

Snapshots #3 (1996-2002)

A sweetly shared appreciation:

On the walk after supper along the Forest Grove path to her Girl Guides meeting at her school, MT was excited:

"This morning I saw a baby robin taking a bath in the creek and flapping its wings," she said, waving her arms. "It just makes me feel so good seeing the first signs of spring."

"Spring has always been my favourite season, too," I said, touched that we were becoming ever closer as older she grew.

"Your story reminds me of one spring, when I was about 16," I began. "I felt so happy to see the robins in my yard that I made a cardboard sign: *'This is a very nice day.'* I hung it in the bush at the end of the driveway. I had a friend take a picture with my Polaroid camera. I still have that photo. Would you like me to dig it out?"

"Yeah, that gives me an idea," she chirped. "I can draw a picture of those robins."

You can put it in your bedroom window," I said.

"Hey, dad—we made cut-outs in Social Studies class last week. We put them up in our classroom window. Do you want to see them? We can go around the back of the school."

That would be great," I said, half jogging to keep up.



A few moments later, we emerged from the trail into her school playground.

"Our room is in the corner," she said, leading the way.

As we drew closer to the window, I saw that each of the coloured balloon-shaped cut outs taped to the window had a hand-written message.

"The teacher said to write something after: *'I want to know more about.'*" MT said brightly. "That purple one is mine. Down there under the yellow one."

I read it aloud: *'I want to know more about my country of origin.'* Humm, that's interesting, honey. Did you come up with that yourself?"

She immediately caught a glimmer of disapproval. "I think I should have written: 'my *countries* of origin', she said.

"That's right," I chuckled. "I know your teacher knows that you were born in Zimbabwe, but she also should know that you are very much from Canada. You ought to tell your teacher that your ancestors have been in Canada for many generations. Maybe longer than hers."

"I know, I know."

"Honestly, I don't think it's fair how people stereotype. Have you heard that the word 'stereotype?'"

"Dad, let's hurry. I'll be late." She rushed ahead towards the front of the school.

"I'll meet you in front at 8:00 PM," I called after her.

I turned back towards the path, not quite as deep in the spell of the harbingers of spring....

1996, March



A tiny demonstration of mercy:

In coming back from the library down the trail on the south side of Burnaby Mountain yesterday afternoon, I came upon two garter snakes sunning themselves on a rock. When I told TE, she asked if we could catch one...

As soon as we got back up the trail to the same place— sure enough, we came upon another snake wiggling for cover. Before it could escape, I lifted it by the tail and gently put it in the yogurt container which TE had brought along.

“Can I keep him for a pet?” she asked.

“No, we don’t have a proper cage for a snake,” I said. “We could take him back home for a picture. Then we’ll have to let him go.”

Accepting that proposal, she held the container carefully while we picked our way back down the trail.

“O look— its eyes are so cute!” said TE peering into the hole in the plastic lid. “But I know why people hate snakes— it’s the tongue and it’s the name.”

“Well, for sure, humans have always been scared of snakes,” I said. “Of course, poisonous snakes are dangerous— but most snakes are harmless. In fact, snakes do us lot of good— they eat the insects and even the rats that spread disease. But like you said— snakes’ bodies are so different from ours... I think a lot of the fear of snakes actually comes from the bible— the story of Adam and Eve. It’d really so unfair to just hate them because of the way they look...”

“I’m not scared of snakes,” said my 9-year-old confidently.

“OK, I’ll get a photo of you holding him,” I said.



So it was, TE has showed the captive snake to her mom and siblings and had her picture taken holding it by the tail... Within the hour we were right back beside the rockpile where we’d captured it— but letting it go...

“Go back to your family, little snake,” I murmured, sorry for scaring you.”

Watching its tail slither under the crevasse, I shivered in a memory of a boy not much older than TE, grabbing up a struggling garter snake and snapping it like a whip...

Indeed, every tiny demonstration to my kids of mercy to small creatures— is but a straw in the dung heap of bad karma to be cleared...

1996, June

fwt

Of a weeping Rachel:

Though the open door of my work room, I heard the crash of a kitchen plate.

I bounded down the stairs in time to see MT standing open-mouthed before a mess of scrambled eggs and broken ceramic scattered on the kitchen floor.

Near the stove was T., her face swelling in rage.

"I am bloody tired," she yelled, "bloody tired of cooking for people who do not appreciate anything I do. I am tired of being treated like a slave by my own bloody children!"

It was no coincidence that there had been a middle-of-the night phone call from Zimbabwe. As usual, I strained in the dark to catch a few words. Along with T.'s 'tsks' and rapid Shona, I vaguely heard '*mari*' [money] and '*madhora*' [dollars]. As usual, she came back to bed, sighing, but saying nothing.

I glanced into the living room where TE, in her habit of ignoring domestic uproar, watched TV with her baby brother. I looked back at MT.

"Every time mom gets angry," she sobbed, "she blames it all on me! It's so unfair!" Brushing past, MT ran up the stairs.

I looked back at T. "Get a grip," I muttered, glancing down at the mess.

Wordlessly, my wife lifted the lid of the garbage receptacle, then bent down and began to pick up shards of the broken plate...



Back at my desk just 20 minutes later, I heard blubbering from the bathroom. I knocked on the door and then opened it. T. was sitting with folded arms in the bathtub in a few centimetres of tepid water.

Stiffly I knelt and touched her shoulder. "T., please."

She turned her head.

"You know," I tried a different tact. "You ought to look at some of the compositions I brought home this weekend. Half of them are about homesickness. Some of were written by refugees— who don't know

whether their families back home are dead or alive. They live here in a strange culture—barely speaking English.”

My wife squeezed her arms tighter.

"There are so many people in this city who live far from their homeland," I persisted. "Think of all the advantages we have. Really, we are very lucky...."

Her loudening sobs— along with the echo of the dripping tap— began to reverberate from the sweating tiles.

With a sigh of futility, I backed out through the open door into my workroom.

As soon as I sat back at my desk, I heard feet on the stairs.

"What's the matter mommy?" It was TE's voice.

"Mommy?"

Then it was MH coming out from her bedroom.

I stepped back into the open bathroom door to see both girls kneeling over the bathtub. Even little MH stood beside his mom, one hand in the water. TE was holding a dripping washcloth to T.'s forehead.

