

5 Endspec (2006-2007)



Grave news was received yesterday afternoon about uncle DT in the Fraser Valley. In a terse phone call, his wife informed that he had been transferred from his extended care home to an IC ward in the local hospital. Apparently, his advanced Alzheimer's had delayed a diagnosis of metastatic cancer.

'You can visit if you want,' she said in her gruff manner, 'But don't expect him to recognize ya!'

This morning, I phoned the hospital and asked about his condition.

'He's not responsive,' the ward nurse said, 'he's not doing well at all. But you're welcome to visit between 1:00 PM and 6:00 PM.'

After dropping off MH at his soccer game in Maple Ridge in early afternoon, along with TE, I drove to the Mission Hospital.

'We're here to see my uncle,' I said at the main desk, 'I think he's in acute care.'

'We have no acute care here,' said the nurse, glancing at TE who stood behind me with the green carrier bag on shoulder. She did not guess that it held a chihuahua.

'Well,' I said, 'I got a call from his wife that he's here. She said he was very sick.'

Raising eyebrows, she looked at a clipboard. 'Name?'

When I answered, she immediately nodded. Without further hesitation, we were directed to the empty corridor of the geriatric ward, where we looked for his room number. His retired benefits afforded him a single room.

From the doorway, the fetally curled mummy was at first unrecognizable. Only in stepping to the bedside was a semblance discernable of the old man seen at the rest home a year ago. Even from that Alzheimer reduced condition, the deterioration was shocking.

As TE and I stood by the bedside, the brown eyes opened. In them was a glimmer of sentience.

'Hi D.,' I croaked, 'how you doing? Are you comfortable?'

The eyes fluttered and he shifted slightly.

“You remember TE, right,” I gestured towards her. “She’s now a university student. Studying at Simon Fraser.”

TE leaned forward with the carrier bag. When Romeo growled from within, the uncle’s eyes shifted towards the sound. TE let the dog’s head pop outside the basket in full view of the bed. For an instant, it seemed the old uncle was trying to raise his head. A vague smile came to the mouth before his head fell back and the eyes fluttered shut.

Thereupon I nervously launched into a monologue. I nervously commented on the weather, the traffic and MH’s soccer prowess.

A few times, I tried to elicit some response. “My oldest daughter, MT, wanted to come but she’s working today. She turns 21 this year. She still remembers how you flew with her to New Brunswick when she was only 4 years old. She was a quite a talkative little girl then, wasn’t she?”

With hands fidgeting under the sheet, he settled back—sunken eyes closing more tightly. I wondered whether our presence was exacerbating his humiliation. Who would ever want to be seen in such a state?

For another 5 minutes we stood in silence in the ragged sound of his breathing. There was also a faint gurgling from a tube which drained from the bottom of the bed to a suspended bag of brownish fluid. Queasily I reached to take his liver-spotted hand.

“Well, we’ll have to say goodbye now, Uncle D. We’ve got to get back in Maple Ridge to pick MH up from a soccer game.”

His wrist dropped back on the blanket. When TE touched his limp hand, the fingers with purplish-yellow nails wiggled. My daughter bit back a sob.

As we turned to leave, the dying man suddenly began to scratch at the left wrist upon which the IV was taped. His eyes blinked and he let out a moan. The horror in TE’s eyes make clear that she had interpreted the desperate gesture as had I: the poor old uncle was trying to remove the life-support tube.

I thought of his look of pleading through the wire screen window of the care home. That was a year ago— more than a year of torture...



Back in the car TE burst into tears.

“I know honey,” I consoled, “it’s terrible to see a person like that. But at some level, I’m sure he appreciated that we showed up. Just hope he doesn’t have to suffer much longer. It’s just not fair.”

In the silence of the half hour drive back to Maple Ridge, there was an unspoken understanding between us. Without her making an explicit promise, I have no doubt that TE knows should the grim responsibility ever come to her— she will assure that her father is not confined in his final months to such a living hell...

2006, January

fwt

Self-assessment lecture:

As a member of the English for Trades Access curriculum development team, yesterday afternoon I attended the workshop on self-assessment of learners. It was led by one Dr. AW, an anglophone teaching in *Universit  de Quebec*. In speaking about the astounding evolution of educational technologies— at one point, the grey-bearded Dr. W. mentioned the year of his birth. From the moment I realized we were the same age, I listened more intently...

