

Snapshots #2 (1992-1995)

A very special birthday:

Instead of taking the bus from the Royal Columbian Hospital, I walked back to the Lougheed Mall. In the sweaty 3 kms. hike along Columbia St., I tried to calm myself from the anxiety of the previous 90 minutes...

The momentous day began at 6:00 AM when T. awoke with sharp labour pains. As prearranged, we called upon our kindly Mormon neighbour, DK, to drive our car to the hospital. Initially, we waited in the pre-labour ward for T.'s doctor to make his round. While some expectant mothers anxiously walked back and forth to hasten labour, T. sat silently clasping her hands.... It was nearly 11:00 AM before T. was assigned a bed. For the following hour she lay wincing in pain while I sat on the chair beside her, trying to read.

Assuming a protracted labour, I took a break around 1:00 PM. When I returned to the maternity ward from a brief walk, there was a hive of activity around T.'s bed. Informed by an attendant nurse of the need for an emergency caesarean, I could only touch my wife's bed as she was wheeled away to the operating room...

I was then directed to the maternity waiting room. I was staring blankly at the green-tinged TV when the maternity nurse whom I had met earlier in T.'s room, dropped by. In her common bond with T. in having emigrated from Zimbabwe, S. kindly offered her support. We were chatting (in affected calm) about the drought in southern Africa when a white nurse popped her head in the doorway. Arriving directly from the operating room, she had a surgical mask flapping from her neck:

"You have a son," she said. "The cord was wrapped around his neck— but he's fine. You should be able to see him in a few minutes."

I jerked up from the orange plastic chair:

How's T.?" I asked, restraining the impulse to croak: '*Are all the fingers and toes intact?*'

"She'll be fine. But she'll be unconscious for a couple of more hours."

"So how do you feel about having a son?" queried S.

"Fine," I sighed, "I just hope that what she said is true. I just hope the baby's healthy."

As S. searched my eyes to gauge my honesty, it occurred that she certainly did resemble Mugabe, who according to T., was rumoured to be her father...



“Mr. T.?”

I was standing in the doorway in dazed expectation of seeing the infant brought down to the nursery when Dr. C., in surgery greens, came down the corridor. He was smiling.

“Congratulations Mr. T.,”

“Is everything OK, doctor?”

“There're a couple of things.”

I jolted. "A couple of things?"

"The cord was around the baby's neck."

“Omigod—did that did that cut off oxygen?”

“Well, I wouldn't speculate about something like that.”

“The other thing?”

“Well, we couldn't do a tubal for your wife, like she wanted. Things were just too rushed.”

Although sensing I was straining his patience, I persisted. “But is the baby OK?”

“You can see for yourself.”

He half-turned towards a nurse padding down the same corridor from whence he had emerged. In her arms was a swaddled bundle from which a tiny head protruded. The eyes were shut, and a white stocking cap was pulled down around the wrinkled brow.

"There's your son."

I touched the pinkish cheek and squeezed the tiny fingers. “Welcome to the world,” I hoarsely whispered the same words I had said to both new-born daughters....



Moments later, I was looking into the nursery window as the babe was unwrapped and placed in a bassinette. A white plastic clamp protruded from its navel, where the cord had been cut. Working quickly, a nurse swabbed his bottom, injected his shoulder and squeezed ointment into his eyes. Dazed, I watched the baby writhe for a few moments before turning towards the elevator. I needed to get home to tell MT and TE that they had a baby brother....

On the down elevator, I recalled the words of the nurse, overheard when she handed over the swaddled baby to the nursery: *"The mother was in induced labour all day. She went into emergency C-section. The cord was around the neck... He seems to be very placid. "*

"Thanks for the hint," said the receiving nurse.

Very placid? Was that not code for possible brain damage?

Knees nearly buckling—I had to hang onto the railing...



So it was, on the long walk down Columbia St., alongside roaring traffic, that I was taunted by the nurse's comment... After two healthy daughters—what were the odds of a perfectly healthy son? If the baby did have some chronic affliction—at 41, could I handle it? In the sting of salt in eyes, I half-jogged up the long hill towards the Lougheed Mall bus loop.

Minutes later, I was grasping a standing pole on the bus winding up to Forest Grove. At the usual stop outside the postal sorting centre on Production Way, the familiar gaggle of Down's Syndrome workers, finishing their afternoon shift, squeezed past. Noisily, they clamoured for their seats. One couple, seen numerous times, began to smooch. How happy they looked! Should I, like the Ancient Mariner, "bless them unaware"—might a curse be broken?



As it turned out, MT and TE had already heard the news from DK, our Mormon neighbour, whose place they went to after school. They were bouncing with joy...

"Can we see the baby tonight, dad—can we?"

“I’ll have to phone. I don’t know if your mom is allowed to have visitors yet.”

With a call to the maternity ward confirming that T. was awake, we had an early supper (leftover spaghetti) then bussed down to the Royal Columbian hospital...

When we arrived, T. was feeding the baby, just lifted by a nurse from the bassinette beside her bed. While the girls were not allowed to hold the baby, I took photos of them leaning over him, beaming. For a few moments, his lashless lids opened and his dark eyes blinked.

“You should have heard him crying,” smiled T. , “it was so strong!”

If joy be profound relief, then I was no less joyful than T. and the girls...

1992, May



A brief review of fairy tale eschatology:

With the infant brother in his crib duly kissed goodnight—both girls climbed into TE's bottom bunk for the original version of '*The Little Mermaid*'... While not as grim as a Grimms' tale, the melancholy tone of the Hans Christian Anderson original seemed a refreshing contrast with the Disney cartoon version... Yet the girls were a little perplexed.

"So, what happened to the little mermaid in the end?" MT asked. "I don't understand."

Propped on the pillow beside her, TE blinked with the same curiosity.

Turning over the '*Classic Fairy Tales*' on the coverlet, I began: "Well, because she failed to marry the Prince, the only way she could save herself was to kill him with the knife that the sea-witch gave her. She couldn't do that. In the end, she turned into sea foam."

"So, she died?" MT said glumly.

"Well, her body dissolved," I said. "I guess that's dying."