Even comforted by her children, my wife still wept like a biblical Rachel, in a language unknown to them...

1996, August

While living in a 3-bedroom house on Tory Ave. in Coquitlam:

A high voltage pre-literacy jolt:

On the way back from our walk around Lefarge Park, 4½ -year-old MH stopped us before an electrical distribution box.

"What's happening to him?" he pointed to the stick-figure being thrown backwards by a zig-zagging bolt.

"He's touching electricity," I said, "The same thing could happen to anyone who touches that box. That picture is telling us to be very careful."

"Is that guy dead?" he asked.

"Well, he could be. Electricity is very dangerous. Remember how we had to throw away your lamp when it had a bare spot on the cord? Remember it made weird sounds? If you touch a bare wire with live electricity, it could kill you."

"Kill you— how?"

"Well, electricity flows like water out of a tap except it's invisible. It's there but you can't see it. It is very powerful."

"Powerful like Hulk?" he says, referring to his favourite toy wrestler.

"More powerful than Hulk Hogan and hotter than the stove when it is red hot. We have to be very careful around it. That's why that box has a warning on it."

"Is that guy going to the hospital?"

"Well, anyone who touches a bare wire will probably end up in the hospital. He could even die. It depends on how much electricity goes into his body. We need to be careful around wires, honey. And around the places in the wall where plugs go in. Never, *ever* touch those places, especially if your fingers are wet, OK?"

"OK, dad."

I tousled his head and we moved along...

At the other end of the block, we passed a second electrical box with the same icon.

"Look dad, there he is again. The same guy."

For a second, I glimpsed the world as a 4½-year-old might see it. It was a world of separate concrete things in harmony or in contrast. It was a world not yet captive to forms and essences; a mind not yet beholden to symbolic representation...

"So, *is* he the same guy, dad?" MH asked again.

"Yeah, honey," he's the same guy— still getting electrocuted. Over and over again."

1996, December



fwt

Sky-treader:

Yesterday afternoon, I finally fulfilled the long overdue promise of flying a kite with the kids.

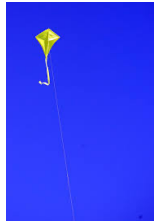
For a golden moment, the yellow plastic kite spiralled upwards over the town centre soccer field in the spring breeze. With MH jogging behind, I ran along the grass paying out the string as it climbed higher.

Yet all too soon the line slackened, and the kite swooped into a nose-dive. As it bounced onto the turf, TE ran to pick it up. Unfortunately, the cracked cross beam ended further flight.

Still, lying in the dark 12 hours later—I could feel that same sure tug of the kite string on my fingers...

While I have no photos of TE's grin behind her shading hand or 5-year-old MH's blinking wonderment beneath the tiny yellow sky-treader—I dearly hope those images have been embedded in their scrapbook of innocence...

1997, April



Under the chimney of the SPCA:

"Why don't you just go back and ask them?"

MH and I leaned on his bikes by the side of the Pipeline Road SPCA, staring up at the rusting chimney. I had told TE that if she wanted to know that fate of the poor kitty we dropped off there 2 months ago, she could ask the woman attending to the dog pens.

"What day was it?" The woman in blue rubber gloves asked.

"March 16th," said TE. Her remembering the exact date made her inquiry all the more woeful.

"Just come in for a minute and I'll check," the woman said.

MH and I glumly watched as TE and her friend, A., followed the woman inside the main door.

Yet again, I ran through the justification for returning the kitty: the scratched furniture, the kitty's resistance to house training; MH's ringworm. Yet again, those excuses failed to dislodge the memory of TE choking back tears as we drove away.

In the baying of the penned dogs, I leaned towards MH. "I don't want poor TE to hear bad news," I said softly. "But I'm afraid that Sabrina went up that smokestack."

"How could a cat float up through a chimney?" asked the 5-year-old.

"They cremate them," I said, "they—"

Just then TE and her friend were emerging from the door. She was squinting in the sun.

"Well, what did they say inside?" I asked anxiously.

"They said they're busy now," she said. "They said to come back later when they weren't so busy."

"We'll do that, honey."

She frowned when I touched her wrist.

"We will get a dog— really we will— as soon as we get back from Dubai."

"Sure," she said, jarring her bike forward with a 'tsk'...

1997, June



While living in a 3-bedroom apartment near Al Mina Road., Dubai, UAE:

Inauspicious beginning:

The kids had apparently been playing tag on the Oasis apartment pool deck when MT accidentally shoved her 5-year-old brother. Little MH slipped on the tiles and stuck his head on the edge of the pool. MT half carried him back up to the apartment.

Under the bloody towel MT held to the top of his head was a deep gash. The fact that he seemed dazed was more alarming than the blood.

“*Mwari batsire*,” [god help us] cried T. “We need a doctor!”

“He needs stitches.” I pushed back the towel.

It’s my fault, I’ll my fault,” MT wailed. “I could have killed him!”

TE, in shivering in her wet bathing suit stood back, pale with fear.

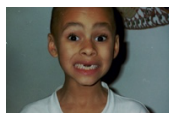
“Don’t panic.” I shushed. “He wasn’t knocked out, was he?”

In choking sobs, MT shook her head.

“That’s good.”

“‘*Good*’—what in hell do you mean?” T. shouted. “My child needs to see a doctor!”

“I mean it could have been worse,” I said. “It doesn’t help to scare him. We’ll get him to a clinic. Just get dressed.”



In the back of the taxi to the Al Riffa clinic, T. held the towel to our son’s head. He whimpered but did not cry.

On the other side, I squeezed his hand. Just an hour before the accident, I had scolded him for forgetting my ‘precious’ snorkelling mask at the pool. What if it *had* been worse?

“You are so brave, honey. I’m so proud of you.” I said, lump in throat.

Within a half hour, we were seated in an examining room of the Al Riffa clinic, watching a Keralan doctor stitch up the gash in MH’s scalp. The doctor snipped the stitch then dropped the scissors in a dish of urine-coloured antiseptic.

“I don’t see any sign of a concussion,” he said taping on the bandage, “but keep him awake for a few hours.”

On the taxi back to the apartment, T. sat in the back with MH on her lap. I sat in the front seat staring out the window. Last Friday it was TE who had an accident at the pool. Her chipped front tooth still needs to be fixed... She had cried inconsolably when she saw herself in the mirror...