Trim in blue jeans and supreme in confidence— he offered anecdotal asides of his prowess in cycling and canoeing. As for his intellectual heft, he seemed less a uniquely gifted specialist than one whose diligence had groomed a modest talent to its utmost capacity. His touted area of expertise in open-learning support was hardly scintillating—but he had raised his flag within a previously unoccupied niche.

I glanced between the man at the podium and his handout. The latter included a biographical blurb and a bibliography. It was plain that Dr. W. had not squandered his time. It occurred that were his life to end tomorrow, his obituary would be impressive...

I was suddenly stung by notions of trajectories I had narrowly missed. Impatience, timidity— sheer laziness— there were no excuses. Even as recently as 1997, I could have undertaken doctoral studies instead of pursuing fool's gold (and destroying a marriage) in Dubai... Yet as reaffirmed thereafter in innumerable self-flagellations, that was already too late. Furthermore, research in the nebulous field of Education could never really have been a pursuit of the heart... As for my obscene squandering of the last decade, is it too late for a tiny redemption?

As I fidgeted through the rest of Dr. AW's breezy presentation, I made this vow:

'Win or lose, I will tackle one more creative project. In the final self-assessment, no failure can more devastating than the bitterness of never having tried'...

2006, March

In being utterly unprepared:

I woke at 3:00 AM pondering the story told yesterday by RR, a colleague on the literacy project. She mentioned how a teacher in the literacy department— a lady about the same age as the both of us— had collapsed in a crowded corridor at the TESOL conference in Seattle. She had been struck by a brain aneurism from which she never regained consciousness...

“Enjoy your pleasures while you can,” quipped RR, “You may end up with a sudden splitting headache.”



I remembered the old promise to the kids of a trip to Mexico or California. When MT reminded me of it last week, I came up with another excuse. So, am I to be remembered chiefly for broken promises? I need to fulfil that one before the end of the year—expense be damned...

I then thought of our screaming matches of late. She is already twenty-one. I should not be surprised if MH decides to strike out for distant territory, just as I did at her age... Before that— will we have a chance to say what we’ve always meant to? It is still not too late to avoid visiting my dear daughter’s future dreams in the manner in which a certain old soldier, eternally unreconciled, recurrently visits mine...

Around 4:00 AM (by the red numerals of clock radio) I began to imagine redemption... That requires ensuring that not just MT— but all three of my fledglings have no doubt that my deepest commitment is to them... I ought to begin treating very parting as though it be the last...

In another stab of guilt, I thought of numerous relationships neglected... Maybe I could start this weekend with letters, emails and phone calls. Like Scrooge bolting up from his Christmas Eve epiphany, maybe I could set about frantically making amends... Until such redemption is sought and accepted—I cannot be more *unprepared* for a sudden splitting headache...

2006, May

In want of the laying on of hands:

After 4 weeks of what should be recovery from the broken collar bone, the latest X-ray shows no sign of ‘gluing’. While basic functions can still be performed with arm in a sling, the immobility is deeply distressing. There is growing doubt that the bone can heal without surgery. Yet surgery would be followed by a month of complete helplessness— intolerable!

In such anxiety, I lay sleepless though much of last night. Confined to sleeping on my back, I stared at the dark ceiling amid the stink of smoke drifting in the open window. Queasy, I also thought of the supper of cold sausage left too long in the fridge.

Only in the morning, did I hear from MT that the housing co-op complex by the Coquitlam library has burnt down. In the spirit of defeat that followed the separation 4½ years ago, I had almost moved into that seedy co-op. In a shudder, I remembered the eagerness of the grey headed chairperson of the Membership Committee. I would have been their first new member in years who could afford the unsubsidized ‘housing charge’. What a close call!



Yet even with a stomach-ache and the 32° toxic humidity, I needed some exercise. Rather than taking the bus to this afternoon’s physiotherapy appointment in Port Moody, I decided to walk.