"I like the movie better," said MT.

"What's sea form?" asked TE.

"Sea foam? It's like soap bubbles that the waves make in the ocean."

"The little mermaid gets changed into soap bubbles?" MT crinkled he nose. "That is weird!"

"Well, you could think that the little mermaid loved the prince so much, she was ready to make that sacrifice. She hoped to marry the prince and get a human soul—but she lost her gamble for gaining both."

The girls exchanged looks.

"Do you know what a 'soul' is?" I asked.

"Naw," said MT.

"What's a soul?" asked little TE indulging my teacherly turn.

"Well, the soul is not like your eyes or even your brain. It's supposed to be something invisible inside a person that makes her feel different from everyone else. Some people believe that after a person dies—after their body dies—their soul lives on. Some believe that the soul goes to a place called 'heaven.' I'm sure you've heard the word 'heaven'."

"Yeah, like in the movie '*All Good Dogs Go to Heaven*,'" said MT, "and you know, some people say that when you die, you come back as another person."

"Yes," I nodded, "That's called 'reincarnation.' People who believe that think that people come back to the world again and again. As different people, as animals or even as insects."

"Insects? Yucch!" TE rolled her eyes at MT.

"How about you, honey," I shifted to TE. "Do you believe in heaven or in reincarnation?"

"I don't know." She lowered her eyes.

"Well, getting back to the idea of 'heaven'— people who believe in it usually don't think that everyone goes there. They will tell you that bad people— which includes people who don't believe in their gods—go to a place called 'hell.' Have you heard of hell?"

"Hell?" asked TE sweetly.

"Hell is supposed to be the place ruled over by the devil. Have you heard of the devil?"

"Oh, yeah," quipped MT, "Once Donald Duck went down there and met the devil."

"Right. Did you see that cartoon, honey?" I asked TE, "that cartoon about the devil?"

"Stop," my 5-year-old buried her head under my arm. "I'll have bad dreams!"

"Dad-dy," said her older sister, "can we just change the subject?"

1992, August



Lamentations of separation:

T. and the baby were probably already through the security gates and waiting to board the flight when the pineapple pizza was delivered. The special treat was supposed to distract two little girls from the fact that their mother and baby brother would be away for 7 weeks.

"You'll like it. The pepperoni isn't too hot. Just try it, O.K?"

Both stared lugubriously at their plates.

Later, I put the uneaten pizza in the fridge and tidied up the kitchen in the sounds from the living room of TE's sobs. My hug had offered no solace. MT came down from her room to join her sister in commiseration on the sofa.

"I miss mummy," she cried.

"Come and sit on my lap," I said, sitting beside them. She tried, but it was plain that a bony paternal knee was no substitute for a soft maternal lap.

"I wish I'd gone with her!" she whimpered.

"There, there," I tried to sooth. "Your mummy needs to see her family in Zimbabwe. She has some things to work out. She'll be back before Christmas."

"But that's so far away," MT blubbered, "And she said yesterday she wasn't ever coming back!"

"No, no," I said, "She didn't mean that. She's just been upset after the car accident. She hadn't been able to sleep. She just wants to see her mum and dad— your *Ambuya* and *Sekuru*. Don't worry. I don't have to teach for two whole months —we'll have fun together..."

On the other side of the sofa, TE sniffled....

"Hey girls," I said, how about after school tomorrow we can go down to the mall and look for Hallowe'en costumes?"

"It's not the same," MT wailed, "It's just not the same!"

Glancing out the window at the black sky, I shuddered in the deepening fall. It will be a very long 7 weeks without T. and the baby...

Hell is separation- is that not a truth borne forth from the darkest dreaming?

1992, October



Home communion:

When MH said that she missed going to church with her mom, on Sunday morning I suggested that she have a service at home...

When I came away from my computer for a mid-morning break, both girls were in the living room setting out plastic cups on a turned over cardboard box draped with a tablecloth.

“This is the altar,” said “MT who was draped in her mother’s blue nightgown. TE, apparently her curate, had a cloth tied on her head like a shepherd...

“Do you want me to watch?” I asked.

“Yes, we want to give you communion,” said MT.

TE stuffed her mother’s green hymnal into my hand and motioned for me to take a seat among several stuffed toys arranged on the sofa.

After whispering a few instructions to her younger sister, MT began:

“We are happy to be here this morning,” she deepened her voice. “Really happy that all of you are here with us.” Lifting arms in the folds of the nightgown, she gestured towards the stuffed toys.

TE leaned into her ear with whispered advice.

“OK, now it’s time.” MT proclaimed. “Dad, you go first.”

I pretended to crawl up to the altar. From a green plastic cup, MT took a bread crumb and tucked it into my mouth. Then TE dipped her fingers in a yellow plastic cup and on my forehead made the sign of the cross...

Don’t forget your animals,” I said.

The girls then took their cups and delivered their eucharist to their stuffed dogs and teddy bears... Back in front of the altar, MT motioned for me to stand.

“OK, everyone, it’s time to sing...”

She glanced at TE who began humming. She warbled ‘*hallelujah*’ and ‘*king of heaven*’ a few times before the ‘*hymn-sing*’ dissolved in chuckles.

“I don’t know that one.” I waved up the green hymnal. “Are the words in this book?”

The girls looked quizzically at one another, not sure how to conclude.

“Why not end with a short sermon?” I suggested.

“Sermon?” asked TE.

“Kind of a speech.”

“Right—but make it short, though—I got to get back to my work. You go ahead, MT, you’re the priest.”

Again, she deepened her voice. “So, thank you all for coming. It’s good to be here together because—” She looked to TE for a clue. “—it’s good because you are getting away from your TVs.”

“Amen,” I said. “That’s good advice. Thank you, girls. When you’re through, don’t forget to put everything back where you found it.”

I rose and headed for the stairs with the imprint of their sacrament a little itchy on my forehead...

1992, November



Paternal bonding:

I was staring at the arrival times in the overhead monitors when I caught sight of my wife. She was pushing a trolley from the gate on the right.

“T!” I waved.

Seeing me, she faintly smiled. I was struck by her new Rasta braids.