I also thought of how earlier it was MT in tears when she heard that due to her math test results, Emirates International School had not accepted her application... It was another bitter reminder of the irony of the supposed justification for uprooting the kids from the new Coquitlam neighbourhood into which they were just getting settled.

Could this be an any less auspicious beginning to what is supposed to be their ‘unique opportunity for learning’?

1997, August (Dubai)



The passing of Ollie:

MT crouched on the floor, bawling. Protruding from the pink tissue paper in her hand was the yellow head of the budgie purchased just 2 weeks ago in the pet store in Karama.

"Why do all my pets have to die?"

Just an hour before, she had burst into the living room where I sat at the computer.

"Come and see how tame Ollie is getting," she said excitedly, "He's letting me pick him up."

As it turned out sadly, the creature was just too weak to flinch away.

"He didn't even live until my birthday," She stroked the protruding tail feather. "It's not fair!"

"Listen, honey," I tried to console. "It was probably already sick when we got it. There are no regulations in the pet stores here. They can sell anything in any condition."

"I never—" she cried, "*ever* want to get another pet. I *make* them die!"

"Please don't think that way, honey. It's just not true—and you know it." I kissed her forehead. Having lost a grandfather, and two aunts in the last year—my dear daughter has had more than her share of bereavement....



Near dusk, her siblings and I accompanied MT out to the vacant lot between the Sun Rock hotel and Standard Chartered bank. In a padded airmail envelope beneath 4 inches of Arabian desert sand, we laid Ollie to rest...

The day of his interment being just a week before her 12th birthday, I could only hope that in her adolescence, MT avoids the paternal curse of needless self-torment...

1997, September (Dubai)

Missing Halloween:

There was not another child in sight as a tiny gypsy, a gorilla and a werewolf walked up the canyon between the Standard Chartered bank and the Golden Sands hotel.

I walked half a block behind the 3 girls (TE and her New Zealand friend along with MT) noting that the few passers-by, jaded by the perpetual Dubai freak show, hardly gave the costumed girls a second glance. At the same time, I was eager to get the girls home before the Emiratis in Mercedes came trolling for Russian whores...

"This is not a real Halloween," said my 10-year-old werewolf in despair. "Why did we have to come here for?"

"You're in another country, TE." I took her hand. "At least now you know how it would feel to be an Indian in Canada at the time of Diwali. Or think how an Arab child in Canada must feel when nobody else is celebrating Eid."

She pulled away. "I don't care—I don't care!"

She pulled off her mask. "Let's just go home."

The girls walked faster back towards the Oasis. Hastening to keep up, I blinked away an intruding image of twinkling Jack-o-Lanterns back in Coquitlam, snaking down Tory Ave. in crisp fall air...

1997, November (Dubai)



Wooden words at Safa Park:

"Nothing is nicer than a happy childhood." said Oasis apartments neighbour and fellow Canuck, JB.

I nodded and stepped aside as he guided his son along with MH and TE into the Safa Park Ferris wheel line-up.



Our encounter had been accidental. I had earlier rented a bicycle rickshaw along with MH and TE while MT helped her mom with grocery shopping at the Union Coop. Returning the rickshaw near the park entrance, we had met JB, who was just finishing his “quality-time” roller-blading session with his son, who was MH's pal. When JB's son clamoured for his dad to take him on more park rides before going home, JB invited us along.

So it was that TE, MH and I joined them in the bumper cars. For the first time since Old Orchard Beach, Maine at the age of 8, I experienced the bliss of bashing abandonly into others— side, fore and aft. It also seemed that in those few laughing moments, the distrust between an assumed Tony Robbins clone and an assumed Maestro of Dourness was quite forgotten.

“So, are you sure you don’t want to go on the Ferris wheel?” JB asked afterwards.

“No, that’s enough excitement for one day,” I smiled. I’ll wait here for the kids.”

I handed a 20 Dirham note to TE who joined the ticket window line up along with JB’s son.

Standing back besides JB, I attempted to resume something of the fleeting fellowship of the bumper car ride.

“It’s great to see kids having so much fun,” I ventured.

"Yup, nothing is nicer than a happy childhood," he said.

“That’s so true,” I said. “I’m reminded of a quote from Dostoev—”

"Do you have enough?" Waving up a bill, he shouted towards his son who had reached the front of the ticket window queue.

“Sorry, what was that?" He asked, carefully placing the bill back in his wallet.

Still watching TE and MH in the lineup, I tried again: “I was just thinking of a famous quote. I can’t remember it exactly— but I believe it was from Dostoevsky.” In the sudden blare of Arabic music from the Ferris wheel loudspeakers, I raised my volume. “He said something to the effect that a soul can always be saved by just one happy childhood memory.”

When I looked back at JB for his reaction, he was gone. While I had been jabbering away, he had slipped forward to be buckled into a seat beside his 6-year-old son. A few seconds later, they would be rocking up into the blue sky over Safa Park...



“Look what I made at school today, dad?”

As soon as I came in the door from work this afternoon, there was MH in his light blue school uniform, eagerly showing me his water painting. It showed a stick-figure of a bald guy with a happy-face above a green blob in the midst of other happy faces drawn above coloured blobs. The caption read: *‘Fun on the bumper cars’* ...

“That is beautiful, man!” I said hugging him. “I’m going to pin it up above my desk at the college.”

I was both touched and contrite. It has taken so little— just a couple of hours at Safa Park yesterday had meant so much to him! Even though I can never be a jock dad like JB— MH loves me just because I am *his* dad. Yet how many more times can I say: *“I’m tired... I’m busy... later...”* before a deepening and irreversible silence?

1998, March (Dubai)

Confidence restored:

Before the start of MH's peewee game, I watched the final innings of a Dubai Little League game on the other side of the park. The adolescents were engaged in a much more serious ritual than that of their little brothers.

The parents, American expats in the stratospheric salary echelon, gauged the burgeoning power of their young stallions, rather like *Maasai* elders watching their unflinching *moranis* being circumcised... With nervous cockiness the teen boys duly performed for the frosted blonde moms who lustily cheered...

