

Snapshots #1 (1989-1992)

While living in a 2-bedroom apartment on Smith Ave. in Coquitlam BC:

A budding awareness:

I came in the door to find the answering machine blinking. I listened to the recording from the open door of the bathroom while tearing off sweaty work clothes.

The only message was for T.—from the Lady Fatima pre-school requesting volunteers for an upcoming bake sale. That was followed by a beep of a caller who hadn't left a message and then by my own recorded message (*'We can't come to the phone right now... We'll get back to you as soon as we can...'*)

In the sound of my recorded voice, 2-year-old TE toddled out from the bedroom. She stopped up by the phone and looked around.

"I'm right here, baby!" I said stepping out from behind the door.

Startled, TE looked back at the answering machine. How could my voice be coming from 2 places at once?

I took a step closer, out of the silhouette. My baby daughter's face broke from bewilderment to delight. When I crouched, she rushed into my enfolding arm.

"Did you miss daddy?" She threw her head back and bared teeth in a smile. "I missed you too, honey," I whispered, hugging her.

Not so long ago, she clung only to her mom. Yet ever day now she toddles further into the world, eyes widening in each new discovery...

Such a beauty, she is! 2 decades or so hence, some young man will be very lucky indeed...

1989, October



In wishing for mysterious intervention:

On the kitchen countertop awaiting delivery is the tray of cookies— my wife's contribution to the Christmas charity bake sale at the Lady of Fatima pre-school. After only 14 months in Canada, T. is growing in confidence. She has volunteered in MT's pre-school classes and has begun planning to return to elementary teaching here in Canada.

Off to the mall for with the girls for Christmas shopping, she left me to hand over her cookies to MT's preschool teacher, who agreed to drop by and pick them up.

Standing over the tray, I recalled how yesterday afternoon T. hummed to herself while kneading the cookie dough. After baking, she saran-wrapped the cookies on a Christmas green tray and adorned the package with a red bow.

I wondered about the reaction of MT's pre-school teacher, Marcia, in receiving the package. Will she notice that the cookies are not all uniformly shaped? That a few are darker at the edges? More worrisome: where amid the other Christmas dainties will be placed this humble offering of peanut butter cookies?

I touched the perfect red bow on the corner of the tray. How crushing it would be for T. to see her contribution left unsold!

Eyes moistening, I could only hope that the heart of some deeply Christian parishioner would feel the love in which these cookies were made... If only there could be some mysterious intervention by the school's namesake, the Madonna Herself! If there really was a Lady of Fatima, my wife's peanut butter cookies would be the first item on the table to be sold...

1989, October



Unmasked gorilla:

“Watch this.”

The smiling daddy tugged the blanket over the heads of his two girls. A few seconds later the sheet was snapped down to reveal a crouching gorilla.

With a shriek, the 2-year-old rolled back against the wall, eyes wide with fear. The gorilla jumped forward, grunting.

"It's just daddy," laughed the 4-year-old sister. "Just daddy wearing a mask!"

""No, no, no!" cried the 2-year-old.

"It's just daddy!" Repeated her older sister. "Don't be scared. It's just daddy, playing!" With a squeal of laughter, she honked the gorilla's nose.

"Daddy?" The 2-year-old grabbed her sister's arm for reassurance. The gorilla then took another leap towards her, roaring.

"No, no, no!" the little girl wailed.

Finally moved by real tears, the gorilla pulled the blanket back over the little girls' heads. When the blanket was pulled back down again, it revealed the bare face of their daddy, grinning. Still, the 2-year-old whimpered.

"What's wrong honey?" the father asked. "Come here and give me a big hug!"

The baby girl held back; her arm tight around the shoulder of her big sister.

“Sorry, honey.”

A little guiltily, the father pushed the mask under the bed. If he had been attempting to impart to his off-spring some inkling of the dualities that lie at the root of all understanding— that the world is never quite what it appears to be— that lesson was premature... Indeed, the unmasked gorilla wondered whether his teasing had verged on the sadistic.

1989, November



First standout:

With little TE in my lap at the back of Our Lady of Fatima church hall, I craned through the darkness towards the tiny face of MT among her 4-year-old classmates on the stage. As the children recited the Christmas rhyme in unison, I watched along with other nervous parents for any hint of how my precious fledgling might either fit in (or better stand out) from the crowd. As it was, my daughter was just another tiny face, blurred in the distance.

"Look at your sister up there, honey," I shouted through the din. "Can't you see MT?"

Not seeing over heads, the 2-year-old looked bewildered.

Meanwhile on the stage, the children executed a pantomime of Christmas trees— gesturing and waving arms under the teacher's guidance. After an instant of trepidation that my precious might be conspicuously shy— she jacked up her arm in a brave and vigourous flourish.

My girl! Yes, she *will* be a standout!

1989, December



Of storybook innocence:

It was during the commercial break to the ‘*Mickey Mouse’s Christmas Carol*’ cartoon we were watching with the girls when T. absently held her hand out before the TV screen, fingers fluttering.

“Look how different my hand is from your daddy’s,” she said pulling up my hand. “His is *so* white.”

MT looked at her hand. Then sliding from her mother's lap into mine, she asked:

"Is my hand white?"

