

Snapshots #4 (2003-2011)

Briefly in tune:

I'd assumed that the most lasting memory of yesterday would be staggering up from an after-work nap, tripping over the carpet and skinning my knee. Yet in limping out from the bedroom last evening to ask MH to turn down the volume on the TV—he unexpectedly asked:

“Want to hear some songs I learned at school?”

He went to his bedroom and brought out his mini-amp and electric guitar. He plugged it in and proceeded to strum. He smoothly chorded through ‘*The Lion Sleeps tonight*’, ‘*Michael Row the Boat Ashore*’ and ‘*Kumbaya*’. While they were only 3 chord tunes— I was impressed.

“You learned those songs at school?”

“Our music teacher really likes folk music. He’s an older guy.”

“Well, that’s wonderful. And your guitar— it’s working OK?”

He nodded. We both knew that I was referring to his accidentally dropping the guitar he had recently got for Christmas... The black lacquer on the neck had been chipped but the guitar was otherwise unharmed... Still, that little accident caught me in a particularly bitter juncture in the separation negotiations with his mom. I am still haunted by my subsequent rant:

“*Maybe you’d have a little respect for a musical instrument if you weren’t so goddam spoiled!*”

My taunting didn’t end there: “*If you like, I can try to return it. I doubt I can get a refund for damaged goods but if they do, I can just give you the money. You can spend it on those goddam computer games you’re addicted to. Isn’t the fact that you get so much more computer time at this dump than at your mother’s nicer place the main reason you’re here?*”

It was only when he had burst into tears that my fury was torn away by a bursting bullet of shame. I tried to beg forgiveness (“*The last thing I should ever do is to take out my frustrations on you!*”). While he accepted my hug, I still feared that another ugly memory had been forged...



Quite deliberately, I did not ask about how the guitar was working or how often he was practicing until last night.

When he started to play ‘*Sloop John B*’, I interrupted.

“Hold on. I think we could play that one together. Do you know what key it’s in?”

He strummed the opening ‘D’ chord, then paused.

From the bottom shelf of my bookcase, I opened the Zimbabwean leather drawstring bag containing my set of harmonicas. A blow and draw on the ‘D’ harp confirmed we were in tune.

For the following 20 minutes, I tooted along in harmony while he strummed. Even if the numbers were only campfire singalong fare, we played them sweetly in tune.

After he unplugged his amp and I had tucked back my bag of harps, I said: “Remember when we stayed over in Victoria a couple of years ago at the house of that friend of mine? Remember how his son played a violin along with his father on the piano? Well, we might not make such fancy harmony— but he can’t be any prouder of his son than I am of you.”

“Thanks dad,” he said, with just a touch of pre-adolescent embarrassment.

Still smiling, I limped back into the bedroom. All that would have been missed if he hadn’t been playing the TV so loud... Indeed, he might even remember this more than my rant when he dropped the guitar... What an unexpected reprieve at the end of a day which would otherwise have been rued!

2003, May

fwt

Lesson in tenacity:

It was not until the last game yesterday afternoon that MH really shone.

For most of the Peewee baseball tournament in Pitt Meadows, Coach Griff kept the usual Mariners lineup that most pleased the parents who mattered. MH, eager to pitch, was assigned right field and for several innings, the bench. Only halfway through the last game was MH brought to the mound as a relief pitcher. He pitched a clean scoreless inning—and in the next inning got out of a jam when a line drive was caught by the short-stop...

Yet it was at bat, that MH demonstrated the greater heroics. In the final inning when his team was behind with 2 out and he was down to his last strike—he pulled out a hit—forcing the game into an extra inning. His team then came back from a 4-run deficit to win the game.

In the team sit down circle at the end of the game, the coach (an active RCMP officer) appropriately reminded the boys of the lesson in teamwork, sacrifice and tenacity against the odds.

Listening from the sidelines, I wondered whether the coach might question his own decisions regarding winning games, pleasing parents and avoiding hurt feelings. Not that it was an easy balance to strike in working with 11-year-old boys. Still, in concluding his remarks, coach Griff proclaimed MH “the game MVP.” The other boys clapped.