The dads' cheers were more measured. There was even a glimpse of misty-eyed football dreams, unfulfilled. In that, I recalled the old poem of James Wright about high school football in middle-America where: *'sons gallop terribly into one another's bodies...'*



As for the peewee game, that followed: MH's confidence was wonderfully restored after being benched for most of last Friday's game. In all 4 turns at bat, he got hits— generating cheers from his fellow Rockies teammates and their parents. Then in one glorious crack, he hit a home run.

Trotting towards home plate, he glanced towards the sideline to make sure I'd been watching. My son! Not yet seven with a good mind and a healthy body— but best of all— unafflicted by the paternal torment of unrelenting self-consciousness...

"You had a hot bat tonight," I said as we later crossed Mankool Road towards the entrance of Spinney's supermarket. "When you're *really* into the game— not thinking about how you look or how others see you—that's when you'll *always* hit the ball— that when Zen takes over."

"What's that?" he asked.

"It's just an idea about a state of mind where you're not always thinking about what you're doing— but just *being* what you are doing..."

"Well," I know what my secret was today," he patted the pin his lapel, "I have this lucky charm!"

It was the coat of arms of BC, where we were soon to return after our aborted 2-year mercenary sojourn...

1999, March (Dubai)

While back in the 3-bedroom house on Tory Ave. in Coquitlam (after return from Dubai):

A 12th Birthday:

Coming back from photocopying at the office for the new class on Tuesday, I found TE sitting on her bed, staring at the wall.

What the matter, honey?" I asked from her doorway— well aware that it was the eve of her 12th birthday...

"Nothing."

"Com'on, tell me."

Crossing her arms, she sniffled. "I never have a nice birthday. I never have a party."

"Well, that's not quite true. You've had birthday parties."

"Hardly ever!" she crossed her arms.

It's just that September 2nd always falls just before start of school. A lot of kids are away for the last weekend."

"But MT always has a party!"

We both knew that starting in another new school next week and having to make new friends after the uprooting from Dubai— was a lot harder than having no birthday party. Definitely harder for TE than for her more extroverted sister...

Suddenly, she was crying.

I crouched beside the bed, arm on her shoulder. "You'll have a good time tomorrow, honey. We'll go out to the Red Robin for dinner and have a nice birthday cake when we get back. There'll be a surprise."

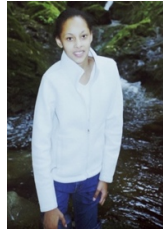
Still, she sobbed.

"Then next year— next year for sure— you'll know a lot of kids from Maple Creek and you'll have a big party..."

Her slender shoulders continued quaking... In hugging her, images flashed forth the Avenues Clinic in Harare, on September 2nd, 1987: Still weak from the oxytocin administered to hasten her delivery, the new-born whimpered under the ultraviolet light, needed to reduce the bilirubin levels in her blood.

"Don't worry, little girl," I murmured, hand on the bassinet wherein lay that unnamed daughter, her swollen face wrapped in white bandages. "It'll work out. You'll be happy— yes, you will!"

1999, September



fwt

Bad Dream:

The cries in the middle of the night were unmistakably coming from MH's room. I switched on his light to find him lying coverless, moaning. His brow was clammy, and he was flu feverish.

"The door's all messy. Something's crawling there!" He cried.

I checked the floor and bedspread. Fortunately, there was no sign of vomit.

"It's just a bad dream, honey. Only a bad dream."

He was glassy-eyed and shivering when I led him into the bathroom. He leaned over the sink, pushing into the wet facecloth I held to his forehead.

"I'm scared," he chattered. "I don't want to be alone."

"It was just a dream. Com'on, you can sleep in my bed the rest of the night."

Blearily, I carried the 7-year-old back to the empty double bed. It seemed no coincidence that this was a night his mom was not sleeping under the same roof

1999, November



Two Cordelias:

Just in from battling rush hour traffic along Lougheed Highway (lower back numb from the frozen posture), I saw MT was in her basement bedroom with the door open.

“You working on your homework?” I asked, dropping the heavy bookbag.

“We didn’t have much,” she said. “I’m almost finished. Do you want me to cut your hair now?”

I then remembered that before I left for work, she asked me if she could go out to a movie with friends. I told her only on condition of finishing her homework. I then asked if she would mind cutting my hair this weekend— as she had been doing since we got back from Dubai. As much as I would have preferred to take a nap before lesson planning, I realized that I’d better not miss the offer— even on a Wednesday night.

“Do you mind, honey?”

A few moments later I was kneeling on a towel, head on the rim of the bathroom sink. MT was wielding the clippers around my areole of greying fuzz.

“Do I look like a prisoner?” I smiled grimly into the mirror afterwards.

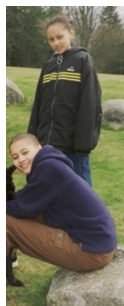
“Maybe people think that we belong to some religious group!” she joked.

When I got the set of clippers at Costco last fall, she had insisted on getting her own hair cut short. I wondered whether her Sinead O’Connor look, as well as being an act of teen experimentation, was also my elder Cordelia’s gesture of copying her dad...

Later, it was TE who came to my aid. When I could barely keep eyes open from the long day following another restless night, the younger Cordelia crouched on the carpet in front of the pullout sofa, marking the multiple-choice diagnostic grammar test of my new class...

Could more faithful daughters even be imagined?

2000, January



Missing critical goals:

MH in his blue jersey waved when he saw me striding across the soccer field... I was late.

After dropping him off before the game, I had gone for a walk—intending to be back for at least the last quarter of his match. The walk along the dreary New Westminster Riverfront took longer than expected. I'd even wandered into the Army and Navy and browsed—oddly enough—the hunting and fishing department.

“Sorry,” I puffed, clasping his shoulder.

“You were coming along just as the last whistle blew,” he said.

I glanced at his teammates' parents pulling close their fledglings. “I was hoping I could watch you play for a while.”

“I got one goal,” he said.

“That's great, honey. Sorry, I didn't catch it. Next time, I will.”

“Sure,” he said.

He walked a little ahead of me on the way to the car. I thought of how he already runs faster than me, throws a ball harder and beats me at chess... Yet despite my many ineptitudes—it still deeply matters to him that I see his goals....

2000, October

***In the eclipse of a Christmas tradition:***

Amid the domestic strains, I have attempted to maintain a semblance of the seasonal ‘family traditions.’ In such regard, last night I drove the kids around to a few of the same over-the-top Christmas light displays visited through the years...

