

6 Endspec (2008-2010)

Of loose ends:

From a rumbling of a calving ice cliff above a narrow fiord through which I was passing on an open deck, I jerked awake. While bracing for the crush of massive shards of ice, the shock came from an unseen presence. Shivering there on the sofa in the blackness of 2:00 AM, I felt that the final instant of awareness had for a split second been revealed in some palpable form...



Was it a foreboding? Four hours later on the drive to work, I tried to make better sense of the strange awakening.

If it ought to be taken as a warning to be ready—I wonder to what extent one *can* be ready for oblivion—however gradually or abruptly it takes shape. Would preparing every detail of an estate, writing farewell letters to friends and family—even preparing a funeral menu—render one any more *ready*? In the termination of existence—even if planned—there will always be loose ends...

As for me, even in late middle age—I have nothing but loose ends. To be cut off now would be to leave no promise fulfilled, no work of the heart completed...

So, in pulling into the parking lot, the key question emerged: which loose ends are in greatest need of tying up *now*?

2008, February

In an ordinary place on an ordinary day:

Throughout the ruing of every wasted minute today, I was strangely aware of the body's autonomic rhythms. It seemed strange that the heart could beat without awareness of how close it came to an abrupt permanent shutdown at 11:20 AM yesterday...

The day began along the icy shoreline of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, in Clallam Bay, Washington, where C. and I spent the night in a cheap motel. The afternoon before, we'd driven to Cape Flattery, at the wild northwestern edge of the Olympic Peninsula... In walking down to the Clallam Bay beach at dawn while C. was still sleeping, I skipped smooth stones into the grey Strait of Juan de Fuca. The serenity of those moments held not the least foreboding of what lay in store 40 minutes before noon...

After breakfast, I took the wheel of C.'s Pontiac Vibe for the winding three-hour drive back to Port Townsend. Our only stop was at the Seven Oaks reservation casino where, repelled by the murky interior, we immediately set off again. On the outskirts of Port Townsend with two hours before the ferry departure, I took a south fork from Highway #101, hoping to kill time with ocean views of the San Juan Islands. Within ten minutes it was plain that Beaver Valley Road was not the least scenic, so I (again— impulsively) made a left turn to double back.

For a thoughtless moment, I seemed to forget that the road was not a divided highway like #101 which we'd exited minutes earlier. It was also after executing that sloppy U turn that I heard C.'s cluck of disapproval. Glancing sidelong, I said:

“So, what's the ‘whoo' about?”

I turned my head back a split second too late to react to the blur of a car shrieking towards us. Too late, I slammed the brakes and jerked the wheel. The slow motion split second in which I braced for an inevitable crash was enough time to allow a clinical perception:

‘Ummm. We are experiencing a head-on collision. Why couldn't I have come up with better last words than: “What's the ‘whoo' about?”’

Then came the bash of metal and the rifle crack of shattering glass. In the resumed flow of time, I was startled by the pinkish parachute draped over the steering wheel amid a powdery haze. Yet there was no blood, no screams, no pain...

I reached over to C. Mercifully she was already heaving at the passenger door. In the whiff of electrical smoke came a bleep of alarm. Was the wrecked car about to explode in flames? I fumbled with the seatbelt and shouldered open the staved-in door.

A trickle of smoke was rising from the hood. The left side of the front bumper was obliterated—pushed so far into the wheel well that even the rim of the burst tire was warped. Dazed, I looked over at C. She was on the shoulder fumbling in her handbag.

“Turn off the engine!” she shouted.

Numbly, I reached in the open door and pulled out the key. I then glanced over at the other car. The right front end was mashed in. An elderly couple, looking mercifully unhurt were standing outside. The old lady was shaking but the old man was inspecting the damage.

The relief of deliverance gave way to gagging shame. I had put in danger the lives of C. and two strangers. I had wrecked C.'s beloved Pontiac Vibe. Whatever was to follow—loss of license, financial ruin, jail— seemed just deserts...

C. came around the back of the car, stone-faced, holding her cellphone to ear.

“Are you OK?”