"It's brown," I said, "beautiful brown. What colour is mommy's hand?"

"She's *brun*," she said reflecting her Lady of Fatima pre-school French lesson, “She’s *brun*, I’m *brun* and TE’s *brun*.” She glanced down at the rug where her younger sister was turning pages of ‘*The Duck goes Quack*’.

"What colour am I, then?" I asked playfully, pulling her closer.

"Your daddy's not white," said T. Smiling, she reached over and pinched my cheek. “Look, he's pink!"

“No, he’s *brun*,” declared our 4-year-old, “we’re all *brun*!” She circled her arm above her head in the similar fashion of Mickey Mouse’s nephew, seen earlier in the cartoon. Mortie Mouse was playing Tiny Tim.

“Allah bless us everyone,” I chuckled.

In the rare moment of storybook innocence, my wife winked and squeezed my hand...

1989, December



In mourning a passing decade:

Just as on the afternoon of New Year's Eve last year, I dragged the Christmas tree onto the balcony and cut off the limbs.

Even though this year's tree was bushy, a hatchet made the work much easier than last year's sawing through scrawny branches with a kitchen knife...

The bushier tree of this Christmas was just one of the bounties of a year that exceeded expectations. Amid the shivering reminder of the bleakness of fall 1988, our first months back in Canada, there was a tweak of foreboding. Failing in appropriate obeisance for our blessings could displease the gods....

As I chopped away, I also acknowledged the commemoration of a passing decade. On the eve of 1980, I was on a train between Halifax and Montreal, a few weeks before landing in Dar es Salaam. Two years thereafter I landed in Zimbabwe where I would meet T. and our 2 beautiful daughters would be born. Those were the salad days, about to be eclipsed by the final decade of the century...

It is hard to imagine what might become of us 10 years from now when my girls will both teens and I (if still breathing) well into middle age...

Stuffing the limbs into a green garbage bag, I recalled my first memory of the passing of a decade:

At sunset on December 31, 1959, I was in the kitchen with my father. Gesturing with a green bottle of Moosehead, he drew my attention to the window beyond which the orange sun was edging below forested hills...

"The sun is sinking on the 1950s," he said mournfully, "We're leaving it all behind."

At 9, I was still too young to appreciate that he was mourning the fact that he was very soon to turn 40—the sobering milestone which I will soon reach...

icon

When the tree limbs were bagged and the balloons blown up for our New Year's Eve 'party' with the kids, I opened a bottle of Heinekens'. It was only 3:00 PM, but already the grey sky was darkening. With little TE plinking her new toy soundboard, I pulled 4-year-old MT onto my lap.

"This is *your* decade coming up, honey," I said. "The 1990s belong to you and your generation. Old guys like me have already had their day..."

1989, December



Fifteen minutes respite:

Instead of the bedtime story tonight, I crouched between the girls on the lower bunk bed, tootling with the toy keyboard that TE got from Santa. The hope is that one of the girls can learn a few simple tunes on the 20 keys. If they show aptitude, then piano lessons could follow.

While they both dutifully watched, I awkwardly plinked out ‘*Frere Jacques*’ and ‘*Old MacDonald*’.

“Now your turn,” I nudged the board towards the 3-year-old TE. “It’s your piano.”

“I want to play, da,” said her older sister.

Pulling it onto her lap, MT pressed the lower keys that droned out in a spooky organ mode.

“That sounds scary,” I said. “What does it remind you of?”

“It’s like Hansel and Gretel,” she said, “Just when they’re eating candy from the cottage door—and the wicked witch opens it up.”

I put my hand over little TE’s eyes. “Close you eyes, honey. Can you see that, too? You know the story from the blue story book—the story about the little boy and his sister lost in the forest. Can you see them now at the door of that long-nosed witch?”

The 3-year-old squinted.

“OK now your turn, TE.”

You play, daddy,” she said.

“OK, just for a minute.” I leaned over the toy still in MH’s lap. “Now you girls tell me what picture you see when you hear *this* sound...”

Switching to the organ mode, I pressed one of the black keys, issuing a wavering plaintive note.

“I can see Bambi,” said MT, “he’s looking for his lost mother.”

“That’s so imaginative, honey—so clever. I then turned to my 2-year-old. “Close your eyes again, TE.” I pressed down the key. “Can you see Bambi, too?”

So, it went for 10 more minutes until lights out... It was my longest stretch of waking time in the last 2 weeks freed from anxiety of an unrelenting sore throat and swollen neck nodes...

1990, January



One of a cat's nine lives:

Can we have a story about when I was a baby?"

TE was almost asleep— so instead of reading a fairy tale, I obliged MT's request and turned out the light for a 'dark story.' Sore-eyed from hours of planning for a scheduled lesson observation, I lay back on the bedspread and cleared my throat.

"Have you heard that cats have 9 lives?"

"No daddy," said my 4½-year-old, "what's it mean?"

"Well, cats are very good at escaping danger. Even when they fall from a high place, they can land on their feet. Some cats have so many lucky escapes, it seems like that they have had many lives."

"Is this really a story about when I was a baby at Kutama?"

"I'm getting to it..."