In the top basket of the trolley was the infant, MH, awake and holding his toes.

T. leaned into my embrace. “I missed you,” she whispered.

“I missed you too,” I murmured, catching a campfire whiff of the kitchen *kraal* of the family farm, 10,000 kms. away...

As we hugged, a blonde woman stared from the right. Only when I frowned did the gawker avert her eyes... It was a dreary reminder that there was no escaping such curiosity...

“How was the flight,” I asked. Her eyes were puffy from her 2 long flights from Harare and London.

“Long,” she said hoarsely. “I need to sleep.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “As soon as we get home, we’ll go straight to bed.”

My wife did not pull away when I squeezed her hand. Can we forget the ugliness of recent months? Can we make a new start?

I then turned attention to our 6-month-old son... In his eyes was alertness and curiosity. What a difference 7 weeks has made!

“Hi, little man,” I lifted his hand. “Did you have a good time in Zimbabwe?”

“He had a good time with *Sekuru*,” said T. “Everyone there will miss him.”

I kissed his cheek. “Well, your big sisters and I missed you, too!”

When his face lit up, all the anxieties of being an old father of an infant son— melted clean away...

1992, November



Mysterious visitation:

T. and I watched from the living room table as the girls hunched on the floor with paper and scissors... My wife's face was no less clouded with the worries about her family in Zimbabwe deepening in the December darkness. Thus, it was a pleasant surprise this morning when she broke her prolonged silence:

"I had a very strange dream last night."

"Can you tell me about it?"

Locking fingers over her cup of tea, she sighed. "I saw the Virgin."

"Do you mean the Virgin Mary?"

"Yes. I dunno what my dream means."

With her opening, I coaxed a spark of a dialogue:

"Do you remember any details?"

"Daddy, look at my Christmas tree!" MT interrupted, holding up her cut-out from green construction paper.

"Great, honey," I said. "Why don't you draw on coloured bulbs. Like a Christmas tree with decorations?"

"No, I'm going to draw presents," said MT. "I'm going to glue them under my tree. What colour should make the background: black or blue?"

"You decide. Show us when it's done."

"What do you think, mom— green or blue background?" persisted MT.

I nodded towards TE, sprawled by the balcony door with her crayons and construction paper. "Can you work quietly for a few minutes like TE? Mummy's telling me something important."

T. leaned back on her chair. "I don't know— it was strange."

"Tell me."

She averted her eyes. "Well, she looked so beautiful. It was like the sun was shining from behind her head... Well, I tried to touch her gown, but my hands were tied, I had on—" she held up her wrists. "What do you call these?"

"Handcuffs?"

"I had on handcuffs and I was crying." She tsked.

"Go on— then what happened?"

"Then the Virgin reached out and touched my hands. The handcuffs disappeared. She said: *'have courage!'* T. shook her braids. "I don't know what that's supposed to mean."

I pushed my chair closer. "Well, it sounds like a positive dream. Especially if it left you feeling reassured. Did it?"

She lifted her eyebrows in Shona assent.

"It reminds me of a Beatles' song," I said. "*'When I find myself in times of trouble/ Mother Mary comes to me...'* Have you heard *'Let it Be?'*"

"I don't remember. But when I woke from that dream, I was really moved. It was so beautiful. I didn't even want to wake up."

Tentatively, I put arm around her shoulder. "Well, you still have that vivid memory to hang on to."

"I guess so," she sighed.

Watching the girls working their scissors, I began to hum *'Let it Be.'*

It occurred that if T.'s dream does precede a few weeks of domestic peace— then it *is* effectively a portent of mysterious grace!

1992, December



Of Carlton card sentiments:

Walking along the Transmountain pipeline trail amid the delirium of the warmest day of spring so far this year, I asked the girls to recite spontaneous ‘poems’:

“O Mr. golden sun, we love you,” crooned MT, skipping a pace ahead with an alter branch in hand, “Be my forever friend. Come play with me all summer long...We loooove you!”

“Great, honey. That good enough for a Carlton greeting card... TE?” I tugged her hand. “Your turn.”

The 6-year-old wrinkled her nose...

OK, while you’re thinking about yours— let me try. Here goes.” I squinted up through the treetops at the cerulean sky:

“...On a day like this, long after I’m gone, can you remember how much I loved spring? Through *your* love of spring— can you make a bit of me come alive again— even for a half second? The hope that you might someday do that gives me almost as much joy as I feel in *this* half-second!” I cleared my throat.

MT turned around. “Is that your poem, Daddy?” ”

“Well, that wasn’t a real poem— it was just a wish. Many other people have the same wish— and have put it far more poetically.”

“I liked it,” said MT swishing her stick into the new grass.

“How about you?” I squeezed TE’s hand.

“I’m glad it wasn’t too long,” she said.

1993, April



Of a delight in cucumbers:

After finishing supper under the deck umbrella, the girls blinked lazily into the twilight sun. Baby MH toddled forward and leaned on my knees chewing a slice of cucumber. As a little rope of drool dangled from his chin, he looked up in a contented smile...

"Do you like cucumbers, little man?"

I lifted down the salad bowl so the 1-year-old could grab a few more slices.

"Geez, they're good!"

In the same moment, I caught an image of a kitchen table in a farmhouse in the Saint John River valley on a hot summer evening. Under a slowly twirling fly sticker, a grandfather in sweaty undershirt chews a cucumber freshly peeled from the garden.

"Do, you know, honey," I pushed another slice into MH's damp hand, "your great grandfather loved cucumbers?"

Eyes brightening, my little son held his hand to mouth. Indeed, his little grunts of pleasure do sound like those of a forebear who died a generation ago and more than 5,000 kms. distant...

1993, May



First word:

With MH on my knee, I parted the curtain in the kitchen window and pointed out at our blue Dodge caravan parked in its designated place beside the green dumpster.

"Car, MH, look, there's our car out there."

Pressing his hand against the pane, I repeated. "It's a car, honey— your car."

He blinked down over the glistening tops of the cars and widened his eyes. A new light was flickering. Was he on the verge of a breakthrough?