Arriving at the clinic fifteen minutes late and drenched in sweat, I offered apologies to the receptionist. She scowled into her computer... The physiotherapist was even more annoyed—cutting short her appointment by thirty minutes while charging me for an hour.

Not counting the partaking of her magical devices, I was effectively afforded only 10 minutes of her time. For nearly 30 minutes I held my arm under a large metal lampshade device reputed to stimulate bone growth. Another ten minutes was spent swirling my arm in a basin of warmish water, presumably saturated with ultrasound.

The healing-faith of that practitioner, as least as applied to my case, was certainly not in the laying on of hands. More cynically, I wondered just what treatment the brusque 40ish woman would have afforded someone more evocative of her fantasies than of her nightmares...

In forking over my VISA at the counter, I was oddly reminded of cancer sufferers in Tijuana, pinning desperate hopes in Laetrile and coffee enemas.

2006 July

Comparing atrocities:

Killing time in the collarbone convalescence, I am drawn deeper into the news about the current crisis in the Middle East. With the Israeli ground invasion of Lebanon, I have been increasingly distressed by the civilian casualties. Despite the reports of Hezbollah “terrorists”, it is difficult not to see the young men of besieged villages like Bint Jbeil as ‘Davids’ armed with slingshots against the ‘Goliath’ of the IDF...

At the same time, I am ever more outraged that the Bush Administration so loosely and liberally smears regional supporters of the Palestinians as Islamic fascists while cozying up the true Islamic fascists in the House of Saud...

This afternoon, morbid curiosity drew me into websites featuring graphic images and depictions of *sharia* amputations and executions in Saudi Arabia. Therein were gruesome accounts of public beheadings in Riyadh’s notorious ‘Chop-Chop Square.’ There was also an interview with a Saudi executioner, a muscular black man, who apart from his official duty, unofficially serves as boogeyman for naughty Saudi children.

In queasy fascination, I investigated the cruelty of death by scimitar beheading compared to execution by other methods... In one site, a “medical expert” opined that: “...*even in the brain, suddenly severed from the neck, three seconds of consciousness remain...*”

This evoked imaginings of the sensations of the one’s detached head bouncing like a loose soccer ball under the legs of the righteous onlookers in Chop-Chop Square...

Only when Romeo whimpered at the door did I tear myself away that ghoulish obsession.



On the subsequent walk around Lefarge Lake, I thought about the contrast of Saudi barbarism with the cold efficacy of the IDF. The pilot who touches a bomb release button may be less subject to nightmares than the executioner spattered by the blood of his victim. Yet is murder from 10,000 meters any less atrocious?

2006 August

A ghostly twang of eros:

The eight weeks of incapacity during the knitting of the collar bone after the hiking fall has left me with a new alertness to the fragility of the body's mechanics. Now mercifully back into routines, I have newfound appreciation in the ability to perform even the simplest operations. Never before has there been such pleasure reaching into the top shelf or swinging a bag of garbage into the dumpster!

Every day I nudge the 55-year-old machine a little further and faster...

In jogging around Lefarge Lake this morning, I passed a grey-headed woman about my age coming from the opposite direction. I nodded and smiled—much more in salute to the pleasantness of the day than a greeting. Yet I caught a glimpse what appeared to be her shock in any acknowledgement by a stranger.... Had I violated the etiquette of mutual invisibility?

With a chuckle, I suddenly remembered how differently younger bodies reacted to one another in passing. Without eye contact or smiles— all intentional flirting aside— even strangers on the street often seemed to exchange tiny ripples of electricity... It was as if the genes of their own accord were blindly messaging...

In a twinge of sadness, it occurred that some bodies with whom I had exchanged such ripples of electricity, are already dust... In a deep draught of September air—I felt a ghostly twang of eros for those departed...

2006, September

In the absence of premonition:

It happened in less than two seconds on the way to MH's evening soccer practice. We were winding up the steep Mariner Way in the rain when out of nowhere an oncoming car was skidding into our lane. I jerked the wheel and veered sideways, just in time for it to skid past.

As the cup in the dashboard holder went flying, MH breathed.

"He was in the wrong lane!"

"Yup," I gulped.