A story of a lucky escape that happened around the time she was born was not what MT expected— but that was the story that wavered up behind my closed eyes:

"Once upon a time," I rasped, "when you were about 2 months old, we got our first car. We bought it from an old priest at the Kutama Mission. He liked your mom and gave us a good price. You saw that photo of us standing in front of the blue car, remember?"

"Our car in Zimbabwe?"

"Unhuh. It was an old Datsun. Anyway, I didn't have a drivers' licence but we lived in the country where there wasn't much traffic. The first time I drove anywhere by myself, was to the nearest village, a place called Norton. I wanted to buy up a few things from the little store there."

"Why didn't mummy go with you?"

"She had to stay home with you. You were just a little baby."

"Is this story about me?"

"Well, kind of— you'll see."

As the memory reeled forth, I drowsily described driving into the village where a policeman watched my sloppy parking. I skipped a few details resuming with my relief in getting away from the village and back on the empty dirt road. Then came the crux of the story: where an oncoming car braked and almost went into the ditch in my approach.

“...Then another car came straight towards me and stopped on the shoulder at the last second. I didn’t understand why. But then a truck with road workers standing in the back, came straight towards me without stopping at all.”

I flinched in the image of twisting the wheel barely in time to avoid a head on collision.

“When I stopped to look back,” I continued, “the truck was stopped, too, and the workers were jumping out of the back. They ran towards me, shouting... Only then it hit me that I had been driving on the wrong side of the road!”

I stopped up again, shuddering in the memory.

“...Well, luckily, the driver was forgiving. He had a brother in Canada so understood how I just got temporarily mixed up with left hand driving. But that was no excuse. I was dumb and reckless. I could have killed innocent people. I could have left you fatherless... But at least I learned the lesson. I realized that with a wife and child depending on me, I could never again be so dumb and reckless... MT?”

Like her younger sister, she was breathing softly in sleep. So quite appropriately, I had been telling that dark story to myself.

1990, January

Another grim tale, unexpurgated:

Last night's bedtime story, '*The Goose Girl*,' was picked by little TE who was attracted to the illustration of a girl amid a flock of geese, combing out her long hair. TE then settled back and listened wide-eyed leaving, her older sister, as usual, to ask the questions.

"Once upon a time," I began, "a widow sent her only daughter to a faraway land to look for a husband..."

"What's a widow, dad?" MT asked.

"Widow? A widow is a woman whose husband has died."

"How did the husband die?" MT asked, snuggling closer.

Oh, it doesn't say in the story. He probably died of some disease." Gently, I lifted her arm off my shoulder. "Honey, my neck is a sore tonight, OK?"

At that instant, I felt a twinge from the swollen nodes. It's been 10 weeks, and there is still no clear diagnosis...

"Can young men die?"

I looked over at TE: she was still awake—intently listening.

"Yes, honey. Young people can have accidents or die of diseases... It doesn't happen as often as with old people—but it sometimes does. Everyone has to die sometime." I patted her arm. Nothing for you girls to worry about, honey. You're young and healthy."

"Oh." She scratched her head. "So does the daughter find a husband?"

"Let's keep reading and find out."

Keep reading dad," chirped up little TE, from the other side.

In my froggy voice, I read the details of the treacherous servant who has the head of the girl's beloved horse, Falada, cut off. The horse's head is then nailed up over the doorway under which the mute 'goose girl' daily passes every morning with her flock. Magically, the head of the loyal Falada speaks to its former mistress and offers counsel...

Neither of the girls flinched in this morbidity so typical of Grimms' tales, unexpurgated. After all, such details are so stranger to process than the possibility of a parent dying—and leaving children behind...

1990, March

While living in a 3-bedroom coop townhouse in Forest Grove, Burnaby, BC:

Of sweet and sour:

In the early morning jog along the Forest Grove trail, I noticed that the salmon berries were ripening. When I came back from work, I asked MT if she'd like to pick a few.

"They look and taste a little bit like raspberries," I told her.

"Maybe mummy can make jam!" she enthused.

So, after dinner, MT tugged my hand along the trail behind the coop. We didn't have to go far. There were bushes laden with berries just behind her school playground. I pulled down the stems while MT picked.

"Just pick the red ones, honey."

"Like this dad?"

"You're doing a great job."

As she filled her little tub, I slipped into a reminiscence:

"This reminds me of picking blueberries when I was not much older than you... I used to pick them in late summer along the railroad tracks near my house. Those wild blueberries were really tiny so it would take hours just to fill a tin can... But then almost every time—just as my container was almost full—I would drop it or knock it over... I can still see all those berries rolling away in the dirt..."

In a ghostly whiff of squashed blueberries in hot coal dust, I patted her hand. "Hold that tub tight, honey. Don't let it drop."

"I will, daddy." She held it guardedly with both hands as he turned back towards home.

"Can I have some on ice cream?" she asked.

"You can try—but you might find them sour. We might have to add a little honey."

I pinched up a fat berry and winced in the confirmation... Still, there was more satisfaction in gathered sour berries than in spilled sweet ones.

1990, June



Landing on her feet:

TE perched at the top of the playground slide with anxious eyes.