Joggling him up higher on my knee, I remembered the afternoon back in March, when we looked down together into the culvert under the footpath behind the coop building. The tiny creek, swollen with the spring rain, was gurgling over the rocks. I was holding him up in the crook of my arm:

"Look, little guy," I said, "look at the water. Say it: *water*."

In that moment I thought of Helen Keller as portrayed in '*the Miracle Worker*', on her knees before the pump.

His face brightened in comprehension, but the sound did not issue from his lips. He was on the edge— but not quite ready...

Yet today before the kitchen window, he made the quantum leap:

"*Ca*," he called, "*Ca!*"

"Good boy!" I hugged him and planted a smacking kiss on his cheek— welcoming him to the magical realm of language.

1993, July



A little drama:

“What are you watching, guys?”

Little MH, no less than his older sisters, was fascinated by the little drama that unfolded near the parking stalls this afternoon. As the 3 kids watched from our doorway, on the unshaded asphalt the neighbour’s ginger cat toyed with a mouse...

The poor mouse kept trying to skitter away under a car while the cat watched lazily from a crouch. Repeatedly, the kitty captured and recaptured its tiny victim, each time letting the poor mousie run a little further from its lifted paw. The only uncertainty was how long it would take for the cat to tire of its game. Yet whether from instinct or on some desperate hope in its minuscule heart—the mouse kept struggling to get away...

Watching, all 3 fledglings—even the 14-month-old—seemed unsure whether to root for the predator or for its prey...

1993, August



Seeking confidentiality:

Last night before the bedtime story, MT sat on the floor beside my desk for a brief singalong. Her most spirited singing was in '*I Can See Clearly Now*'.

"Let's sing it again dad," she said.

"This time you sing alone, honey," I said, pulling up my 'C' harmonica. "I'll play along."

Throwing back her head, she sweetly sang:

*'I can see clearly now the rain is gone
I can see all the obstacles in my way—
Gone are the da-ark clouds that had me blind
It's gonna be a bright, bright sun-shiny day!'*

"Bravo, bravo!" I said afterwards, tapping my Marine Band harp on knee. "You know the lyrics better than I do. I'm impressed."

"We learned it in music class," she said.

I patted her shoulder. "Know what honey? When I think of that song, I remember one of the happiest days of my life." I glanced to the door. "Want to hear about it?"

"OK".

"Well, it was a warm sunny morning in May, 1975. I had hardly slept for 3 straight nights working on a long term-paper that I should have finished a year before. I needed to get that essay into the mail to complete the university degree that I should have finished the year before. For a whole year that unfinished work had hung over me—but that morning, I finally knocked it off..."

...Later that morning, my friend, LJ, picked me up for a walk along the Spanish Banks beach. We took off our shoes and walked along the sand. We raced back to the car, splashing along the shoreline just as the spring sun was rising up through the mist... A few minutes later, we turned on the car radio, just in time to hear '*I Can See Clearly Now*' by Johnny Nash..."

I blew a few notes of the tune on the harmonica and then paused. "I swear, honey, at that moment, I never felt so—"

"What are you two gossiping about?"

Suddenly, there was T. in her nightgown at the door. "Talking about me, I bet."

"No mom," MT said. "Dad was just telling me about the happiest day in his life."

I twisted in my chair back toward my keyboard. "Not *the* happiest day in my life—just one of them."

T. chuckled. "I bet it wasn't the day he married me or the day you were born."

"It was the day he finished an essay." MT said.

"Dedicated to his old girlfriend?"

I laughed. "Com'on, T. no need to tease."

"You want to get rid of me, don't you? You want to gossip in private."

"Don't be paranoid."

With a tsk, T. turned, shutting the door behind her.

"Can we have the bedtime story now?" asked MT, touching the spines of books on the bottom shelf.

"Sure— but just getting back to what I was telling you about for a minute. The point is that a person's greatest happiness often comes after he works hard and finally overcomes his biggest obstacles." I tsked in having spoken both quickly and woodenly.

"Can we have a dark story tonight?"

"Sure, honey." I squeaked up out of my chair, wondering just how many 42-year-old fathers seek such confidentiality is an 8-year-old daughter...

1993, September



A prince of innocence:

I should have known better than to complain to T. about the duration of her latest phone call to Zimbabwe. After two days of toxic silence, I was initially hopeful when she accompanied me on the minivan service appointment this morning. Even if her intention was to visit the Caribbean store a few blocks away, her gesture seemed to signal some willingness to ease the tension.

Still, on the drive down to the Dodge dealership in New Westminster we did not speak. Once there, we sat on opposite sides of the service department waiting area. I flipped through a magazine and she glumly watched the fuzzy TV. Little MH toddled back and forth between us.

After about 15 minutes, T. suddenly broke the silence. "I need to buy a few things," she said brusquely. "Can I have \$20?"

Glaring, I dug from my wallet. "Is that the first thing you can think of saying to me all day?"

She stood up. "Don't worry, I don't need your money or your car, mister. I'm taking the bus. Take care of MH."

"What in hell are you doing?"

She was already out the door, headed across the parking lot...

Little MH toddled towards the closed door. "Mama, mama!" the 18-month-old cried.

"Mama's coming right back, MH," I soothed, swooping him up and setting him back in his stroller.

In a sting of embarrassment, I glanced around. Fortunately, the waiting room was almost empty, save for an old bald old man hunched by coffee machine. Nose in a magazine—he had either missed the little melodrama—or assumed he had to pretend so.



"Let's get something to eat, MH,"

Moments later, I was pushing the stroller into the Burger King, a few blocks away. With an hour to kill for the car service, I found a cramped corner booth where I slowly gnawed on a Whopper and fed chicken tenders to little MH in the stroller beside. Under his Burger King cardboard crown, the little guy chewed happily. After wiping him off with the paper napkins, I pressed into his tiny hand, the plastic car that came with the kids' meal. After zipping his jacket, I pushed the stroller back out into the grey light. At least rain was holding off.

For another 20 minutes, I pushed the stroller up Columbia St. past the Skytrain columns. We circled back towards the Dodge dealership along the decaying New Westminster riverfront. How much longer before the next temporary truce, I wondered. What chance that little MH will ever see parents who don't either bicker or not talk at all?