“She grimly nodded. “What in hell did you think you were you doing?”

“Omigod, you don’t have to tell me—I know it’s my fault. I’ll pay for the damages— whatever it costs. Every penny.”

When I squeezed her hand, she might well have flinched away in disgust.

“Lucky I’ve got good insurance,” she said.



There followed the arrival of the firetruck and ambulance in response to the old man’s 911 call. His wife, although walking unassisted, was still driven away by for a checkup. Then there was the young cop who ascertained that I was not drinking yet who wrote me a ticket for distracted driving.

After we waited or a half hour by the wreck with gills working like beached fish, there arrived a tow truck. The driver spoke of his drug addiction recovery before dropping us off at a sleazy motel in Port Townsend. C. watched in misery as her Vibe, clearly a write-off, was hauled away. It would be met at the border by another tow truck for delivery to a Canadian junkyard.

So instead of taking the leisurely ferry back to Keystone and some grocery shopping in Burlington—we had to take a twelve-hour taxi to Port Angeles and a ferry to Victoria from whence we had to rent a car for the trip home.

What a strange and violent intrusion upon an otherwise ordinary day!



In the pre-dawn taxi ride to Port Angeles (the driver again identifying himself as a recovering addict) I recalled the ‘death’ scene in Monty Python’s *“Meaning of Life.”* In it, a genteel English cottage dinner party is interrupted by the arrival at the door of the Grim Reaper. In realizing that

the professorial hosts and their American guests have all had been fatally poisoned by the chocolate mousse, the host gasps: *“How frightfully embarrassing!”*

On the Blackball ferry to Victoria, C. sweetly took my hand. In late afternoon, just before she dropped me off at my door behind the blue dumpster, I took her hand again.

“I’m sorry being so stupid,” I said. “I take full responsibility. Please, let’s not let this come between us.”

I have no doubt that she knows I was sincere. Still, as she pulled away in the rental car, there came another stab of self-torment: If she ever had serious doubts about me over the last 2 years —this is her golden opportunity!



MT was in the kitchen when I opened the door. She had known C. and I were on a weekend jaunt but not that we’d gone across the border. Before taking off my jacket, I told her about the accident.

“Omigod!” she cried. “What if you ended up in the hospital or worse? If you didn’t come home, how would we even know where you were?”

“I would have called, honey. I just didn’t want to upset you. C. only phoned her daughter to get help with the insurance.”

She sobbed. “Well, mom flew to Montreal to meet someone and she didn’t tell us either where she was going, either. I went over to the house and MH was there with some of his idiot friends. They were in the basement, drinking. You’ve got to talk with that kid. He just takes advantage when he knows both you and mom are away.”

I winced in yet another stab of guilt. “I’m sorry, honey. Honestly, If I’d known your mom was going away, C. and I would’ve stayed home.”

“What if we heard that our father had been killed and our mother had run off some guy at the same time? What would happen to us?”

“Please, honey. Please don’t make me feel worse.”

MT wiped her face., “Well you just have to be more careful.”

I leaned forward to hug her. “I am sorry, honey. Please never doubt that you kids will always come first.”

Again, I realized that contrition is due before forgiveness is deserved...



On my cot a few hours later, my thumb began to throb. Hooked into the steering wheel it had obviously been wrenched in the collision. Lying there in the dark, I avowed that some swelling and pain for a few days were a fair reminder of my stupidity.

In those same sleepless hours, I speculated on what might have been the result had the point of contact of the bumpers been a few centimeters to the right. In that case, my arm would have had an exponentially greater force to dissipate. Almost certainly, both thumb and forearm would have been shattered. The broken collarbone of two years ago would have seemed a minor inconvenience compared with the hellish helplessness I would have afterwards had to endure.

What if the impact had been even further towards the center? Or, instead of sideswiping, what if the ongoing car had slammed into the drivers' door? In either collision, even at thirty MPH, there would have been no worry of incapacitation... There would have been no guilt, no shame—there would have been *nothing*...