“That’s my son,” I grinned, speaking to a fellow parent for the first time of the weekend as I waved up my camera.

2003 August



New member of the family:

Since she's moved into the apartment from her mom's, MT has been pleading for a chihuahua. I have tried to beg off. This evening she put on my lap the '*Tri-City News*' classifieds page with an ad under 'pets' circled in green.

"These ones would be *so* cute! Can you please put the \$100 down payment on one? I will pay you back for the rest."

"Don't you remember?" I tsked. "I said we could start thinking about getting a little dog when we move into a bigger place. Can't we wait for a few months? The last thing we need now is a puppy messing all over the carpet."

She pulled the ad away. "You have never given me a special Christmas present. *Ever!* MH got that guitar he wanted last year and TE always gets something big. I always get nothing."

"That's just not true, honey." I took the ad back from her hand. "But look— my god— those dogs cost \$800. That's a hell of a lot."

"It's a good price. I've seen them advertised for \$1000. Please? It can be my combination Christmas and birthday present."

"How do I know you'd take care of it?" I looked her squarely in the eyes. "Maybe you'd get tired of it and it would end up in the SPCA."

"That will never happen. I promise I will take care of it like it was my own child." Her eyes shone. "This is all I'll ask you for a whole year. It would be my best Christmas, ever!"

"Well, I can't promise," I said grimly. "But I'll think about it."



There was further reservation in hearing from TE that the little circle of MT's friends are all expecting chihuahuas for Christmas. The girls could well be emulating bimbo star, Paris Hilton, whose chihuahua looks as much a fashion accessory as the Louis Vuitton purse she carries it in... Still, after MT left for work—in defiance of common sense—I laid my sheaf of exam papers aside and phoned the number on the classified ad to make an appointment...

At 7:30 PM, MH and I drove out through wintery drizzle down the dark and twisty Dewdney Trunk Road east of Maple Ridge. In the ghostly echo of MT's tearful plea, I followed the map on MH's lap to which he held a penlight. Well beyond suburbia, we turned into the long driveway and up to the house bearing the address given over the phone.

The young woman who answered the door invited us into her living room where 5 tiny puppies were playing before a projection TV. MH's eyes lit up.

"2 of the 3 females are already spoken for." the woman said.

Her husband, a shaggy bearded fellow with his hand in a cast, got up from the sofa. "I'll put the mother in the kitchen," he smiled, "then you guys can take a closer look."

As he was fiddling with a doorway gate, his wife crouched by the litter. "They're still not weaned," she said, "but they'll be ready to go in about 2 weeks."

"So, the females are more expensive?"

"Yes, females are \$850— males are \$800." She picked up the rodent-sized puppy playing with a miniature teddy bear. "If you want a male— this one is still available. He's the runt of the litter but a feisty little guy."

I glanced at MH.

"It's a Christmas present for my daughter. Can't you come down a little from \$800?"

"No, we've had lots of calls," said the no-nonsense wife, "we're firm on our price."

MH gently held the tiny squirming male. "Do you think your sister would pick that one?" I asked. He nodded.

I pulled out my wallet and handed the wife the down payment. When she went into the kitchen to write out a receipt, we watched the puppies play.

Meanwhile, the friendly husband asked me about my work. He gestured towards my prosthetic arm. "Well, I guess that thing doesn't get in the way of bein' a teacher," he said, "but this," he held up his cast, "this is a real bitch for a carpenter!"

He then mentioned that he was on Workers' Compensation benefits and retraining as a crane operator.

"More reliable and a lot more bucks", he said. "Especially with the big Sea-to-Sky-highway project comin' up. I figure that'll be good for at least 5 years. After that, I'd like to cut back to half-time. Maybe then we'll breed horses instead of dogs!"

Just then, the wife came back from the kitchen. "Excuse me, you gave me \$120," the wife said, handing back one twenty...

How smoothly money flows from the foolish to the shrewd! I reflected in nodding thanks.



“I hope you understand,” I said to MH on the drive back, “I can’t afford a big present for you this year. It’s just that it’s MT’s turn.”

“I know dad,” he said.