First, we parked on the dark shoulder of Smith Ave. in Coquitlam and walked back to the yard with a Santa’s workshop and a life-sized nativity scene. Amid the garish lights radiating from the roof of the manger and the tinny recording of ‘*Little Star of Bethlehem*’ I took a few ‘traditional’ photos. In the chilly walk back to the car, TE and her little brother walked ahead, and MT walked quietly beside me.

“I’ll never forget,” I broke the silence, “the first year we came here. It was our first Christmas in Canada. I had seen the display from a bus window so the next night, your mother and I walked here in the rain. You were on my shoulders and your mom was carrying TE.” I shivered in a ghostly image of tenderness. “Do you want to see where we first lived?”

“All right,” she said.

A few minutes later and 4 blocks away, I pulled up to the curb outside a shabby apartment building. MT was in the front seat and her siblings, sipping their Starbucks hot chocolate, were in the back. I pointed through the steaming windshield at the nearest 2nd floor balconies.

“That first Christmas here 12 years ago, I was desperate for a job. Your mother was homesick. But I’ll never forget how excited you were that night, seeing those lights. TE was just a year old and you were just 3. It’s so moving to see how happy little kids can be even when their family is in a dire situation...”

I bit my lip, but it was too late. Even for a few days of Christmas— there was no distracting from the reminder of a family in crisis...

2000, December



Perfect timing:

Only on a whim did I linger to watch MH's soccer game for a few minutes rather than walking back to the car to read, as usual. Serendipitously, it was in those few minutes that he got a breakaway. He faked around 2 defenders near the center line and brilliantly controlled the ball while running full tilt down the right sidelines. His long corner shot went sailing past the right arm of the goalie.

Even before the ball bounced back from the netting, my son looked over to see if I was watching. With lump in throat, I raised my hand and cheered— grateful to the mysterious forces— that at least for once aligned in perfect timing...

2001, February



A portentous 16th birthday:

There were barely a dozen shoppers in the Oakridge Mall yesterday when I walked through the concourse holding MT's birthday balloons. The elevators down to the parking level and back up to the computer lab (where I endured an HTML coding workshop) were just as eerily empty. The emptiness of the shops and lack of traffic was creepily reminiscent of an apocalyptic zombie movie ...

While stores have reopened, many people are still nervous about going into public places. For the last 5 days, most people are still glued to their TVs watching endless replays of the second silhouetted plane disintegrating in impact with the second of the twin towers... What a surreal atmosphere for MT's 16th birthday!

In pushing the bobbing balloons into the backseat of the van, I cast back to nearly 16 years ago:

I was sitting on the bed in our cinderblock house at Kutama Mission, with the 2-week-old MT on my knees... Looking into her face, I wondered when she would be able to sit, crawl, walk—and finally talk. Gazing into her dark brown eyes, all her milestones seemed so tantalizingly distant. I realized that I would be nearly 40 when she was only 6; nearly 50 when turned 16. What would she be like? Would I be so lucky enough to find out?

I then thought of how a few weeks thereafter, Halley's comet made its faint appearance in the austral night sky. Several times, I woke in the middle of the night and drove out beyond the mission gates. Only there, into the total darkness was I able to catch a glimpse of Halley's in the southern sky. Even through binoculars the comet appeared only as a ghostly torch beam amid the brighter stars.

Still, I was deeply moved. Holding the shaking binoculars, I wished for a swift passage into the ghostly future... On Halley's Comet, I fervently wished that I would see my daughter grow up...

Despite numerous close calls over the last decade and a half, I have around to witness her first crawling, walking and talking—and now her blossoming...

Yet in the depth of gratitude for that, I have never been more apprehensive of the future. Of all that portents that I ached to know, in looking into her infant eyes, I could never have imagined that she would pass her 16th birthday in the same week as a dress rehearsal for Armageddon...

2001, September



A trill of anguish:

When MH declined a Saturday afternoon outing to Science World with his mom and sisters, I asked him why.

“I just want to stay home,” she said, hunched back on his bed.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked, leaning in his doorway.

“Nope.” He stared at his wiggling fingers.

“Are you sure?” I pressed. “You’ll be missing out on some fun.”

“No that’s OK,” he reached onto his night table for his baseball glove. “We can watch the World Series opener together.”

“But that doesn’t start until tonight, honey,” I said. “You would probably still be back in time.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he tossed up and caught his baseball. “I just want to stay with you.”

Touched, I knew this could not be a typical weekend before the computer...



There were no fireworks. We just went on a jog together around the Coquitlam Centre stadium track and then walked to the mall. We got hamburgers at the food fare and rented a Play Station game. Back in the house, MH played his game on the basement TV, and in my adjacent ‘office’ with the door open, I worked on Word files. Still, we felt an ease with one another that would have been unimaginable for me with my father at any age...

Later in the afternoon, when TE was back from the excursion, she joined us in the basement to watch the World Series opener.

We were all pleased by the Diamondbacks’ blowout win— the Yankees’ post September 11th ‘come-from-behind heroes’ narrative being just too syrupy to swallow...

“Next summer, we’ll definitely go to a Mariner’s game in Seattle,” I said in the post-game glow.

ME gave TE a grave look. With all the talk of my moving out— even working overseas—can they believe I’ll even be around next summer?

So it was that the goodnight hugs that followed were accompanied by the same trill of anguish felt so often of late.

2001, October

Of the suspicion of strangers:

Like so many parents in the aftermath of Halloween, I sorted through MH's treat bag. It was not paranoia about germs—let alone rat-poisoned toffee or needles in apples. The examination was just to be able to recommend the lesser risks to teeth and pancreas...

Of course, loose handfuls of candies, peanuts of popcorn balls in the treat bag are of Halloweens of the distant past. The only surprise in MH's bag was a cookie wrapped in tinfoil. What a contrast with the rest of the vacuum sealed treats!

I unwrapped and sniffed it. It was as home-baked chocolate cookie—likely from a giver as yet uncontaminated by the prevailing suspicion of strangers. Who would think of offering home cooking as a Halloween treat except for a new immigrant mom?