'...I always wondered how he managed to get a driver's license without special restrictions... It was an accident waiting to happen... Just horrible that there were innocent victims!'

Shuddering, I imagined post-mortem gossip. What would be hideously unjust would be the assumption that the accident had to be the result of driving disabled rather than driving *stupid*. But then—what is 'hideous injustice' to a non-person?



At the office the following afternoon, I was still nursing my sore thumb.

"Did you hurt your thumb?" asked B., the office assistant, noticing how gingerly I picked up a printout from the photocopier tray.

"It just got pushed back when I was catching a ball," I lied. "It's nothing."

"So, did you get away to the Olympic Peninsula?" She asked.

I had forgotten that I mentioned my weekend destination to her on Friday afternoon even though I'd failed to inform my own daughter.

"Yeah, my girlfriend and I drove out to Cape Flattery."

"Did you have a good time?" She smiled.

"Pretty good," I said, "Although the weather was lousy."

With that breezy reply, I felt rather like Jack, in '*The Shining*', feigning normalcy with his wife moments after being tricked into an erotic embrace with a putrefying corpse....

2008, March

After all the fuss:

This afternoon at the summit of the high knoll of Minnekada, I looked out at Pitt River far below and dropped my head for a tingling minute... My whispered expression of gratitude was not addressed to any spiritual being but bore some semblance to a prayer...

On the hike back down, I reviewed the details of that close call in the Olympic Peninsula two weekends ago. Again, I was struck by the strangeness of the stretched-out instants before and after the crash. The entire sequence, comprising less than 3 seconds, seemed to comprise at least twenty sequenced freeze frames of *uber*-awareness.

Again, I tried to grasp the exact sensation of bracing for the collision. That instant as remembered, was not some crystalline 'unconcealing'. It seemed rather like a dazed reaction of the recipient of a surprise party when the lights are suddenly switched on. ('*Surprise!*')

Might such a daze be an uncommon impression before the final shuddering of awareness?

Then it occurred that the time-worm speculation of one's life flashing before the mind's eye in a few seconds, seemed less probable than the errant intrusion of some inane earworm. Maybe the last awareness is more likely to be an old advertising jingle: ('*Come alive—you're in the Pepsi generation!*')

Even in the likelihood that there will be no profound revelation in that final awareness, there may be a few seconds to reflect. Perhaps there is a warmish opiate trickle before the fading out. If there is time for words to self—perhaps they are less likely be pithy than inane:

'Gee, gosh—here it is now my turn. Heck—after all the fuss—I am not being so skittish about it after all... Shucks, it ain't so bad!'

2008, April

Of mass terror, unimaginable:



Shaken this evening by an on-line article in 'Esquire' called: '*The long fall of 111 Heavy*'. The essay by journalist M. Paterniti, powerfully rendered the horror of the crash of Swiss Air Flight #101 in St. Margaret's Bay, Nova Scotia, on Sept. 2, 1998.

Many details included were drawn from research of hard evidence—the records of air traffic controllers and recovered data from the damaged black boxes. The research also drew upon reports of residents near the crash site and of participants in the recovery operation. Exactly what was experienced by the occupants of the smoke-filled tube that plunged from 22,000 feet into the surface of the dark Atlantic can barely be imagined....

The hard evidence has determined that when the stricken plane struck the water at 555 kms./hours, many among those 229 humans on board were still conscious. That impact, of the equivalent of 350 G-forces, was enough to render within a split second, 229 mind/bodies into slithering bits of jelly that had to be scooped up in superfine nets...

Of all the forms of excruciating death suffered by human beings though the the dark annals of history, few final minutes of consciousness can imaginably be more horrific than the awareness of falling upside down through roaring, smoke-stinging darkness towards certain death... That experience could have lasted for more than twenty minutes—including the final six-minute plunge. Those final six minutes could have been a hellish eternity...