Icy sobriety, like an Arctic outflow, swept away the fog of a long day. After dropping off MH in Charles Best School parking lot, I sat shivering behind the wheel for several minutes. Since the car would have hit the driver's side, at least MH in the passenger's seat would likely have been spared... As for his dad?

It was eerie that that not an hour before, I had been leaning over the sink, thinking about the execution scene of *'Dead Man Walking.'* The sobbing Sean Penn character on the gurney tilted up to the witness window in crucifixion pose, probably did not realistically depict a typical execution by lethal injection. Still, the close up on the victim's face as the drugs entered his veins was unnerving. I wondered what execution victims do typically feel in their last few seconds of consciousness. In rinsing the cups under the tap, I shuddered that such deaths were probably most often met in choking fear.

Before turning the key in the ignition, I counted out ten deep breaths. At every moment one must be ready for the unexpected. At the same time, one cannot expect a premonition in the hour when one becomes a 'dead man walking'...

2006 October



On the death of stars:

The chat started when MH, sitting on his bed after supper, showing me his homework poster of the birth of a star.

“I just don’t understand,” my 14-year-old chuckled, “how something could begin from nothing.”

I leaned back against the doorway. “Well, it’s not that something really *does* come from nothing. Something may come from a previous state— a state that is mysterious but still subject to scientific understanding.”

In attempted illustration, I flicked the light switch. “It seems that light changes instantly into darkness—but the light and darkness are not simultaneous. There has to be a transition between the states. Light changing to darkness is not a sudden end of one state and the beginning of another— it’s a process. Certain instruments can probably detect the stages that are too fast for us to perceive...”

With MH seeming to be listening, I crouched down and continued. “It’s like when you boot up a computer. ‘Boot’ is short for a process of ‘bootstrapping’— going through a series of higher and higher stages until the computer can run a program. It takes a few minutes with today’s computers but probably before too long you’ll be able to switch on a computer like a light switch. It will be going through the same stages, but the switch on will seem instantaneous.”



From that point I launched into a fifteen minute ‘mini-lecture’— zigzagging between vague speculations on biological origins, string theory of matter, parallel universes and quantum physics. In wrapping up, the fact of mortality was raised again:

“By the time you are my age, honey, science and technology will be advanced into frontiers we can barely imagine today. Of course, I won’t be around for that. But I certainly don’t mind making way for your generation.”

MH asked: “I can understand why people believe in religion. It gives them a lot of comfort.”

I nodded, realizing that he was probably thinking of his mom. “To tell you the truth, honey, religion just leaves me cold. I once tried to read the Bible as literature and wasn’t much impressed... But from my earlier memory of thinking about the cosmos gave me goose bumps. It still does.”

“Yeah, but we’re still going to die!” he glanced towards the black window.

I sighed. “Well, M., think of it this way: just by being alive as an intelligent creature you have won maybe the biggest lottery in the galaxy. Just because it’s temporary— what is there to complain about? No seriously, nothing in the universe is permanent. All life on our planet— the sun— even the galaxy will eventually die out.”

He looked down at his chart: his neatly labelled red giant, white dwarf and dark nebula...

“You know,” I started up again in his silence, “I remember as a kid how frightened I was of dying. I remember even being scared by the little bedtime prayer I was supposed to say after the light was turned off. I hated to say: *‘If I should die before I wake,’* because it seemed like I was tempting fate to make it happen. Some nights I would lie petrified of falling asleep...”

With MH’s smile, I moved towards a soft landing. “Growing up, getting a good taste of the world— watching your own kids grow up— it’s an amazing journey. Many people my age are pretty satisfied to have had more than our share. Maybe what young people fear is not so much going to sleep and never waking up— but never getting a chance to *live*. That’s natural.”

“Well, it makes me scared!” He caught my eye.

Crouching, I patted his knee. “You’re healthy. You don’t live in a poor country and we’re not poor. Few kids in the world have as good a chance as you do of living a fulfilling life. Just use your gifts well and don’t be reckless. You’ll get a good run for your money. I’d bet on it!”

Tsking again, he jiggled his poster in the reflecting light. Might this be a moment that will stick in his memory?