I then thought of how in our first months in Canada, T. sent peanut butter cookies to a school Christmas bake sale. Like T.'s cookies of nearly a decade and a half ago, the tinfoil-wrapped cookies handed out last night were probably baked in good will—even with a touch of neighbourly love.

A lump came to throat. Yet probably like every other parent on the block—I tossed the cookie into the garbage.

2001, November



The outgrowing of bathtub toys:

Coming out from my computer desk, I was taken aback to find MH in exactly the same pose as he was an hour before. With the play station frozen on the TV screen, he was listlessly tossing a tennis ball against the basement wall.

I sat down behind him on the pullout sofa. “Can I tell you how I sometimes spent Friday nights when I around your age?”

“Sure,” he said still tossing the ball.

I launched into a monologue about the titanic struggles of rival gangs in my fantasy world of heroes and monsters. I told him that Friday night was bath night— when I looked forward to playing in the bathtub with toy boats crewed by little soldiers.

“I played with little plastic figurines right up until I was nearly 11,’ I said, “right up until my dog chewed up Davy Crockett, the toughest of my gang leaders. I buried him in the snow and that’s where it ended. By then I was just getting a little self-conscious to be playing with such toys... Anyway,” I chuckled, “maybe that kind of play was more creative than watching TV.”

Sighing, MH went upstairs. I presumed that I had only made him feel guilty whereupon he went to watch the upstairs TV, out of my sight.

Later in the evening, I came upstairs to use the kitchen after T. had gone to bed. MH was asleep on the sofa. The main bathroom room was open and the light still on. I peeped in to see a heap of his clothes on the wet floor. At the bottom of the drained bathtub was a plastic boat and a gang of his toy wrestlers, tied together with string...

2001, December



Little stings, remembered:

“So where *were* you dad?”

Since I am spending my low-seniority allotted vacation in the basement, MH asked why I couldn’t have walked over to Maple Creek school today to see him perform in the Chinese New Years’ commemoration. He was the only boy selected by his class to parade around the gym holding up the red dragon.

“I’d wish you’d told me that it was a big deal,” I said, dishing out his noontime bowl of soup.

“I did this morning,” he said glumly. “You weren’t listening.”

“Well, I was listening,” I said, “But I didn’t think you really wanted me to show up. I thought you were asking just to be nice. I’m sorry.”

He raised his eyebrows in mild censure. Chastened, I silently vowed to be more attentive to such little stings that tend to lodge in memory...

2002, January



Breaking the news:

I broke the news to MH at breakfast. I was at the stove stirring porridge and he was waiting at the table. At the beginning of April, I told him, I would be moving into an apartment.

“You will have your own key and you can spend as much time at my new place as you like. OK?”

He stared into his empty bowl.

“You knew for a long, long time this was coming. Don’t worry, we’ll make the best of it.”

He turned aside, mumbling. I put down the wooden spoon and touched his shoulder.

“Can you say that again honey?”

He tsked. “I’ll get screwed up.”

“‘Screwed up’? What do you mean?”

“If you live far away from me, I won’t have a dad. I’ll get screwed up.”

I crouched by his chair. “Please don’t worry about that,” I said, falteringly, “I won’t get a place that’s too far away. I will find a place where you can come and go from easily. I promise.”

Going back to the stove to fill the bowls, I continued. “Look, maybe after school one of these days— or on the weekend— you can come looking with me. I won’t rent a place without you seeing it first.”

Despite my effort to reassure, he left the table in glum silence. I stared for a few moments at his uneaten bowl and then retreated to the basement ‘office’.



When MH left for school, I tried in vain to focus on a Word file. In the mounting anxiety, I was unable to work. Can I really afford a place he can think of as his second home? Meanwhile, what if T. should bring a new man into this house? I blinked in an image of a jock in tee-shirt and tight jeans in the backyard playing catch with MH....

Amid the tumble of dark thoughts, I remembered a poignant moment nearly 3 years past:

I was staring up the arrivals board in the Dubai Airport, looking for flight information of the Air Tanzania flight in which T. and the 3 kids were booked for their return from a vacation in Zimbabwe. The previous week was the longest time I’d spent alone since marriage. Tormented by air crash

‘premonitions, I had scarcely slept. When the arrival time of my family’s flight suddenly switched to ‘delayed’ I was seized with panic...

Amid that horrific imagining of a disaster—I avowed that for their safety I would gladly trade my life... When the flight did land an hour late, I was profoundly grateful. Yet, as always, the sense of obligation for mercy faded with the return of petty concerns...

How could it be that less than 3 years later, any rift with T. seemed grave enough to break up the family? For the kids’ sake, could I not have tried harder to salvage the marriage?

I shook my head. The dynamite-wired bridges have been blown. Yet with determination I *can* keep my promise to make a second home— one definitely within walking distance from the first.

2002, February



fwl

No mood for Khalil Gibran:

While helping to load cardboard boxes in my office, MH was in a sullen mood.

“Com’on what’s the matter?” I asked, half-turning from the bookshelf I was emptying. “Look, you don’t have to help me if you don’t feel like it.”

“I don’t mind,” he scowled.

After a few more awkward moments, I tried again.

“So, what’s wrong, really?” I crouched by the pile of books on the floor. “You can tell me.”

Still packing, he tsked. “Why should I? You always get angry at me, anyway.”

“That’s not true!” I patted his shoulder. “How can I help you if you won’t tell me what’s wrong?”

Ruffling the pages of a paperback and still facing away, he tsked. “Mom favours MT, and you favour TE. No one cares about me.”

“What?” I put my arm around his neck. “How in the world can you think such a thing?”

He shook his head. “Well, it’s true.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” I said.

Tsking again, he continued packing the paperbacks.

“Before it gets dark,” I said, “Would you like to do some catching practice?”



On the walk back from the Town Centre stadium he started off ahead. We’d thrown the ball back on firth for only 10 minutes on the periphery of the stadium lights, when he suddenly took off his glove and turned away.

“Com’on now,” I jogged up beside him. “It’s time to snap out of this.”

“You weren’t throwing hard enough, he scowled. “And you never gave me any diving catches like you promised.”

“Sorry, you already throw harder and faster than I can. It’s hard for me to challenge you.”

Grasping his shoulder, I pulled him round facing west. It was chilly, but the sky was unusually clear for early spring. The 'evening star' was rising brightly in the west, over the lights of Port Moody.