The article does disturbingly evoke the experience of a few nearby witnesses:

'...if you had been standing beneath the revolving green light [of the lighthouse in the cove]... you would have heard the horrible grinding sound of some wounded winged creature, listened to it trail out to sea as it came screeching down from the heavens, down through molecule and current, until everything went silent...'

Particularly eerie is a description (presumably based on local reporting) of a couple in a house near the shore. In the midst of making love, they apparently felt:

'...unrelated to their lovemaking, in direct physical opposition to it: an electrical charge so strong they could taste it, feel it, the hair standing on their arms, just as it does before lightning strikes...'

At the same moment, fishermen in a nearby boat apparently felt: '*...the shove and lock of some invisible metallic bit in their mouths... an intense, creeping darkness, that electrical taste...*'

Whatever dramatic licence the author takes in such a description, his images triggered a recollection of the plane crash in the desert near Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, in Dec. 1997. All but one of 86 passengers on board a passenger jet from Tajikistan were killed (the survivor

was to die later in hospital). In the instant that those 86 lives were snuffed out, I was only 10 kilometers away waiting for a taxi. Still, I did not become aware of the crash until later that evening.

As hard as I tried afterwards to reconstruct that instant, I could not recall that “electrical taste” of the instant obliteration of 86 universes in proximity. Was I distracted by the buzz in my own head?

2008, July

fwt

Unburdening of dead weight:

In preparation for the move next month, yesterday afternoon I began culling old books and papers. The ruthlessness with which I gathered up erstwhile ‘precious’ materials for the maw of the blue dumpster, seemed analogous to the neurological evolutionary pruning of dendrites.

In the excitement of liberation from sentimentality—I threw away scores of old tomes which I have carried from trunk to plastic tote and from basement to storeroom over more than 3 decades. Even those old books spared were not selected with the expectation that they will ever be read again—at least not by me. Instead, the selection was based on a guess of which texts which might possibly be of interest to my kids. There is even some vague hope of a future grandchild’s passing curiosity about the reading habits of an eccentric late grandpa...

In any case, the collection was culled by nearly 50%. After loading up the rejects into green garbage bags, I dumped the lot in the rain under the shade umbrella in the forlorn back lot of the Port Coquitlam Sally Ann. It felt almost like abandoning a pet at the SPCA. Fortunately, the initial pang of the remorse in driving away, slowly gave way to the vague pinch of euphoria in being just a few pounds lighter for the journey towards the end...



After I told C. of my ruthless jettisoning of “sentimental junk”, in my presence she went through the old certificates, newspaper clipping and yellow grey photos her “late mother’s strongbox.”

I wonder if I should just toss it all?” She asked.

While consoling her that her box will certainly not take up much space even in our limited storage room in our new place in Port Moody, I resolved to henceforth do a yearly culling. The final passage towards oblivion need not be burdened by dead weight...

2008, July

One last glimpse in the mirror:

MH gave an update on the tragedy of the father of the girl with whom he has been going steady for the last few months. B. is a sweet kid but both C. and I worry that she and her mom are putting emotional strain on MH, who is just seventeen. There is no male figure in their family for B. or for her younger sister.

Only two weeks ago, B.'s father, with whom she used to stay with every 2nd weekend, committed suicide. MH said that he had only met the man once and said that he barely spoke. MH could not guess why his girlfriend's father would have taken his life. He said his girlfriend had only spoken of the "how" and not the "why."

Still, in hearing the chilling details, it was plain that his was not a suicide *attempt*. A man who sits in a lawn chair in his garage and dons a welder's mask attached to a hose connected to the car's exhaust can only be stone-cold in his determination to succeed.

In trying to imagine what that man—father of two daughters—could possibly have been experiencing when fitting the mask over his head—the mind goes dark. Even in self-pity or self-disgust before suicide, surely there is anguish for loss of all that one has ever known. Surely there is a pang of pity for those who will be haunted by one's act.

One wonders whether in such final moments there is a fleeting desire for one more mouthful of food or drink; one last look at the sky—even one last glimpse in the mirror...