"Do it, honey – don't be scared. I'll catch you."

She had never before come down the slide on her own. On her previous tries she had climbed to the top of the ladder, hesitated— and then edged back down...

"Don't worry honey, you can do it. I know you can!"

Stopping myself from nudging her forward, I stepped away from the slide. No— she had to take the chance herself...

She looked backwards, assuring herself that that no other children were waiting behind. Fretfully, I watched. *Will she be able to cope with the rough-and-tumble before her? Will she have the courage to take a few bold risks?*

Suddenly she launched forward – leaping into the unknown with eyes shut tight.

I rushed to the bottom to swoop her up. "You did it, honey!" I kissed the top of her head. "Sometimes you just have to take a deep breath and jump. If you are brave and careful—like a kitty cat— you'll land on your feet!"

1990, July



The sensitive one:

Dad, come quick,” cried MT from the living room. TE’s goldfish is dead!”

In the fish tank in the corner of the living room one of the two goldfish was floating belly up. Both girls stared forlornly at the single fish hovering in the bottom.

Both had accepted that our garage sale fish tank was not a viable habitat for angelfish, which they had initially wanted. The hope was that a couple of supposedly hardy goldfish would be good practice in keeping a first pet. If the experiment worked out, then maybe we could get a better aquarium and a few more exotic fish. For the last few months, the girls duly keep their promise— regularly feeding the goldfish— even giving them names.

“Goldie looks so sad.” said MT.

By MT’s designation of individual ownership, it was TE’s goldfish that had died. As I scooped out the dead fish with the aquarium net, little TE put her hands over her eyes. I wrapped it in a paper towel.

“I don’t think it was anyone’s fault,” I said. “Maybe it was sick when we got it. It always seemed to be gasping for air.”

MT tapped her finger softly on the glass. “Goldie is missing her friend, Spotty.”

“Your fish belongs to both of you now,” I said. “We’ll get him a companion. Just wait until the weekend.”

I wrapped the wad of paper towel into an old ‘*Vancouver Sun*’ and set it on the floor. Not in the girl’s presence could I deposit Spotty in the kitchen garbage.

“Can we get an angelfish now?” asked MT. “Like in the little mermaid cartoon?”

“Not yet, honey. Not until we get a proper aquarium with an air pump. Anyway, we’ll see about that. In the meantime, we can get another goldfish. A healthier one.”

“No!” cried little TE. She dropped her head into my knee. Just 3 years old and she already seems to sense that every life is unique and irreplaceable—even that of a goldfish.

Could we have a funeral for him, dad?” asked her older sister, tugging my sleeve. We can bury him out behind the flower bed. I can get him ready and say the words!”

“Do that, honey.”

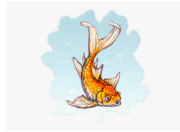
Yet suddenly TE ran towards the stairs, crying.

“She misses Spotty,” murmured her old sister.

In a twinge of poignancy, I remembered how yesterday TE looked up from my lap and asked: “*is your neck still sore, daddy?*”

“Honey, you’re got to let your little sister,” I said, squeezing MT’s hand, “you’ve got to let her say the words when you bury her pet fish.”

1990, August



fwt

When the red soccer shoes hit the turf:

"Run, honey, run! Just run after the ball!"

Both T. and I stood in the drizzle along with a score of other parents watching their 5 and 6-year-olds run back and forth along the soccer field. Egged on, MT's little peers seemed to have already grasped the direness of winning or losing... Meanwhile, through most of the game—even as a gaggle of other girls swirled around her our darling daughter stood frozen.

For a few moments, I could scarcely bear to watch. I could only blame myself for taking a 5-year-old's fancy in a new blue uniform and red soccer shoes as a desire to play a sport. Yet when the shoes hit the turf, excitement seemed to abruptly turn to dread.

When I looked back, MT was still standing awkwardly on the same spot while the other little girls chased the ball far into the opposite end. At that instant, MT looked towards us in helplessness. *My little sweetie—humiliated?*

"She just needs to stop day-dreaming," scowled T., joggling little TE in arms.

Amid the welling of pity, there arose an image of a boy a couple of years older than MT crouching with an oversized bat held under his arm, 2 strikes down. At the signal from the coach, the little league pitcher moved halfway up to home plate and softly lobbed a ball underhand. After making a token swing, the boy dropped the bat and ran off to the side of the field, not daring to look towards the sidelines where his father for the first (and only) time watched....

Swallowing back that image, I gamely yelled: "Come on honey, you can do it. Just run—just run!"

1990, September



Nova's miracle of life:

When T. was visiting at her friend's place after supper, with both fledglings cuddled beside I watched the PBS *Nova* documentary *'The Miracle of Life'*.

Featured were sequences only made possible by specialized miniature cameras able to probe human uteruses. Live images were captured of human spermatozoa wiggling up the cervix. Some were thrashing in circles while others swam like fry towards the skin of the egg. At that point, only a few thousand remained of the many millions shot into the vagina nearly 24 hours before...

The narrator made clear that it was not necessarily the strongest nor the healthiest swimmer who would win the 1/300,000,000 fertilization lottery... To a large extent— as in any lottery— it was the *luckiest*...