“That’s really mature of you, honey. You won’t say anything to the girls, OK? You and I can come back and pick up the dog on Christmas Eve. We’ll make it a surprise for MT.”

“Sure.”



I woke at 1:00 AM in a sweat. While \$900 is still owing to ICBC and arterial blood for the legal divorce remains to be drained—I spend \$800 for a dog? Have I taken leave of my senses? Meanwhile, added to the daily struggle to keep a little apartment occupied by 4 from complete squalor is the prospect of house-training a puppy!

Still, there is the hope that MT’s narrative of unhappy Christmases gets a surprise update. At the same time, all 3 kids will need some distraction in the absence of their mom, away in Zimbabwe for the holidays. Maybe all this for \$800 is a bargain! As for the debt—I will just have to consider the lilies-of-the-field...

2003, December

While in a rented low-income 3-bedroom townhouse in Coquitlam:

Making it almost decent:

As promised, I took the kids to IKEA this morning to pick out furnishings for their rooms in the new rental on Inlet Drive. They will now have separate bedrooms, however tiny. While it would be inaccurate to call the townhouse “a dump” (as MT first opined) all 3 are disappointed that I had not found a place where they could be comfortable bringing their friends...They did not buy my tired argument that the money hemorrhaging of divorce had left me no better options. So along with the plea for acceptance of the new digs, I tried to console them with a furnishing splurge...

Unexpectedly, it was TE who was most reluctant. She came along but walked dolefully behind as we ascended the escalator and followed the floor arrows.

“Please honey,” I pleaded. “Just go ahead and pick out some stuff along with MT. You need a bookshelf, a desk and a lamp to start. Be reasonable. We want to make the place look as nice as possible. I need your help.”

Gradually she assented to the coaxing. In the bedroom display area, she tentatively pointed to the wall shelves. I wobbled a few then reluctantly shook my head.

“Sorry, honey. We’re not allowed to screw anything into the walls. That’s in the rental contract. Why not get free-standing bookshelves? They’re just as nice.”

She crossed arms and looked away.

“Please, choose some things,” I said. “I want you to be comfortable in your room.”

“Don’t spoil her,” sniped her older sister, lifting a bright red plastic lamp into her basket.



I clenched teeth when the checkout boy in the blue vest tallied our purchases.

“OK, shock me.” In awkward humour, I held up my VISA card like a shield.

With the new sofa it came to \$2100.

“Jesus Christ!” I muttered.

“Shuhhh!” said MT Checking her phone. “Just think, you’ll never have to buy a sofa again. “This one should do you out!”

I winced in the morbid expression she's obviously adopted from her grandmother in New Brunswick... Still in affected flippancy, I surrendered the card: "This is what happens in a divorce. The woman gets the good furniture, and the guy gets IKEA."

The check-out boy pretended to ignore the smart-ass comment while other polite Canadians in the line-up looked away.

With the arrangement made for delivery of the sofa, I began wheeling the trolley load of plastic junk towards the sliding doors. MT was already waiting in the van with the chihuahua puppy (requested to be removed when his head was noticed poking through MT's jacket). TE still walked a few paces behind.

"So now the place should look decent enough, don't you think?" I asked.

TE frowned.

"I'll help you put your bookshelves and desk together. And I'll get you a new bedspread. We can look for that at Costco, OK?"

Still in freeze-out mode, she got in the back seat.

"Or at the mall, if you prefer." The glimpse of my middle-daughter in the rear-view mirror reminded me momentarily of her mom in younger days, resisting my efforts to cajole.

2004, March

In turning the other cheek:

Barely 5 minutes through the door between changing from work clothes to dishing out supper, I checked the blinking phone message:

“This is Mr. M., the vice principal, I hope you can phone me back today. I need to explain a scenario to you in which MH was involved.”

“What’s wrong?” asked TE, sensing my dread.

“It’s a message from MH’s vice principal.”

“Let me listen,” she asked.

Sucking teeth, I punched the numbers. “It’s always the vice principal who handles discipline, right? If he’s in trouble, I just hope he tells the truth about what happened. My god!”

After listening, TE looked glum. “Don’t shout at him,” she said.

“Shit, your brother in trouble at school is the last thing we need!”