"Hey, see that bright 'star'? It's really the planet, Venus. Isn't it beautiful? I just wish we could see the starry skies more often. When we get too wrapped up in ourselves, it's good to feel just how insignificant our troubles really are before the vastness of the universe."

I chuckled in the sudden realization that I was close to plagiarizing lines from Eric Idle's: *'The Galaxy Song'*.

MH curled his lip. For the moment, the 10-year-old son of parents on the verge of separation was in no mood for Kahlil Gibran let alone Monty Python...

2002, March

fwt

Forgetting a miracle:

“So, can I see your term report card?” I asked my eldest, standing in her bedroom doorway. “TE already showed me hers.”

“TE’s only in Grade 9. They might have got theirs, but we don’t get ours until May 1st,” said MT, looking me straight in the eye.

“Well, that pretty convenient for you,” I scoffed turning from her bedroom doorway, “knowing that May 1st is the day I’m moving out!”

“Do you think I care?” the 16½-year-old yelled, slamming the door behind me.

The latest confrontation with my teen rebel could have been worse— had she known that that I’d already snooped and seen her report card, tucked below her pile of ‘*Seventeen*’ magazines on her dresser. Apart from her history grade, her average was C- and the comments abysmal. How could a girl who was reading well above her grade level a few year ago—not even get a passing mark in Grade 11 English? However disappointed, I had to acknowledge the fact that another teen rebel (also a fan of ‘*Catcher in the Rye*’) similarly self-sabotaged his report card, 35 years ago...

Still, it was plain that my pestering would change nothing... Perhaps my absence might even make way for some epiphany in her—one coming even in time to reverse the diminishing odds for college... Maybe it’s not too late for a surprise turn-around...



The confrontation that might have come over grades—erupted in an entirely unexpected manner. I was in the middle of the basement, packing a box with toiletries when MT came out of her room.

“You are *not* taking those towels,” she said angrily. “Mom and I won’t have enough towels here. Do you expect me to go buy towels for myself?”

“Get real,” I yelled, “I’m leaving your mom with the house. Do you have to begrudge me a few towels?”

Arms akimbo, she yelled back. “You are *so* immature. You are always sucking up to TE and MH. You don’t even treat me like your daughter!”

As deeply as that cut— there was an odd consolation that she could use her tongue so sharply... It could serve her well in cutting through cruelties as yet unimagined...

Moments later, she slammed out the front door and jumped in the back of her blonde buddy's cherry red PT cruiser. In a surge of bitter poignancy, I watched them drive away. How can I even for a moment forget the unexpected miracle of her very being?

2002, April



fwt

While in a 2-bedroom apartment on Pipeline Road in Coquitlam:

A Cordelia in pink rubber gloves:

Already with a key to the apartment, TE offered to help me clean before the furniture is moved in on Friday. Coming back in late afternoon carrying one of the boxes from the back of my van, I was surprised to find her in the kitchen. She was scrubbing out the cupboards.

“When did you get here, honey?” I asked, setting down the box.

“I came here right from school,” she said. Carefully, she dipped a Jaycloth into the plastic bucket set on the counter. With her pink rubber gloves, she wrung the wad.

“Did you put Lysol in there?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Be careful, honey. Don’t let any of it splash onto yourself.”

Of course, I was alluding to her (paternally inherited) susceptibility to eczema. Still, she scrubbed—having already determined she was making a second home more livable.



In the evening— my last but one in the basement of Tory Ave.— we watched a video she had selected from Blockbusters’ on the drive back from the nearby apartment.

Her choice of ‘*Domestic Disturbance*’, was telling: It was a thriller involving a divorcing mother, rebellious son, an evil stepfather and a dogged— but luckless— dad. Not that I could be remotely identified with the John Travolta character, but her choice might well have reflected a take on the moment’s circumstances...

After the video, as I was pulling out the sofa-bed, TE leaned in with a kiss on my cheek.

“Goodnight dad,” she then said, over her shoulder in heading up the stairs to her bedroom.

She could not have fathomed just how deeply those gestures were appreciated.

2002, April

At the Superstore Gas bar:

On the way back from picking up a few items at Superstore, I drove to the gas bar where MT (as informed by her younger siblings) has begun a part-time job. Since my move, she has yet to come by the apartment.

The first glimpse of my eldest behind the glass, rent my heart. I turned my head while the attendant filled the tank. I then parked on the side and joined the line up before the cashier window.

She was taking money from a customer, when she glanced up and saw me.

“Oh, hi, dad,” she mumbled, counting out change.

At the front of the line, with 2 customers behind me, I had to make it quick.

“What time do you get off work?” I asked, trying to catch her eyes.

“5:00 PM.”

“Do you need a ride?”

“Mom’s giving me a ride.” She glanced over at the West African girl working at the window beside her.

Shrugging, I turned away. In acknowledging karmic debt from my own adolescence— should I really be disappointed?



Back in the apartment, TE showed me a blank Superstore gas coupon she said that she had found on the floor at her mom’s place and intended to give back to her sister when she went over on the weekend. Before comprehending, I scowled at the scribbled lines.

“They’re lyrics,” said TE.

“MT writes songs?”

“No, song lyrics.”

Beyond any reckoning of the words themselves was the assurance that MT, in her way, was already planning for a life beyond the glassed-in cubicle at the gas station... *Bravo!*

2002, May

A paternal jinx?

On the morning slow jog around the park, I talked with MH about his last game and the coming tryouts for the all-star team.

“Would you like me to be there?”

“Mom said she’ll take me,” he said.

There was a moment of awkward silence.

“Do I sometimes intimidate you when I’m watching you play?”

“What do you mean?” He glanced over at a red-haired man with a black poodle who seemed to do a double take in passing.

“Well, think of that episode of *‘King of the Hill’* we watched a few nights ago. Where the son Bobby was in the middle of a target shooting contest when his father, Hank, showed up. Bobby couldn’t concentrate and lost the competition. Remember?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway, I hope I just don’t make you nervous.”

“Don’t worry,” he said, with a little chuckle that could have been embarrassment.

In the resuming silence, I thought again of last week’s game in which he pitched a couple of bad innings. With every wild pitch I looked away into the trees. When the coach pulled him, he came off the mound, sobbing.

“He just put too much pressure on himself,” said his Mountie coach afterwards.