"What's happening now, dad?" MT murmured when the diaphanous ovum pulsed like an anemone in a tidal pool.

"Oh, the sperm are just looking for the egg," I said.

TE, whom I thought was dozing off, suddenly stirred from under my chin.

"The egg," she repeated solemnly, in beholding the image of the state in which she had herself miraculously passed through half a world away, just 4 years ago...

1990, October



Poor old Miss Green:

Down the packed snow hill of Burnaby Mountain Park on her yellow plastic sliding sheet, MT skidded backwards. At the bottom, she hopped up and brushed herself off looking around to see whether any other kids had witnessed her wild ride.

Edging down the hill to meet her, I called out. "Hey, that looked like fun!"

"Can you carry my slider?" she asked.

"Sure." I rolled it under my arm. "It's really hard to steer these things— especially on an icy hill. That reminds me of sliding when I was a kid. You want to hear a little story?"

"OK, dad," she said looking tentatively over at the snow-suited boy of about her age who was watching us.

"Well," I began, "One winter afternoon when I was about 6— in Grade One— I went sliding on the hill behind my school. The hill was even icier than this one and I was using a sled— which is harder to steer than a toboggan."

The little boy took a step closer.

"I was going down really fast when I saw an old woman with a cane walking down the path beside the trees. I couldn't stop in time. *Bonk!* I knocked right into her and she fell down beside me."

For an instant I saw the withered old face inches from my own.

"How did she get up?" asked MT, looking towards the little boy.

"Some older boy came along and helped her up. She was OK. She just scolded me and hobbled away... The worst thing was the next day in the school corridor. Some kids started to tease me. '*You knocked down poor ole Miss Green! You knocked down poor ole Miss Green!*' They chanted. Some were laughing."

MT looked down the hill smiling thoughtfully. Beside us, the eavesdropping little boy was smiling.

"Sooo," I boomed, "the lesson is that when you lose control on an icy hill— just don't knock down old ladies. If you do— make sure to help them up."

MT nodded over at the little boy, as if to message: *'That's just my silly ole dad!'*

1990, December



Of wondrous differences:

"What would you do, MT, if you found in the grass a tiny creature like Thumbelina?"

Closing the cover on the blue book of fairy tales, I reached across the bedspread to grasp MT's hand.

"I'd put her in my little dollhouse," she declared. "I'd make her a walnut shell bed and give her a rose petal blanket. Then she could have tea in my little teacups."

"What would you do, TE?" I whispered, sorry for my delay in asking. My 'shy' little one hesitated, squirming and kicking against the sheets.

"TE?"

Finally, she blurted.

"I'd let her go."

Her older sister warbled on: "I'd let Thumbelina wear my Barbie clothes and use my Barbie brushes and combs..."

"You have a wonderful imagination honey," I kissed MT's cheek then rolled over and whispered into little TE's ear: "Your answer is really sweet, too!"

In turning out the light I wondered just how much such a casual question had revealed about the 2 little sisters— so alike, yet so wondrously different...

1991, January



Blossoms on the Burnaby Mountain trail:

Reeling in the intoxication of spring on Burnaby Mountain, I squeezed TE's hand.

"Do you remember the sunny winter day we walked here?" I said, teasing out a contrast to the warm swampy air.

"Yeah," she returned the squeeze.

"Do you remember the little worm we saw wiggling on top of the snow?"

"Yup," said my 4-year-old skipping forward on the path.

"Do you remember what we did for it?" I stopped up and pulled from a bush, a half-ripe salmonberry.

"I remember," she said. "We helped it crawl back under the ground— back to the mummy and daddy worms."

"That's right, TE!" Delighted by her blossoming language ability, I crouched down beside her. "That's just how I remember it, too." Hugging her, I could almost feel her fluttering heart... No more worries about speech therapy for this little girl!

"Where is the worm now, daddy?"

"I don't know, honey... Maybe he's still alive, squirming under our feet. Maybe he's been eaten by—"

"Look, daddy!"

"What is it?" I looked round where she pointed. Three robins were hopping away through the underbrush.

"They're robins. There are many kinds of birds of all sizes: crows, sparrows, eagles. Did you know that?"

"No-o."

"What do you think robins eat?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. Like a cloud moving over the sun, I wondered if the timidity was resuming.

"Guess, TE." I cried out, "Just guess!"

"Worms," she shouted back, "and tugs!"

"Tugs?" I squeezed her hand. "Just say it again, honey."

"Tugs."

I watched her imploringly as she carefully formed her lips.

"Worms and pugs."

At the same instant as she squinted in the flicker of doubt, I heard the word she was trying to pronounce. I dropped to knees and scooped her up. "*Bugs*, honey, *bugs*- yes, that's really close. I'm so proud of you."

In the instant that her tiny arm tightened round my neck, I was back on the New Year's Day walk with her and MT when we suddenly espied in the snow— the worm whose life we may have saved...

1991, May



A toughening up?

"Com'on girls, you can make it!"

The assumed shortcut from our front door to the trail up Burnaby Mountain turned out to be a tangle of brambly underbrush. Yet even with their bare arms and legs, I urged my my little girls to follow me through.