I was helping TE on a history essay at 8:20 PM when MH came through the door.

“How was your game, honey?” I asked, jolting up to dish out his lasagne.

“Look, I got my baseball statistics.”

Before sitting at the table, he showed me a copy of a chart with yellow highlighting. “I’m leading my team in almost everything.”

“This’s really impressive!” Feigning a smile, I looked them over. I waited until he was nearly finished eating before dropping the bomb.

“Your vice principal left a phone message to call him. I’ll going to call back in the morning. Do you have any idea what it’s about?”

For an instant he looked scared.

“Just tell me, honey.”

He swallowed. “O, some kid shot me with a soft air gun.”

“Shot you?”

“With a soft air gun.”

“Did you say: ‘shot you’?”

“Here,” mouth full, he pointed to a tiny red welt on his cheek.

I touched his cheek—shock giving way to the shame of my initial reaction to the phone message.

“That could have hit your eye. What little bastard did this?”

“Just this weird kid. He doesn’t have any friends. He always tries to show off.”

“What to hell was he doing with a gun at school? Jesus, I feel like phoning the cops.”

He shrugged. “It was a *soft* air gun.”

He noticed my hand on his shoulder, trembling. “I told the principal to call you,” he said. “I know mom would freak out.”

“Well, I’m freaking out, too. I just want to make sure we handle this properly.”



After an uneasy night, I sat at my computer after breakfast, watching the minutes digitally click off until 9:05 AM. Taking a deep breath, I called the office of the Maple Creek vice principal.

“O, Mr. T., thanks for calling back,” said one Mr. M.

I recognised his voice from a parent-invited event last Christmas in the Maple Creek auditorium. MH said his vice principal was also a gym teacher. In that same breezy voice, he recounted the “scenario”:

The offending boy has apparently taken the air pistol to school in his backpack. He was firing it in the playground when MH was hit. The boy was temporarily suspended. When I asked for the boy’s name, Mr. M. said that he could not tell me over the phone “for legal reasons.”

“Look, my son could have lost an eye,” I said sharply. “This is a very serious matter.”

“O, this boy’s in trouble—you can be assured of that,” the vice principal said.

“I could press charges against that boy’s parents.”

“Yes, you could, Mr. T.,” soothed Mr. M.

I had intended to come across as ‘firm yet reasonable’ but grew more irritated by the patronizing tone.

“This kid—and his parents—especially the parents—have to know how serious this is. Unless he apologizes directly to my son, I *will* press charges.”

“I know how you feel, Mr. T. But you should know that the boy’s coming into the office with his father later in the morning. We’re going to decide then how long to keep him suspended.”

“I want you to call me back to confirm the apology.”

“Certainly, Mr. T.”

After hanging up, I felt duped. I could have threatened to call the cops. I could even have said I was ready to call BC TV. They would be eager to use such a story for one of their nightly local scandal reports. That’s what many parents would have done. Had the vice principal been scared shitless he would have taken the matter more seriously. What a relief for him that he got a push over!

I sat back at my desk, rattling the mouse pad. Probably young Mr. M.’s greatest relief was that I did not accuse the offender of a racist attack on my son. That’s very likely what T. would have done—and then demanded an investigation... Yet because MH asked me rather than his mom to handle the matter—some trashy little bastard is off the hook. Maybe the little creep will go on to become a white power fanatic...

I winced in the sting of bitterness. I still want to be a voice of reason: cautioning MH not to automatically assume that every injustice he suffers stems from racism... Yet in this case—have I failed him? It is always such a delicate balance!

The Windows home page blurred before my swimming eyes...



When I came home from work at 6:45 PM, MH was in front of the computer.

“The kid apologized,” he said without turning around. “In the principal’s office. His father was there, and he apologized, too.”

“Are you OK with that?” I asked. “We could still take it further.”

“No, it’s OK.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Well, I'm awfully proud of you, honey. You should never take shit— but you should always have the capacity to forgive. That's the mark of the better man.”

In hugging him, I was struck by a little irony. It was not the devoutly Christian parent who was here invoking the virtue of turning the other cheek...