2009, August

Five months before the Kennedy assassination:

On the circular jog to the Rocky Point pier this morning, I reflected on a poignant memory from pre-adolescence. I was eleven going on twelve—amid that most impressionable period when the inchoate memories of childhood flow into the narrative continuum that stretches to the very present.

That particular sequence begins early on a muggy morning in late June 1963, when I crawled outside a tent pitched in my front yard where a few buddies had slept over. Coming up the road towards the railroad tracks were three boys carrying fishing rods. They were about my age—but not friends. Two were blonde brothers—who lived in the fine brick house reserved for railroad company officials. With them was MR—a dark-haired boy of a large Irish Canadian family. He was known as “the smartest one in his class”...

Nodding a greeting before crawling back into the tent, I wondered why those three would want to spend a hot day hiking up the tracks instead of swimming, as my sleepover buddies and I were so eager to do.

Later that morning, it grew blazing hot. When my friends and I were cycling to the beach on the US border 6 miles distant, it crossed my mind that the three boys who went fishing would probably be swatting mosquitoes in the boggy woods. In any case, my buddies and I enjoyed the afternoon at the lake before another sweaty pedal back in late afternoon.

I was walking my bike up the hill below my house when I was stopped by CH, waving from his porch. A year older than me, CH was a rather sadistic boy with whom I sometimes joined in shooting birds with BB guns.

“Didya hear about MR?” he asked with an odd smile.

Then almost with relish, CH reported what was already foremost on every villager’s mind:

A few hours earlier, a railroad section man had seen the two brothers walking back along the tracks back towards the village carrying their fishing rods. They were bare-chested and “looked nervous.” MR was not with them.

Only when the brothers got home did they burst out crying to their mother. They said that when they were wading across the brook below the railroad bridge 3 miles up the tracks, MR lost his footing. They said MR panicked and they were unable to get to him. They said they didn’t know he couldn’t swim.

“So, he’s dead,” said CH in wrapping up, “Ya know I never liked the little squirt!”

Years later, I would not be surprised in hearing that CH had become an RCMP officer.



Back on that June afternoon in 1963, I heard more details about the drowning from my mother waiting by the door.

She said that the older of the brothers was taken back up the tracks in a putt-car to show the village constable exactly where MR was last seen. It was said that his body was pulled from a pool that was barely waist deep. His mother was apparently so distraught that she has to be taken to the hospital in Fredericton.

“You’ve got to be more careful on that bike and swimming over your head!” my mother blinked away tears.



On the night of MR’s drowning, I felt no solace in any thought of ‘god’ or ‘heaven.’ For the first time, I apprehended that the world—which was continuing in the absence of the smartest guy in his class—could certainly go on without me... Yet why him, I wondered. Was I—his same age—not more expendable? I was scared to fall asleep.

Through that whole summer, I remained shaken by his death. I have no doubt than several other village kids, also in silence, felt the same...

I often thought of our few encounters. I particularly remembered riding bikes with MR one evening just a month before his death. In stopping for a few minutes on the wall of the dam behind the village railroad station, he suddenly said:

“You know what I’m looking forward to?” His dark eyes flashed. “Canada’s 100th birthday. It’s in 1967—four years away. It’s going to be a really big celebration!”

Speaking of an event so far into the future, seemed strange. Although a little intimidated by his cleverness, I felt that MR and I had something in common. I felt sure that had he lived—we would have become friends...

It was in remembering this exchange that I was most bluntly stuck by the brute finality of death. MR would not only miss Canada’s 100th birthday—he would no longer see, hear, smell, taste, feel or think anything—*ever* again...



In the following days, rumours spread of horseplay before the drowning—that MR had been pushed into deeper water. Still, the death was ruled accidental. Before the end of summer there was unspoken agreement not to make the two brothers feel any worse. They were, after all, the sons of a superintendent... There was no outward bitterness between the families. They carried on as neighbours and fellow Catholic parishioners.

Still, from that time onward, the bereaved father looked haunted. Passing him on his way to work at the railroad shops was awkward for boys who were the age of his dead son—especially as we grew into our teens...

“You know what I’m looking forward to?”