In ramming along the cracked sidewalk past the seedy Terminal Hotel and an adult book shop, I felt the shivers of passing drivers. Amid the traffic fumes, I could all but hear telepathic whispers: '*What kind of future could that poor kid possibly have with a father like that?*'

Yet in the bumpy ride through traffic fumes my son did not whimper. Even though his paper crown hung lopsided over one eye, he still smiled.

Hail Prince MH, the Innocent!

1993, October

fwt

Struggling with a WordPerfect file:

At the same time as I was struggling with a WordPerfect file, I was trying to keep an eye on MH. Like any inquisitive 22-month-old, he was tugging at everything within reach. At one point I turned around just in time to stop the middle shelf of paperbacks falling onto his head.

“Can you watch your little brother?” I asked the girls, who were cutting paper on the floor. It was amid the scattered paper that I saw the tube of cortisone that should have been in the bottom dresser drawer. On the rug was a white coil of the squeezed ointment.

“Jesus, half of it’s wasted!” I growled, swooping up the tube. “That’s an expensive prescription. Who took it out of the drawer?”

Both girls were silent.

“TE, get some paper towels from the bathroom,” I ordered. “MT, you look for the cap.”

“Maybe MH was playing with it,” peeped his older sister.

I reached over towards the bookshelf and opened little MH’s hand. Sure enough, on his fingers was a smear of the ointment.

“Don’t take things from there,” I pointed his fingers at the dresser. “Very bad—dangerous!” I emphasized the last word with a slap on his bottom.

Eyes big with shock, my little boy staggered back. “No, no, no!” he cried, stamping like Rumplestiltskin. His little mouth twisted from anger to anguish.

“You didn’t have to hit him, dad,” said MT, putting his arm over her bawling brother.

“He’s got to know what he can’t put in his mouth,” I said defensively. “That stuff’s poisonous. What if we had to call the ambulance?” Dropping to knees, I rubbed a tissue into the smear. “Where’s the goddam cap?”

In truth, I was justly shamed.

TE scrambled up and away, followed by MT, half carrying her sobbing little brother... She closed the door behind her.

Suddenly, it was quiet—just the quiet I thought I needed when I was frustrated by the WordPerfect file. The eyes moistened and the heart began to ache...

1994, March





Demands of love and duty:

"Dad-dy, da-ddy!"

Like a newly hatched chick, 2-year-old MH followed me around the house this afternoon. Were it not for the bleariness of the split shift, I would certainly have got down on knees with one of the toy trucks he held up...

"Daddy's got to get ready for work honey," I said. "We'll have fun together this weekend."

When I sank down on the living room sofa with my evening lesson plan, he was still at my feet making *vroom-varoom* sounds with his fire-truck.

"Look daddy!" Yet again his eyes were blinking up for approval.

"Sorry, honey. I'm busy right now."

"A few moments later, he was back with 2 of his wrestlers, The Undertaker and Bam Bam Bigelow.

"Let's play, da!"

"This weekend, honey."

How long will I be able to keep up with this little guy? How will he feel when he realizes that his dad will not be one to teach him to bat—let alone coach his team?

In a sigh of weariness, I leaned forward and hugged him. In some manner—as yet unknown—the demands of love and duty can still be met...

1994, May



Having gone the distance:

Back from the evening class of my split shift, I felt like a battered boxer who had barely gone the distance.

I creaked up the stairs and gently opened the kids' bedroom door, expecting the comforting sound of breathing in the dark. Yet the light was still on and T. was sitting on the lower bunk with storybook in her lap.

“What to heck are you guys doing up so late? It’s past 10:00 PM!”

“It’s just getting dark,” said T. smiling.

We’re waiting up for you da!” shouted MT, bouncing behind her mom.

TE was giggling, arm around her older sister. Little MH was in pyjamas, juice box in hand. In the corner of the room even Fuzzball the hamster was skittering wildly around his Mobius strip wheel.

“What about school tomorrow?” I stepped over scattered blocks to crouch by the bunkbed.

“It’s a PD Day!” yelled MT.

“You’ll wake the neighbours,” shushed T.

I kissed T. on the cheek and hugged each of our fledglings in turn.

“Com’on, let’s get your face washed.”

I did not in the least mind the grape juice stickiness of MH’s cheek. Indeed, for those fluttering moments, the split shift greyness blossomed into vivid colour.

1994, June



Of fragility:

The glitter globe, a class gift which could have found a place in the abandoned kitsch corner of the ESL department's resource room, was predictably adored by both my daughters.

After winding it up, we sat around it on the living room floor. Amid a blizzard of multi-hued sparkles, a pink angel twirled to the tune of Brahms's '*Lullaby*'

"That music's so beautiful," gushed MT.

"Well, you can keep it on your shelf. Just be careful not to drop it. It's fragile. With all the liquid inside it would be a real mess if it breaks."

"The sparkles look green and sometimes blue," MT whispered, "Oooh, I love that little angel."

"Maybe she's praying in there," said TE.

As the lullaby slowed, both girls grabbed to wind it back up.

"Com'on, don't fight over it! It's for both of you. Just don't wind it too tight—the spring on the music box will break."

"O we'll take care of it, daddy," said MT, holding up the globe. TE, deferring to her elder sister put hands behind her back.

"OK, take it to your room," I stood up with a yawn. "Put it up high on your shelf where your little brother can't reach it."



From down on the living room sofa, I heard their bedroom door slam—followed by a banging and bouncing—like a dropped bowling ball.

I sprang up and shouted up the stairwell. "Did you break that goddam thing already?"

With no response, I jogged up the stairs. Looking guilty, MT poked her head outside the bedroom doorway.

"You weren't listening to a bloody thing I said, were you?"

"It just slipped out of my hand," she said dolefully, "But it didn't break."

"Well, it easily could have," I roared, "and we'd probably have to have the carpet cleaned. Just don't be clumsy!"

She broke into tears. "I can't help it if I'm clumsy", she cried, "it's not my fault!"

She slammed the door.