2004, May

fwt

The real MVP:

While MH brought home a trophy for first place in the baseball tournament in Cloverdale—he was still glum. Tainting his team's victory was his feeling that he deserved the tournament's Most Valuable Player award...

As the closing pitcher the semi-final game, he shut down the opponent's surging comeback. Then in the afternoon final, he pitched 6 solid innings. Even in the innings in which he didn't pitch—he was a solid catcher. He blocked several wild pitches that would have resulted in stolen runs.

When the winning team lined up for medals, MH got the strongest spontaneous applause. Yet the MVP award, as usual, went to the kid whose dad helped out most with the coaching...

Back in the living room, I tried to console. "Just forget it. The award hardly ever goes to the most valuable player, anyway. It's really the dad's appreciation award."

Yet the irritated flick of his fingers on the Play Station buttons made it plain that he was still upset. It occurred that had his mother been at the game, she would probably have offered a rather different version of commiseration: '*You see—just to be recognized for your achievements in this society—you have to be twice as good as the white kids!*'

At the same time, I wondered whether MH has made any connections with this disappointment and last month's 'soft air gun' incident... These rude awakenings will be part of the story he carries into adulthood...

"Hey," I patted his shoulder—to hell with them. You *were* the Most Valuable Player today. You know and I know it. That's what's most important!"



2004 June

So far, so good?



The highlight of the overnight camping trip with TE and MH in Golden Ears Park was wading in Gold Creek. Even with the dust from the traffic of picnickers crossing the bridge, the glacial blue water looked no less inviting than it did on the last visit, 12 years ago.

On that hot June day, just a few weeks after MH's birth, we posed on a rock for family photos. Both T. and I took turns taking pictures of one another with our newly expanded brood. The girls crouched on both sides of us while we held the baby on our laps. In one photo, T. tightly held MH and dipped his heels in the icy water. It seemed both a thanksgiving and a baptismal gesture...

Yesterday, the kids and I looked for the same rock. They splashed up and down the creek with Romeo shivering wet, until we found a place to take the photos.

"OK dad, quick." said MH, holding the little dog on lap.

I could not be completely sure he was on the same rock from which the 1992 pictures were taken, but we were certainly within a few meters of it. There also seemed the same play of sunlight on the shallow creek, made infinitely different by 12 years of the Heraclitean flow...

In squeezing the shutter, I was for an instant back squinting into the camera with the infant son on lap—wondering whether I had the strength for the marathon of raising 3 small children... I could not have imagined in that moment of doubt that after 12 years of vicissitude—including working through dual custody—I could mutter to myself: '*so far—so good...*'



2004, August

Lump in throat:

Back weary from work, sniffling against a threatening cold, I wondered whether the blinking light of the telephone heralded more bad news. Yet it was TE in a tone of unusual excitement:

“Hi dad. I’m just phoning to tell you I got my provincial grades back. I got 98% on my history.”

Lump swelling in throat, I phoned back.

“I’m so proud of you, honey. You’ll go to university next fall, for sure! Now you know that you can get anything you want if you work hard for it—anything!”

For an instant I remembered the surprise in my own provincial matriculation grades. After years of failing grades, I had suddenly done well... For the first time, I could question the bred-in-the-bone conviction that only the lucky few born smart or born talented got good grades—and that they succeeded ‘naturally’—almost without effort. For the first time, I had evidence that effort *did* matter. What a vindication that TE has come to this understanding earlier than I had—and without the preceding humiliations...

“So you see honey—all those long nights studying with your cue cards—you see—it all paid off. You ought to phone your nana. She’ll be delighted. Even though she never got a chance to finish high school, did you know her favourite subject was history?”

Indeed, there can be no greater joy than seeing one’s children excel where one fell short... I thought of the proverbial medieval merchant, fearing all his ships have foundered, suddenly seeing his distinctive sail coming into the bay.

My middle daughter could not have known just how close I was to tears...

2005, March



Night fever:

From somewhere above the pit of unconsciousness came MT's cry. Her silhouette was in the bedroom doorway.

"I have a terrible sore throat!"

I rolled over to the clock radio. It was 3:00 AM.

