passage were almost too intense to bear...

Yet by mid-July, the fireflies disappeared and by mid-August, the black nights grew chillier. Well before the first autumn snowfall or even before the turning of the leaves, winter was already reclaiming its inevitable dominion in that glacial scoured fenland...

Five thousand kilometers and four decades distant, the marrow still shudders in any imagining of even a few grains of its remnants scattered in such a godforsaken place...

2005 September