2006 December

In the back row of the pension seminar:

Addressing this afternoon's college retirement planning seminar, the financial planner from Victoria (who looked rather like Clark Kent) put teachers at ease about the security of the college pension plan. He also spoke of the bridging incentives for those who retire before the age of sixty-five as well as the cost-options for continuing extended health care benefits. After the overview, he fielded questions:

"Does it make sense to do a pension service buyback?" He tilted head and blinked owlishly. "Calculations show that you can recoup your investment when you live past 76.2 years. It all depends on life expectancy."

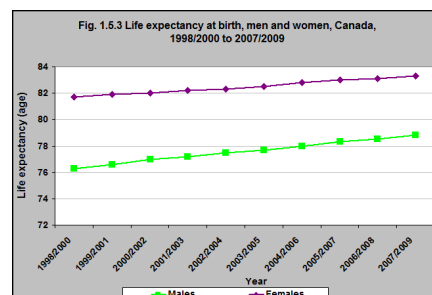
Looking round at my fellow boomers—most nodding in approval—I wondered whether a single one had any doubts that he or she would be comfortably drawing on their pension after reaching that 76.2-year-old benchmark.

In any case, the financial planner reminded us of the precipitous drop in the bell curve in which we were already beginning to slide:

"Of course, everyone should regularly update their will. Estate planning is an essentially part of retirement planning."

Then with a prim smile, he allowed us to catch up on their notes. Amid the mild coughs and chair squeaks I scribbled on the corner of my handout sheet: *'Ensure healthy finances for post-oblivion... Fucking absurd!'*

2007, February



A chill of post-mortem defilement:

In the bedtime reading of the *Lonely Planet* guide to Fiji, I was queasily fascinated by the details about the practice of cannibalism that once was widespread through the South Pacific islands. Apparently in the pre-colonial era in Fiji, dried human flesh was often prepared like jerky. It was not only ritualistically eaten but sometimes kept at hand for casual “snacking.”

What seemed particularly strange is the fact that it would have been unimaginable to one of the victims of cannibalism that they would be regarded by a stranger of the future only by the bits of their flesh their tribal enemies had once nibbled upon...

Following upon that grisly thought, I remembered Angela M., my domestic helper in Zimbabwe, vowing that she would leave instructions that her grave be cemented lest her body be dug up and eaten by “witches” ... A quarter century later, I acknowledge a blindness, in having then presumed myself immune to such superstition.

It now occurs that paranoia of what others may talk about— or even think about— oneself after one’s permanent absence, is equally irrational. Yet I find such a prospect deeply disturbing... Indeed, imagining thoughts of others (apart from family and friends) upon hearing of my demise is no less chilling than the thought of strips of my dried flesh being snacked upon. Yet unlike the grave sealed against the witches, it is impossible to protect against such defilement...

2007 February



An unsettling prelude:

With the stomach-ache that kept poor MH awake half the night, we arrived early at the Plateau strip mall walk-in clinic and had to wait in the car for the 10:00 AM opening.

To kill time, I switched on the radio. Even the dreary CBC '*Sunday Edition*' talk show was preferable to awkward silence with a teenager. The segment we listened to (while staring blankly though the drizzle) featured an interview with an American funeral director who also identified as a poet.

The funeral director-poet spoke about the North American disconnect with the ritual of death. He lamented the decline in recognizing the traditional role of funeral directors in the life of communities. As well as being pillars of their local Chamber of Commerce, he claimed that his ilk fulfilled a critical need as old as human society: guidance and support of grieving...

"That's a lot of bullshit," I chuckled. "Most morticians take advantage of people in grieving! When people are at their most vulnerable, funeral directors make them feel guilty about choosing a cheap coffin instead of a fancy one. There was an expose on funeral homes called the '*American Way of Death*,' that this guy wouldn't dare talk about."

Although wincing with his sore stomach, I could tell that MH was intently listening.



That '*Sunday Edition*' segment was hardly a reassuring prelude for a 15-year-old nervous about his diagnosis. After the 5-minute exam (the Russian doctor asking MH to twist and bend his torso) we sat in the examining room while the doctor brusquely wrote out a prescription for an X-ray and blood test.

When MH caught my eye in a glint of alarm, I smiled back in the assurance that it was just a routine procedure...

2007, November