"It really hurts," she sobbed, "I don't know what to take."

I turned on the bedside lamp and rose to check her forehead. "You have a fever too," I said. "How long have you been sick?"

"I woke up dizzy and went to the bathroom. I vomited but I still feel horrible!"

"You weren't drinking in the evening?"

"No no, no. Please—if you just have anything for this sore throat!"

"Just go back to bed, honey. I'll be right there."

In the clearness of digging through the medicine cabinet, I remembered the night I came back late from my German friend's place at Sandringham Mission to find the baby MT, just a year old, sweating in her crib.

T. was in Harare taking her final semester in the teacher's college. We had hired a local girl as a babysitter during those weeks. She was not much older than sixteen. That night, the girl was supposed to watch over MT until I got back but she had fallen asleep in the spare room.

MT had kicked off all her blankets and was clammy with sweat... As she whimpered, I patted her with a damp washcloth. I feared she had malaria. We were more than an hour's drive over farm roads the nearest clinic, and I had no driver's license...

I crouched by her crib holding the cloth to her forehead until finally the whimpering softened, and she began to breath more evenly in sleep... For some time after that, I stared at her tiny face, trembling in relief. I vowed that never, ever—would I leave her alone again...



By the light of open door, I brought some Tylenol and Cepacol lozenges and back to MT's bed...

"If you feel worse, I can take you to Eagle Ridge emergency."

"Thanks, dad" the 20-year-old croaked, taking 2 tablets with the proffered glass of water.

2005, July

Of the unfixable:



TE has had her new Seanix laptop, (a combination birthday and high school graduation present) for only 2 weeks. Yet in coming in from the afternoon commute, I was surprised to find her working glumly at my desktop computer.

“Why aren’t you using your laptop?” I asked.

“It’s not working,” she said.

“What in hell do you mean ‘not working’? It’s brand new.”

“It’s not booting up.”

“Are you sure?”

Try it yourself,” she nodded towards the kitchen table.

Jesus, Christ,” I muttered swooping it up.

Sur enough, the system seemed stuck in a loop. The labouring hard drive spat up strings of commands that scrolled down the monitor yet failed to summon forth the Windows start-up screen.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t have a virus. Did you try to open anything on the CR-Rom drive?” I asked growing more irritated with each failed attempt.

“No,” she said, “MH was the last one to use it.”

“Do you have back-ups for your course files?”

“No,” she tsked.



MH was lying face down on his bed, bracing for what was coming...

“TE’s laptop isn’t booting up. She said you were using it. What happened?”

He pursed his lips.

“Com’on, tell the truth.”

He lowered his head.

“Com’on.”

He broke under my withering stare. “I was just trying to get a game program to run,” he faltered. “I just tried to do it through ‘Task Manager’.”

“Well, it looks like you really screwed it up.”

“Sorry, dad.” He looked up pleadingly.

“You better apologize to TE. You’d better hope to hell that we don’t have to reinstall Windows and wipe out all her files. I got that laptop for her to work on her university courses—not for you to play your goddam games.”

“Sorry.”

“Jesus Christ,” I roared, “this isn’t the first time you’ve crashed a computer! If you weren’t wasting your time on those games—maybe you could learn how to use Windows properly. A lot of kids your age know how to program computers. You seem to know a lot more about fucking one up!”

“You’re saying I’m stupid.” Suddenly he burst into tears.

My wrath was sucked away by the rush of shame... Had today’s commute been faster—or my morning class less awkward—would it I be raging at my son?

I crouched beside the bed and touched his shoulder. “I’m sorry, honey. I had no right to lose my temper. We can fix the laptop if we have to. It’s a lot harder to fix someone’s feeling when they’re hurt.”

Even with his head in pillow and hands behind neck, I sensed he was listening. In almost a whisper I continued:

“You know, I had a terrible relationship with my father. The worst thing I can imagine is something terrible coming between you and me... You know MH, I don’t just love you as a parent—but I respect you as a human being. I hope we can always stay close.”

His sobbing began to ease.



Later in the evening we took the laptop to his friend, Gordon, who lives just a block away from his mom's place on Tory Ave. In just 10 minutes Gordon's brother, a computer whiz, resurrected the lost start-up files through 'System Restore'. TE's precious course files were saved.