Stabbed with shame in the sound of her crying, I stood frozen at the head of the stairs. *Should I fail to be mindful of that which is truly fragile and irreplaceable—may I be forever damned!*

1994, August

fwt

Not a fairy tale:

"Dad, why did people used to have slaves?"

Since MT has been reading a school library book about the Underground Railroad, her question did not take me by surprise.

So, while T. was reading a story to TE and her little brother in our bedroom, I gave MT a lengthy answer to her question. Although MT is certainly reading beyond her grade, I tried to present the difficult topic at a Grade Four level. Hunched beside her bunkbed, I began almost in the manner of a fairy tale:

"Well, honey, I suppose it got started in ancient times when chiefs or rulers captured their enemies in battles. Some of the captured people were killed and others were treated like they were working animals. Maybe a few of the captured people escaped but many others endured their misery just to stay alive... After a few generations, many people were born into slavery. They suffered, but few tried to escape. Many of them probably could not imagine their lives being different..."

...Fortunately, by the early 1800s, some people did begin to fight against slavery. Gradually more and more people began to realize how evil the system was... Fortunately, slavery is illegal throughout the world today."

All the while, MT seemed to be listening intently. Only when I blew my nose, did she ask a question:

"Were all black people once slaves?"

"You probably read, honey, about how greedy Europeans make fortunes taking slaves from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean. Many of the captives who were taken died in the horrible slave ships even before they were sold to slave-owners for huge profits. The survivors were forced to work in big plantations in South America and in the southern USA. Their children born into slavery and the evil system went on for generations..."

...A few slaves in the southern USA did manage to escape. They were secretly helped to make their way to the northern states where slavery was not allowed... That was, of course, the story of Underground Railway you've been reading about. After that, it took a civil war to end slavery in the USA... Still, people whose ancestors were slaves are treated unfairly in many ways—even today."

I tousled her head. "Hopefully, your generation will work towards making the world fairer for everybody—no matter where they are from or what they look like."

After a small silence, she softly asked: "I read that the ancestors of all the black people in America were slaves. Is that true?"

"Well, it is true that the ancestors of most black Americans came from West Africa where the slaves were taken from. But if a person's ancestors came from southern African, they probably would not have been slaves. You know, your mom's ancestors were no more likely slaves than were my

European ancestors. At least going back 500 years or so. Before than just about everyone's ancestors were slaves in one form or another. Way back then, nobody thought about human rights like we do today."

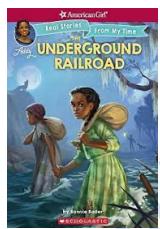
After a pause, she asked brightly. "Dad, can you tell me the '*Panda Family Vacation*' story— tell it in your own words?"

"Sure, honey. Do you want me to turn off the light now?"

"You can leave it on dad," she said, pulling up her covers.

Only then did it strike that my 9-year-old had had more than enough of a 'dark story' for one night.

1994, November



Before the diamond store Santa:

MH looked down through the railing of the upper tier of Lougheed mall watching Santa Claus on his dais below. A moment before, we had circled the lower rotunda wondering whether to line up among the parents waiting for a photo of their towheads on Santa's lap. I decided that \$5 fee was too steep. Yet was I such a cheapskate as to deny my 2½-year-old the standard pre-Christmas thrill?

"Look, dad, over there— another Santa!"

Before I could react to his astonishment, little MH broke from my hand and galloped across the concourse towards the Santa in the entrance of a jewellery store. Before I could catch up, he jumped straight into the upscale Santa's lap.

Inside the store, green-suited clerks curtly shifted around the glass cases. With a sniff in my direction, one lowered his head. Perhaps he wondered whether their gimmick was back-firing. Rather than luring toney customers, maybe their 'free' Santa would only draw in the presumed children of rifraff...

Despite the awkwardness of the clerks, the diamond store Santa played his part charitably.

"What do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas?" Asked the cotton-wool bearded old gent, hands on MH's shoulders.

Uncaptured by any camera, MH's grin would have outshone any bauble in the locked glass cases...

1994, December



A shadow passing over:

In the letter from her sister P. in Zimbabwe received this morning, T. learned that one of her former classmates had recently died. Felled by a brain tumour, T.'s school friend apparently left behind an unemployed husband and 4 young children.

"Why, why, *why?*" my wife wailed from the sofa. "Why do some people suffer so, and others complain about tiny things. It's just not fair—not fair!"

"Don't cry mom", said MT. She nestled against T.'s side while little MH patted his mummy's back.

"T.", I said, hand on her shoulder. "For thousands of years, people have asked your question. "Why do good people suffer, and bad people go unpunished? Why is there so little justice? Think of the story of Job."

Gradually, her cries subsided to sniffles. She blew her nose.

"But how does God allow it?" she murmured, staring at the envelope on the coffee table before her. "Sometimes I wonder if there's a God at all..."

She blinked and gently shook her head as the shadow of doubt passed over...

1995, January



Reminiscing before nimbler minds:

The antics of 3½-year-old MH and his oldest sister on the living room carpet this afternoon brought to mind tumbling puppies. When I leaned a little too close, I narrowly missed MT's scissor kick before little MH butted his head against my chest.

"OK you guys, that's enough— enough!" I lurched back on my knees.

"Tell us a story," said MT, sitting up cross-legged.

I leaned back against the sofa, motioning for little MH to take my lap.

"OK," I patted his head, "did ever tell you about the furry white dog I had when I was a kid?"

"Was that the dog called Snowball?" asked MT. "I think you told us about her before."

"It was a *him*. Maybe I didn't tell you how Snowball could jump up and take a hockey puck right out of my mouth. My teeth can still feel him grabbing it..."

"Let's play, hockey, da," said MH squirming around.

"Later, honey."

"Be quiet you little brat," said MT. "I want to hear the story!"

"Really?" I smiled. "It's not a happy ending."

"I want to hear it again."

"OK, this time I'll give you a few new details. Like about the last time I saw Snowball alive... It was on a Saturday morning and I was playing with him in the middle of the kitchen floor. He was jumping up and snatching that hockey puck out of my mouth. A few times, I grabbed him around the middle. When he squirmed away, he felt warm and strong..."