MH was still upset on the drive back to the apartment.

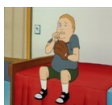
“Lighten up, buddy,” I had said, “No one can be on 100% of the time.”

“I just don’t like you to see me screw up,” he had muttered.

Jogging along, I remembered times he looked towards me, after fumbled catches or fanning swings at the ball. In those moments, it was hard not to believe that my presence was making it worse...

“The last thing I want to do is jinx you,” I had said.

2002, June



A promise renewed:

Since the beginning of my college employment, rumours of cutbacks, bumpings and layoffs— have been standard gossip around the photocopier.

Yet of late, ominous emails from the union have warned that the fiscally conservative provincial government was intent on cutting education budgets while the college administration is increasingly flat-footed in its negotiations...

As for my place in the hallowed seniority list— I could probably hang on in most scenarios short of a divisional collapse— but even as early as September, I could well be “bumped” into a church basement on a split shift... At the very least, when the ‘seniors’ returned from summer vacation, I would be on the night shift— not getting back until 10:30 PM...

“So how will you and TE make out here alone in the evenings?” I asked MH while dishing out the supper of a Costco Shepherd’s pie.

“We can get our own,” he said. “Just get stuff like this that we can heat up.”

“Sure, but will you do your homework afterwards— or just spend all evening on RuneScape?”

“I’m do my homework,” he blew on his plate.

“Yeah, but a 10-year-old kid shouldn’t have to get his own supper.”

“It’s OK.”

“No, it isn’t!” In a spasm of bitterness, I let loose: “I’m getting tired of being jerked around at work— tired of not knowing what, when or even *if* I’ll be teaching until the night before... And if I get cut-back to half-time in September—I can’t possibly pay the bills on half a salary... What about when you kids need money for college?”

MH looked glumly at his plate.

Maybe I’ll have to think of working overseas again,” I went on. “Somewhere like Saudi Arabia. When my wallet becomes most important than my presence— you kids will be better off with me sending you money from overseas. You’d probably even respect me more.”

“Don’t go away!” cried, MH, jolting me from the self-wallowing turn.

His plea brought to mind his crying out as toddler when trying to catch up with his sisters and me. Overcome, I leaned over to embrace him:

“Don’t worry, honey,” I said, repeating the assurance I had given the 3-year-old who once feared he was left behind during a walk in a snowstorm. “I’ll *never* leave you!”

2002, July



fwl

Not a happy ‘Quinceanera’:

As soon as I got home from work, I called TE at her mother’s place and wished her a happy 15th birthday.

When she was here last evening, I prepared a spaghetti dinner (presumably her favourite dish) along with an angel food cake— homemade without a proper baking pan. We had hoped that MT would join us for the meal, but she didn’t show up. Only MH and I were there to present her with our lopsided cake topped with strawberries—while a recording of ‘*Happy Birthday*’ played on the soundboard behind her...

“Are you having any friends over this evening?” I asked over the phone.

“No.”

Left unsaid was the ill-luck of having a birthday that fell on the Labour Day weekend when most kids were away.

“Well, I hope your mom got you a cake. I’m sorry that the one here didn’t turn out so well.”

“Mom just ordered MacDonald’s. MT made me a card.”

“Well, maybe next year, honey— maybe next year MT can help you plan ahead. Then you can have a really nice party. I’ll pay for it.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

A catch came to throat. Anyway, happy 15th, honey— just one year shy of sweet 16!”

“Thanks, dad. Thanks for the card and the money.”

“I wish it could be more. See you on Monday afternoon.”

“Bye.”

When our called ended, I held the phone in the drone of the dial tone.

For those few moments, I was thinking of a photo from an old ‘*National Geographic*’ of a Mexican girl celebrating her ‘*Quinciera*’. She was in a beautiful dress, dancing with a teenage boy in a suit... Then there was my TE— more beautiful than that dark-haired Mexican girl on her 15th birthday — sitting glumly behind that deformed cake...

I could only avow— yet again— that next year, she will have the birthday more worthy of the scrapbook of memory...

2002, September



fwt

Back at the stone circle:

It was only MH and I who this year kept the ‘family tradition’ of a winter solstice visit to the Druidic inspired stone circle on Burnaby mountain. Even before he was born, when we lived at nearby Forest Grove, his older sisters, his mom and I would mark both summer and winter solstices by hopping around the rocks making wishes. Before we went away to Dubai in 1997, we ceremoniously left a loonie under the south-facing rock in our wish for a safe return...

This afternoon, we were lucky that it was a mild 8° with the winter sun faintly pleasant on the back of the neck... When we got to the parking lot, we saw that a middle-aged couple sitting on the stones. While waiting for them to leave, MH played around with the video camera.

“Why not practice journalism?” I suggested. “You can pretend to interview me.”

He pointed the camera. “What do you want me to ask you?”

“Well, you could you ask me about the war on terrorism,” I joked.

“OK, what do you think of the war on terrorism?”

“Seriously? Well, I wonder why we can’t go after the real terrorists...”

‘Is that it?’

“It’s a wrap,” I said, self-conscious in the red blinking light.



“So, what did you wish for?” I asked “MH on the drive back to the apartment on the Barnet Highway.

“My secret,” he said.

“Really—that’s good— keep it to yourself. Maybe that makes a wish more likely to come true.”

“What did you wish for, dad?”

“Well, I don’t mind saying. I just wished that I will make it to retirement. Maybe get to enjoy a few years.”

“You will, dad,” he said.

“Well, I don’t know. I’ll having to keep exercising. You’ll keep running with me, won’t you?”

“Uhhuh.”

In the tingle of our stone circle visit, I volubly continued. “Well, I’m hoping to retire in 2011. I’ll be 60. Maybe I can go somewhere warm like Mexico or Thailand. You remember BC and his Thai wife from Dubai? They said they could rent me a space on their property in Thailand.”

But can’t you stay another year until I finish school? That’s be 2012.”

“Sure, I’ll try for that. And wherever you want me to stay— I’ll stay.”

“I want you to be around,” he said.

“Well, I appreciate that you think that way now— but when you’re a teenager— maybe where I’ll be won’t matter so much. Anyway, we’ll always be close in spirit, right?”

“Unhuh,” he said, turning the radio dial away from the drone of CBC talking heads...

2002, December

fwl