For both MH and I—it was one more lucky reprieve.

2005, September

Remembering Mount Beautiful:

MT was taking a shower after returning from her camping trip with her girlfriends. MH was in the living room where he promised to read the Jack London short story, 'To build a Fire', instead of spending the evening on MSN Messenger. On heading up early to my cot, I saw that TE, who had unexpectedly arrived a few hours earlier from her mom 's place, was still sitting on her bed, brooding...

"What's the matter?" I asked from the doorway.

She turned, revealing a blotch on her cheek.

"What's that?"

"Sunburn."

"Don't scratch it and make it worse. Can I get you anything for it?"

"No. Leave me alone."

I sighed. "Com'on, honey. Don't you think it's been long enough?"

"I'm not talking to you," she said.

I stood silently for a few minutes, thinking of how the freeze-out began:

It was more than a month ago when she called to tell that she'd just received the final grades on her first-year university transcript. My first question was about her Economics class. I had known from the beginning of the semester that she was finding it difficult.

"I failed it," she said. "But I passed everything else. I got 'A' minuses in English 101 and Canadian History."

"You failed your Economics? Why didn't you just withdraw when you had the chance? Now you're stuck," I seethed, "stuck with a failing grade on your transcript."

"Don't you care at all that I did well in everything else?"

"Of course, I do. That's great. But why didn't you take my advice and—"

Not only did she hang up on me, but she stayed at her mom's place for the next 3 weeks. She did not even come over in the last week of June when I broke my collarbone while hiking on Burke Mountain. Still, I knew that her umbrage was not only due to my reaction to her grades.

The fact is that up until early spring, she routinely spent more time with me than did either of her 2 siblings. She regularly asked for advice on her assignments. We went hiking together as well to concerts and films. I had even raised the possibility of moving to an apartment on Burnaby Mountain from which she could walk to her classes at SFU.

Then in March, I started dating C... MT and MH were quick to accept—even to embrace—the idea that their divorced father was entering a serious new relationship. TE is still chilly to the new reality...



“Just tell me if there’s anything I can get you anything from the drugstore. If you think it’s necessary, I can make a doctor’s appointment for you.”

She remained silent with head in profile, like a portrait. In sudden awe of her beauty, I thought of the photos taken last summer on the summit of Eagle Ridge. We had hiked for hours up the steep Swan Falls trail above Buntzen Lake before beholding the breathtaking vista from Mount Beautiful...

I stepped into her room, leaned over and gently kissed her cheek. She slightly winced but did not flinch away...

At the same time, I remembered C.’s reassurance: *“I understand how she’s feeling,”* she said. *“Just give her time—she’ll come around!”*

2006, July

At Birch Bay:

After 2 months of recovery from the broken collar bone, I am finally able to return to work. In celebration of the recovered mobility, I took TE and MH on an overnight camping trip to the Washington state park in Birch Bay, just south of the border.

Despite the (inevitable) forgotten camping items, we were lucky to find a site on the bluff with a view of the ocean through the trees. Even with the first hint of fall, there was a wistful beauty in the coppery sun. After pitching the tent, we went for a late afternoon walk along the high-tide shoreline.

At one point an old man on the beach jumped up to pitch stones at the floating log which MH was trying to hit... Back at the campsite, the competitive American spirit was even plainer in the '*mine is bigger than yours*' array of 'loaded' 5th wheelers, trailers and Winnebagos. The silver-haired captains and their first mates of these grand road ships (many masted with satellite dishes) only emerged at dusk. Tilted back in comfy chairs, the couples often turned towards the same sounds but never appeared to talk. At sunset, most of these minimalist Raymond Carver characters retreated inside their crafts, probably to watch TV.

However conspicuous among them with our *paisan* tent, TE, MH and I had a most enjoyable evening. We had a supper of Costco potato salad and hotdogs roasted on the propane burner purchased in the morning from Canadian Tire. After dark, the kids toasted marshmallows around the campfire. Both relaxed, they bantered and even offered confidences never heard back in the living room:

“MT’s more like mom,” said her younger brother, “and TE’s most like you.”