...The next thing I remember is walking home alone from the skating rink that evening. It was cold and pitch-black. Outside the door, I heard crying. My mother opened the door.

"Snowball's dead", she said. "He got run over by a car up by the Catholic church. Your father went to pick up the body."

In the living room, both my older sisters were crying. I could hardly sleep that night...

...The next morning was sunny and bitterly cold. My sisters didn't want to see Snowball's body before my father took it away to bury it—but I did. I went out alone to the tool shed. The body was lying in the wheelbarrow. The eyes were frosted over. I touched the white fur—it was cold and hard

as stone. I could not believe that my dog—who the day before was so alive he could hardly stay in his skin—had become this icy *thing*..."

"O, that's awful!" said MT, momentarily troubled by the dark image.

"I want a doggie, da," said MH. "I can wrestle with him!"

"Me too," said MT skipping forward. "We can call him Bingo.... '*There was a farmer who had a dog—*'"

MH jumped off my lap and began clapping along with his older sister's singing.

"*B-i-n-g-o, B-i-n-g-o, B-i-n-g-o—and Bingo was its name-o!*"

I blinked for a moment before catching up with 2 nimbler minds, as yet unburdened by memory...

1995, January



A snow day tableau:

Typical of northwest winters, snow came late this year. Yet almost as the first crocuses are breaking the ground, we have been hit by a traffic-paralysing snowstorm. Nearly 15 centimetres has already fallen today— giving the girls their first ever snow day school closure.

After supper, I led the kids through footprints on the path behind Forest Grove school. The hissing snow was still coming down and hanging heavy in the trees.

We stopped at the tennis court which was backlit by an eerie yellowish sky. The kids waded calf-deep across the unbroken snow while I waited on the near side. MH led the way and little MH, with snow almost to his waist, followed in his sisters' footsteps. At the far end, the girls made snow angels while little MH hands stood uncertainly with his hands pulled up into the sleeves of his parka jacket...

"Hey, aren't you getting cold?" I shouted over; my voice partly muffled by the soft wind. "Let's go home and get warmed up!" I tried again.

Only when I jumped and waved, did MT began slogging towards me. TE ran squealing beside her. Little MH, still standing at the far side, started to wail.

"Don't leave me!" he cried.

The girls, giggling, pushed forward.

"Daaa!" cried MH standing alone.

"I'm coming!" I jogged back though the girls' footprints. MH was still sobbing when I swooped him up. "We won't leave you," I said, "We'd never *ever* leave you!"

Holding him in crook of arm, I crunched back to the path where the girls were waiting. In a shiver of warmth, I imagined how my son might remember this tableau: amid wind and swirling snow, being comforted...

1995, February



Lamentations for Fuzzball:

Hearing shrieks from upstairs, I bounded up toward the stairs. Both girls met me at the top, bawling.

"Fuzzball's dead!" cried MT.

I hugged both, swaying along with MT's wailing and TE's sobs.

"I went in to feed her carrots," MT blubbered. "She was on her back. She was so cold."

"Sorry. I know you feel terrible right now—but you don't know how old Fuzzball was when you got her from your friend. She could have died of old age."

"But I fed her every day and changed the water. I kept her cage clean!"

"Yes, you did a good job, honey. Little creatures just have a short life span."

"She was so playful. Every yesterday, she was in her wheel. I'm going to miss her so much!"

After a moment of silent reflection, the tears dried. "She's still in the bottom of the cage," said MT. "What will we do with her?"

I pointed out the window. "Why don't you bury her in the woods behind the flowerbed? You could dig a hole out there and cover it with a rock. You don't want another animal to dig up the body. There's a garden trowel in the basement."

"I'll find a little box for her," said MT.

"We can put flowers on the grave," said TE.

"Well, get your boots on." I said, "You better do it before it starts raining again. Don't let MH touch the body, OK? He could his fingers right into his mouth. And you both make sure to wash your hands."

"Come and see her," said MT leading me into her room.

It seemed the pall of death had lifted more quickly for the hamster than it had for the goldfish, a couple of years ago...



As it turned out, Fuzzball was not quite so quickly forgotten. Indeed, after she was laid to rest in the manner suggested, MT wrote a poem about her.

"Can I read it to you?" She said this evening.

"Please do."

Cross-legged on her bedroom floor, she opened her notebook:

"A cold dead thing my hand did touch- it made me cry so very much."

"That's great, honey!" I said. "You should always try to write about what you feel deeply. Get in the habit and work hard at it. Then you'll become a really good writer."

"Maybe I'll be a poet," she said closing the cover.

1995, March



Determined to be in the game:

When I drove into the parking stall from work yesterday afternoon, little boys were playing road hockey at the far end. Among them was 3-year-old MH. The littlest of the kids, he seemed to be waiting for a loose ball while the older boys scrummed around the net...

The sight of his expectantly raised stick tugged the heart. Would the other boys give the little guy a chance? How would he feel if they continued to ignore him? I wondered whether I should walk down and tell those boys to let my son join in...

Almost immediately, I knew that would be a mistake. MH would have to find his own way amid the rough and tumble. Of course, it will not be my influence that determines his place in the pecking order...

In that moment, I remembered watching MH in the Forest Grove playground, about a year ago:

At the top of a slide, he watched curiously as a dad lifted onto a swing a sniffling boy who looked much older than him... When afterwards, I came up from the bench to lead MH back towards home, the same father gave me a censuring glance. How could I have sat back and allowed a 2-year-old to climb unassisted on a steep slide?

Still, I returned that father's look with a smile of defiance: '*Hey my little guy is feisty—I don't need to hover over him—as do you over your little gene pod!*'



Just then, MH caught sight of me opening the car door... When I waved, he bobbed up his hockey stick and grinned. Even with these older kids, he is determined to be in the game...

1995, March



Of a fledgling initiation:

Instead of telling the usual dark story after lights out, I asked MT to tell TE and I any story from a book she had recently read. I was surprised that my precocious 10-year-old would select '*Joseph and His Brothers*':

"Once upon a time in a land called Canaan," she began, "there was a shepherd boy called Joseph. He was the youngest of his brothers and the favourite son of his father, Jacob... When Jacob gave Joseph a beautiful coat, his brothers were very jealous ... One day when they were out herding their sheep, they threw Joseph down into a pit. Then they tore his coat and put some sheep's blood on it. They told their father that Joseph was eaten by a wild animal..."