"Com'on, be brave, I'm right here!"

Even in the anguish of their protest, I took the bushy gauntlet as something of a lesson in perseverance— if not a little toughening up...

"Com'on, TE, just crouch down!" I beckoned from a few paces ahead.

In watching her edging silently along, I wondered whether something of the same quiet persistence might serve her 20 years hence...

Meanwhile, her older sister moaned: "The bushes are holding me down! This is terrible— why did you bring us here?"

At that moment we half-way though—too far to turn back. Still, MT's words dug deeper than any blackberry thorn. Was it not cruel to subject little girls to such a needless ordeal?

"Com'on, girls— com'on! Just a few more steps— You can do it— you can make it!"

The final barrier was an ancient rotting log. Pulled over it, they were finally on barer ground, brushing themselves off.

"We made it dad!" MT wiped her forehead and TE gave her mysterious half smile...

It was not quite graduation from a bootcamp, but they seemed as proud of themselves as I was of them...

1991, July



Of the unwieldiness of things:

"Stupid, stupid, bike!"

MT stepped away from her blue bike on the basketball court where it had fallen. Her second try without the training wheels was not going well. "I'm *never* going to learn!" She sobbed as her mother and I shook our heads.

"The bike's not stupid," I said. "You just need to be more patient."

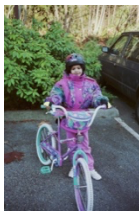
"You have no patience" said T. gruffly, "because you're spoiled rotten. Do you any idea how many 6-year-olds can only dream of having their own bikes?" She slapped an alder branch in her palm. "Now go back and pick up that bicycle before you get a good one across your bum!"

Obedying, MT bent down and pulled upright the bike. This is so hard," she whimpered. "It's not fair!"

I stood back in deference to T.'s maternal tough love. Still, the heart was pierced by MT's bitter cry. If only a crooked finger could move objects— or one could flap arms to take flight! Yet unlike in dreams— in the real world one struggles with the mastery of unwieldy things that scrape and bruise...

"Just think, honey," I tried in good-cop mode, "Just think that when you learn to ride it— just a few days from now—it'll feel like having wings..."

1991, August



Labours of love:

There was T. softly humming on the sofa yesterday afternoon, sewing gauzy orange organdy into princess costumes for Halloween. Just a few hours ago, she awoke moaning with abdominal pain.

"Listen now!" I shushed the girls who bounced on the smaller sofa. "Listen for just a minute." I cleared throat and made a gesture of tipping a hat. "I want you to remember that when you were little, your mom spent a whole week making your Hallowe'en costumes. Even when she was sick— she worked on them. 30 years from now, I want you to remember that you were fairy princesses for Hallowe'en only because you had the most loving mom any kids could hope for!"

I leaned forward and pecked my wife's cheek. She nodded with a grimace of pain.



Several hours later, I lay half-asleep, hoping for her thrashing limbs to settle. Well before there was any sign of her sleep, I felt her quaking sobs against my back.

"I'm in so much pain," she whimpered.

"Don't worry, I whispered, "We'll manage."

Still sobbing, she squeezed my hand back. With only 2 weeks past the positive results of the pregnancy test, a long fall and winter lies ahead...

1991, October

Saying 'yes' to the world:

There was little TE scowling and turning her face from the open book on her mother's lap.

"I don't think I'll send her to school next year," grumbled T. closing the book and pulling the comforter over her legs. "She's not ready!"

On her knees before the end table, TE glowered.

"TE," I addressed her from the other sofa, "You need to promise that tomorrow when mummy is teaching you the ABCs you *will* pay attention!"

"No!" The 4-year-old dropped her head and crawled under the table.

"All TE says is 'no!'" taunted her older sister skipping across the rug.

"Shuhhh," I said, "that doesn't help."

MT shrugged shoulders and veered towards the stairs, storybook under arm.

"You know your sister is right, honey," I crouched down and patted her back. "'No' is not a good answer for every question. If you say 'no' to everything, you're going to be an unhappy person. Please, honey- please start saying 'yes' to the world."

"No!" she stuck her thumb in her mouth.

"TE," I gently poked her leg beneath the table. "Just try honey— just try— OK?" She turned up her face, pouting.

I sighed. How this 4-year-old tugs the heart from disappointment to the highest hope!



It was just last Sunday afternoon, on the slippery path behind the coop when I stopped with TE to look down together into the rushing brook. I had asked her if she wanted to see the upcoming movie, *'Beauty and the Beast'*. She and MT already knew the story from their fairy tale book. I reminded her of the ending in which Beauty marries the erstwhile beast and they live happily ever after...

"Do you want to get married when you grow up, honey?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

"Are you going to be a mummy?"

Again, without hesitation, TE nodded.

I squeezed her hand. "Will you let me visit your kids?"

"Yes," she said again.

With her cryptic little smile, she stared into the roiling brook.

1991, November

fwt

A faraway smile:

“We don’t have to turn off the light,” said MT, pulling the Little Mermaid bedcover over my head, “Let’s pretend we’re in a tent.”

While I agreed to make up a short “dark story”, I was too tired to come up another episode of Captain Morgan and his wonder dog, Blackie. Instead, I asked:

“Just for a few minutes, would you like to hear about where we lived in Zimbabwe?”