Through the summer after the drowning, I was haunted by the dead boy’s voice. It sometimes warned me when I was swimming over my head. Through one violent midnight thunderstorm, I remember bracing—expecting to be smitten...

Still, the impact of the tragedy faded with the return to school. Along with the entry into junior high there arose a pre-adolescent interest in the budding girls...

But then later that fall, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. For a few months thereafter, night fears returned, in ever greater intensity. At no time since have I quite so keenly grasped the fragility of existence.



My reflection was interrupted by the reaching of the end of the pier at Rocky Point. As customary, I touched the railing for good luck before doubling back toward home.

Beyond the grey inlet, the snow dusted top of Eagle Mountain was emerging from clouds. Glancing over left shoulder, I paid brief homage to that one bright boy who missed the chance to behold such beauty...

2010, January

Flashes of foreboding:

Just after Wednesday midnight, I woke on the sofa to find MH standing over me. He was just back from drinking with his buddies. He was primed to get something off his chest. After moments of sigh-punctuated silences, he began to tell me about a shock he received on his birthday a week ago.

“I asked mom to tell me something about the day I was born. She said you wrote in your diary how horrible you felt to be trapped with another kid—especially a boy.”

I jolted up on the cushion. “That is a monstrous lie!” I rasped. Even though I was still half-sleep, my temple swelled in outrage. How dare the ex-wife in her bitterness, try to embed such a canker of suspicion in a vulnerable adolescent mind!

“Think of it, M.” I took his arm. “Have we not stayed close through your whole life?”

In the darkness of his mood, he was unconvinced. Already nervous about flying to Prince George for the college conference on the morrow, I realized there was a new priority to attend to before departure.



Fortunately, I had a free morning before heading to the airport. Waking early, I immediately began patching together a collage of old journal entries from the year of MH’s birth. There was no difficulty in finding multiple entries demonstrating gratitude for joys of familyhood and devotion to the new baby... Yet it was the expressions of anxiety for job security which the snooping ex-wife had copied and pulled out of context for her “evidence” in the separation warfare. That ten-year-old scar began to throb...

Still, before the 11:00 AM departure, I managed to send MH the journal excerpts attached to an email. Also, before rushing out with my carry-on bag, I wrote a cheque for TE to make a payment on her student loan. With the customary unease before a flight, it was a small effort to tie up a couple of loose ends.



I was certainly not looking forward to the prospect of two nights in a motel in northern BC around two full days of mind-numbing meetings. Still, in the rendezvous with my departmental colleagues in the departure zone, I dutifully joined in the shop talk.

We taxied down the runway during a break in the intermittent rain. After takeoff, we laboured up into dark clouds. Suddenly the plane began bucking, wobbling—then in a heart in mouth moment—sinking. I glanced over at the female colleague in the seat opposite. Her jaw was

dropping. There were scattered gasps and yelps. Amid that giddiness of a fast-sinking elevator came a shrill sense of disbelief mingled in absurdity. When I was anxious last night, did I *really* expect this? Ironic that if this is the end—I will not be able to proclaim that I really *did* foresee it!

Then mercifully, the plane pulled up and out of the down draft and the unconcealed instant slipped away. Soon thereafter, the welling of relief and gratitude was pushed aside by the reinflating concerns of the mundane. So, there would be more time to fritter away!



Back home, I selected for the Friday night video, the '70s classic thriller, '*Don't Look Now*.' The tale of mystery serial murders in Venice set against the grieving of parents (masterfully played by Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie) was even more chilling than it was in the last viewing more than a decade ago. The climactic flashbacks of the murdered architect as his life-blood ebbs away, powerfully rendered the idea that had obsessed me earlier in the day... Yes, it may well be that foreboding images of one's end do sometimes waver up on the periphery.

In the final scene of the gondola carrying the murdered man's wife, the blind old clairvoyant woman and her friend all veiled in black (one of the architect's recurrent flashes), I wondered whether by twisting my neck fast enough, I could catch glimpses of mine...

2010, May