"Hold on," I interrupted. "Where did you get all that detail?"

"In the book of bible stories. I read it when I was home sick with the flu last Friday."

"You mean one of the books you got from your aunt K.?"

"Uhhuh."

Perhaps catching something of my disapproval, MT hesitated. Admittedly, I had been a little suspicious when my sister in Ottawa included an "*Illustrated Bible Stories*" along with other used books and clothes that she generously sent T. last fall... Of course, she knows that T., like herself, is religious... She also knows that I am emphatically not. Even though my sister probably knows that T. has enrolled the girls in confirmation classes—it seemed presumptuous that my kids could benefit from white-washed biblical fairy tales...

"Do you want to hear the rest of it?" Asked MH, slightly subdued.

"Go ahead, honey. You have a great memory for detail."

"OK," she resumed her chirping narration: "Joseph didn't die, but he was taken to Egypt as a slave. The wife of his master was called Potiphar. She saw that Joseph was very handsome and she tried to make Joseph love her. When he refused, Potiphar lied to her husband saying that Joseph was trying to cheat them. Her husband had Joseph put into jail..."

MT went on to tell about Joseph's prophetic interpretation of dreams, his becoming viceroy of the Pharaoh himself and his success in preparing Egypt for the "7 lean years" he had predicted from the

7 lean cows in the Pharaoh's dream. She concluded with Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers who travelled to Egypt to buy grain...

"So, Joseph's family came to stay with Joseph in Egypt," she said in wrapping up, "and they lived happily ever after."

"Well," I chuckled, "I don't know if you can say that they lived happily ever after. The story goes on from there. But you are a great storyteller, honey." I patted her shoulder.

"I liked the stories in that book," she said.

It was then that I remembered how literary critic, Northrup Frye, contended that that familiarity with the bible is indispensable to western cultural literacy. Quite apart from being a religious text—the imagery, themes and language of the bible are to be regarded (in that same snooty realm) as a 'great code' for accessing English Literature.

"Yes, those stories are very colourful," I said, "and important to know if you are going to study English Literature—which I am sure you will."

I gave MT a goodnight kiss consoled that whether or not she becomes an initiate of the great code—*"the Illustrated Bible Stories"* can do her enquiring mind no harm...

1995, April



Paying attention:

Between the full-time Upper Beginners' teaching, 2 evening classes at SFU and the looming thesis, I have undeniably become of late—an absent father. Yet in my hurried passing between computer desk and front door, little MH keeps trying for my attention:

"Are you going to work, dad-da?"

"No, honey, I've got to get up to the university."

Not quite 3 years old, yet he is already chattering like his elder sister.

"Can we play zombie, daa," he said this afternoon while I was brushing my teeth.

"Can't play right now," I garbled, "This weekend."

Undeterred, he followed me down the stairs.

"Will you give some gum, dad?"

He looked into my briefcase as I filled it with the papers for the evening class. He knew packets of spearmint Excel could sometimes be fished from therein.

I blocked his little forearm. "Not now, MH. Later."

Dragging on my raincoat and swinging bookbag onto shoulder, I clomped down the stairs. Halfway down, I turned in the cry from behind. My little son was standing at the top, wailing inconsolably.

"What's wrong, MH?" I crouched by the door.

At that moment, T. came around from the kitchen, putting an arm around his shoulder. "All he asks me is when are you coming home," she said. "And then you come home and don't pay attention to him."

Heart-struck, I held out my arm. "Come here, honey."

Rubbing his eyes, he tentatively slid away from his mother's arm. Sitting down, he bumped his way down the steps.

Near the bottom, he hesitated—but then ducked his head under my reaching arm.

"If I give you some gum," I whispered while digging into my bookbag, "Will you promise not to tell your sisters?"

Glumly he nodded.

I slipped one piece into his mouth and another into his overalls pocket. I kissed his forehead. When this dreary crucible is over—will there still be time to make it up to him?

1995, April



fwt

In failing to build a treehouse:

Yesterday afternoon, TE came to my computer desk to show me her wiggly front tooth.

“That can come out now,” I said. “You want me to help?”

My 8-year-old demurred. “Will it hurt?”

I can’t promise you won’t feel anything,” I said softly. “But I’ll try to make it quick.”

“Don’t pull too hard,” she said in a small voice. “Promise?”

I crooked my little finger. “Promise!”

After our mutual pinky wiggle, I planted feet and grasped her loose tooth. Instantly, I yanked. In her shriek, the dislodged tooth twinged onto the carpet. She tiny shoulders quaked as she covered her mouth.

“There, there, honey. I didn’t mean for it to hurt. But that’s the best way—to do it quickly. I remember your nana pulling out one of my baby teeth that way.”

Rocking her, I wiped the bloody spittle from her chin. “Now almost all your baby teeth are gone. Soon you’ll be getting your forever ones.”

Her gasps subsided.

“Where’d that tooth go?” I bent down to the carpet.

With tissue held to mouth she got on her knees and grabbed it from the corner under the bookcase. She inspected it between fingers.

“Put it under your pillow,” I said, “A front tooth has got to be worth a toonie. Is your mouth sore, honey?”

“Just a little.”

“Some ice cream would probably sooth your mouth.”

She nodded.

“Just give me a minute.”



In saving my file before turning off the monitor, I thought of TE's request a few weeks ago. She asked if I could build her a treehouse in the woods behind the parking lot.

"I wish I could, honey but I can't. People aren't allowed to build things on land that doesn't belong to them."

It was a good excuse—but still a dodge...

The importance of a dad's ability to build things and fix what is broken is not to be dismissed. Hopefully, TE will not be too disappointed in the coming years as it becomes ever more evident to her that she does not have a very practical dad. Yet maybe in the fullness of time she will remember that a dad who could not build a treehouse could at least pull a baby tooth...

1995, June

fwt