"Yes! Yes!" they both urged, snuggling deeper.

Holding the cover over our heads, I launched into a rambling monologue:

".... We lived in a bungalow on a school compound. I was a teacher in the high school and your mom taught in the nearby school for the little kids... A German family lived next door. You would sometimes go over to visit their kids— Girma and Stefanie... On the other side of our house lived the Dundu family. They had a fat little boy, about your age, MT. He would come to play with you. Once he rode his muddy little tricycle right into our bedroom. You would always say:" *‘Oh, oh— here comes that Dundu boy again!’*"

...We had a babysitter who was also our helper. Her name was Calista. Every morning, she would come and clean up. She would even make us lunch. We have a photo of her sweeping the floor with TE, just a few months old, tied in a towel on her back. Poor Calista. Do you remember, ME, how every afternoon, she would take you to pick up a pitcher of fresh milk at the school dairy? Every time you drank milk, MT, you would say: *‘Thank you, cows!’* The school also had a big vegetable garden where we could buy fresh tomatoes...

...Do you remember Hund? We would sometimes call him ‘the Lizardman’. He was also one of the teachers at my school. He would often come for lunch and he would sometimes scare you girls. He was a little crazy, but a good friend. Your mom and I couldn’t drive, so Hund often drove us into the city. He even drove us to the hospital when TE was in mom’s tummy... Some afternoons we would drive with Hund down to a swimming pool and swim there until dark...

...We had a TV but we didn’t watch it nearly as much as we watch TV here. We would often read in the evenings and in the colder months we would make a fire in the fireplace and listen to music. And MT, you spoke as much Shona, your mother's language, as you spoke English. Sometimes—"

In a sudden creak, I pulled off the bedcover ‘tent’ to see T. in the doorway.

“Did you hear the dark story, mom?” asked MT.

With a soft faraway smile, my wife lifted her eyebrows in Shona assent.

1991, December



A Lear awaiting the millennium:

While T. stayed home nursing her cold, I took the kids on a brisk New Year's Eve walk. Through the icy mist, we circled down Forest Grove Drive and back up Ash Grove Crescent. I held TE's hand and she in turn held her older sister's.

"So tomorrow it'll be a new year," I said. "1992. A big year for us. Sometime in May, you'll have a new sister or brother."

"I want to feed her," said MT.

"Will you also change her diaper?"

"Yucky!" said TE.

Well, we'll all have to help your mommy. It's a lot of work having a new baby. Especially with other kids your age."

"My friend, Sonja, had a baby brother," said MT. "She helps to feed him."

"That's nice of her. Babies need a lot of attention for the first few years... Brothers and sisters can help. But time goes quickly... I can't believe we've already been 3 years here. Just a few more years left before the millennium."

"What's the millennium?" asked MT.

"That's the year 2000. Just 8 years away."

"I can count to a thousand," said MT with a hop.

"That's clever. The year 2000. Not many people ever experience the beginning of a millennium. Isn't that something exciting to look forward to?" I began puffing with the uphill exertion.

"How old will I be?"

"You'll be 16 that year— a teenager. TE will be a teen, too. She'll be 13. The baby— the baby will be just 8..."

TE squeezed my hand.

"...I'll be— my god—I'll be 49. Pretty old. Will you take care of me when I'll old and feeble?"

Both girls kept heads down.

"Will you?" I teased. "When I'm old, I'll need a corner to roll out my sleeping bag, a spot in the cupboard for a few teabags, a corner of your fridge for a few cans of beer. Com'on, girls—tell me whether I can rely on you!"

"You can come to my house, dad. You can have your own room."

“Thanks for the offer, honey—but I won’t take it as a promise. I won’t set myself up like old King Lear.”

"How soon," asked ME, "before we can get a pet dog?"

TE looked up hopefully. Both my little Cordelias were glad to change the topic.

1991, December



fwl

Judgmental watcher:

There was 4½-year-old TE dragging herself along behind her preschool classmates, most of whom were skating smoothly to the opposite side of the Kensington ice rink. From behind the fiberglass boards, I bit my lip: *'Why is the teacher ignoring my child?'*

With ankles bend on the ice and the cuffs of her snow-pants dragging right onto the ice, little TE looked forlornly towards the group of towheads clustering around the teacher for the next instructions.

Hardly bearing to watch, I kicked the boards. It was then that an image shuddered forth of a 10-year-old amid the yawning emptiness of one side of an outdoor ice rink. While the pack of little hockey players scrummed at the far end, the lone boy was on knees reaching for a fallen hockey stick ... The only consolation amid the hot shame was that his father was not among the other parents, watching...

I raised my head in time to see little TE, finally caught up with her little cohort, anxiously looking back towards me...

1992, February



Competing catechisms:

Nearly every Sunday for months now, the girls have been accompanying their mother to St. Joseph's Parish church in Port Moody. MT, not yet 7, has already started taking confirmation classes...

While she was water painting on the floor beside my desk this afternoon, I 'playfully' queried for any impressions of how catechism might be affecting her:

"So, tell me MT, what does god look like?"

"O, he has a circle around his head, and he has wings," she said matter-of-factly.

"That's interesting." I squeaked my chair closer to the filing cabinet under which the newspaper was spread for her little box of water colours. "Where did you get that idea?"

"I don't know. I saw a picture like that in a book."

"Could you draw a picture of it for me?"

"Maybe later. Now I'm just painting some flowers." She turned up her paper to show the yellow splotches. "Flowers on a spring day."

"That's pretty. But tell me more about what you think about god. Is he watching us?"

Thoughtfully, she dipped her brush in the water.

"Maybe. Maybe like in the song."

"What song?" I ask thinking she might be referring to some hymn from the church.

"You know, the one you sometimes sing. From the tape. About the distance."

"You mean '*From a Distance*'?"

"Yes, dad. Sing it."

Surprised that an old folk-rock number by the Byrds would have so touched her, I cleared my throat and began:

"From a distance—the world looks blue and green, and the mountain tops are white..."

I stopped, leaning back in my chair. "I forget how it goes from there... Do you know where that song comes from, honey?"

"No, dad. Where from?"

Encouraged by her seeming curiosity, I fell into teaching mode. "Well, let me tell you. I was about your age when they sent the first rocket into space. It was called Sputnik. Still, a more amazing thing happened when I was a teenager. I think it was in 1968, around Christmas time, when a spacecraft

with three astronauts in it was sent around the moon. When the astronauts came around the far side of the moon, it was the first time that human beings saw the world from that far out in space. The astronauts took colour pictures. It was amazing to see just how beautiful the world looked from that distance. Both beautiful and fragile.”

“What’s fragile?” she asked, circling her brush in the blob of green.

"Something is ‘fragile’ when it can be easily broken... When people first saw that photo of earth alone in the darkness of space—around the whole world, many people had the same deep feeling. It was incredible to think that we were all together on the little blue ball. It seemed so obvious that all human beings are part of the same tiny family—and that all life on earth is very fragile... It was that photo that convinced so many people that humans have a duty is to protect the earth that gives us life.”

“Can you sing the song again, dad?” she said gently.

"No, no— let me play it for you. I’ll get the cassette.” I switched off my computer monitor. “I’ll also bring up ‘*Imagine*’ by John Lennon. You remember that one? I’d like you to listen to that one again, too.”

I clomped down to the living room, encouraged that my beloved daughter’s ‘spiritual’ nurturing need not be conducted entirely under the aegis of the Roman Catholic church...

1992, March



Helpless before the woes of the world:

It was not surprising that T., now 7 months pregnant, spent most of Saturday alone in the bedroom. Several times, I went to the doorway and stood helpless amid the funereal pall of her silence.

For their part, the girls played in their bedroom and later watched a video. In mid-afternoon, I was sitting upstairs at my desk staring gloomily at my amber screen when MT ran into the room, crying.

"What's the matter, honey? "

Head against my chest, she quaked. "I feel bad, daddy— I feel bad."

"What are you feeling bad about?" I asked softly, well knowing the answer.

Amid sobs she thrust up her face. "I'm just so worried about *Ambuya* and *Sekuru*."

"Now don't you worry. They'll be fine, they'll be fine. You can send them one of your paintings. I'm sure they would love that. They will probably put it up on their wall."

"But mummy said they have no water. Everything is drying up."

"The rains will come soon honey. Then everything on their farm will start to grow again."

Attempting to change the subject, I touched the new gap in her front teeth. "Hey, maybe you'll get a visit from the tooth fairy tonight."

"I don't care about the tooth fairy," she cried.

Patting her back, I looked up at the bookshelf at the newspaper article I'd clipped from yesterday's '*Globe and Mail*'. It was the article that caused T., propped up on her pillows this morning, to burst into tears:

"Why?" she blubbered. "Why does God allow food to be thrown away here when people are dying of drought? It's not fair. It's not fair!"

Both girls, came timidly into the bedroom. For several minutes they hugged their mother as she rocked and wailed. I stood back stiffly. I should have known better than to show her that article! Just as she was finally getting over the woeful news heard from her sister P. in last weekend's phone call, her anguish was retriggered...

Several hours later, T. was still lying in the semi-darkness but '*Millions Face Starvation in Southern Africa Drought*' was in my wastebasket. In its erstwhile place on top of my bookshelf was an envelope addressed: '*From MT to the tooth fairy*'.

1992, March



Would that by her tears, the shriveled maize be watered:

After the early meal of Kentucky Fried Chicken, we were sitting comfortably on the sofa just in time to hear the lead international story of the BC TV six o'clock news:

"Well, Canada comes out on top in today's U.N. survey," said the doe-eyed anchor, "And right at the rock-bottom is Zimbabwe..."

T's curled foot jolted. What followed were images of swollen bellied children in the Binga dust bowl of northwest Zimbabwe. I dropped my head as my wife's eyes flooded...

"It's so sad, so sad," I sighed, touching the 'mute' button.

My wife rose heavily, holding her swollen belly under the tent-like blue dress.

"Tonight," she sniffled, "tonight I have to go to church."

If not by her prayers— would that by her tears— the shriveled maize be watered!

1992, April