“Is that so, TE?” I asked.

My middle daughter gave her cryptic smile.

“Is it?”

“Yes,” she said, twirling her marshmallow stick.



2006, August

Toothache:

Near midnight last evening, I woke to a sobbing. Jumping up, without turning on the light, I opened my door. At the top of the stairs was TE, her face puffy.

“I have a terrible tooth ache!” she cried.

Only upon repeated urging did she reveal that 2 of her teeth—one a molar—have been aching for weeks.

“How could you possibly have let this go so far? Why didn’t you tell me? The longer you go without treating a decayed tooth the more damage is done. My god, you don’t want a gap in your mouth!”

Hand to jaw, she sobbed in that ugly image as much as in the pain ...

I went back to my cubicle and dug in the nightstand drawer.

“Here,” I came back with Aspirin, “Just bite down on 1 or 2 of these. I’ll help with the pain. I’ll phone Dr. Chen tomorrow and tell him it’s an emergency.”

Turning for her doorway with hand to jaw, she whimpered. As often in TE’s distress, I thought of the day-old infant blindfolded in gauze—wailing under an ultraviolet light...



Fortunately, the dentist took TE early this afternoon. In a long procedure, he did both a root canal and a wisdom tooth extraction. Since I was still at work, she asked her mom to pick her up afterwards.

When I called after work, she was still groggy. With her mouth too sore to chew, she asked that I bring her a tub of strawberry ice cream. Within a half hour, I drove over and parked at the top of Tory Ave. a half-block from her mother’s place.

TE came out of the house in pink bathrobe one hand on her jaw.

“How are you doing, honey?”

“The freezing is just coming out,” she mumbled, “I can’t talk.”

In handing her the bag, I saw the bloodstain on her sleeve. My heart panged in our parting hug.



2007, May

Handmade gifts:

Touched by the Father's Day cards:

TE, in her teasing mode, made her card with a hand-drawn picture of a toothy rat, my 'favourite' animal. Inside was a message: *'father' is a name for 'love'*. Meanwhile, she vacuumed, did laundry and washed the dishes.

MH's card, done on the school computer, had images of a palm tree and an American flag—his little leg-pull... Under the palm tree was printed: *'I hope you and I can sail together to this island one day. We could hike and explore.'*

As for MT, her handmade Father's Day gifts from earlier years will remain precious keepsakes. There is heart-shared rock she found on the seashore and painted with a heart—a forever good luck charm. Then there is the scrapbook she made one year with captioned family photos (*'Introducing the best father in the world!'*)

This year, her call from her mom's place was no less touching than the cards of her siblings: *"I don't think I have to write down how much you mean to me..."*

What greater appreciation could one possibly desire?



2007, June

Bad neighbourhood:

“Dad, look at this skinhead guy.”

I was just in the door from work when MH, at the desktop computer, showed me an odd Face Book page. It showed a wild-eyed fellow with backward baseball cap clutching a bottle with arm around a girl who could have been 10 years his junior. The girl was the feral pubescent who lived next door.

“That’s the boyfriend of that trashy 14-year-old who’s always leaving butts outside the door. Dad, how can you live here? There are just has too many weird people around.”

“Right,” chimed in TE from her sofa where she lay with her laptop on knees. “And that guy in the house on the corner who dumps the glass from his truck into the dumpster. He’s really weird, too.”

“And that girl’s trashy mother having different men every night,” said MH.

“Are you forgetting the trashy family a few doors down where the teenage girl has 2 babies?” TE added.

“OK, you’ve made your point,” I said, “But we can’t afford to move right away. We won’t be here any longer than a year. If you guys can just be a little patient.”

They looked at one another— both rolling eyes.

“And don’t worry, it will be a nicer neighbourhood where you won’t be embarrassed inviting your friends.”

In silence, both refocused on their screens... It was still too early to confirm that C. and I were looking for a place together. Yet when can I reassure them that wherever we move will certainly continue to be their home?

“Just don’t worry— things will work out.” With a sigh, I turned for the stairs.



2007, July

Moving out:

“It is up to you. Stay where you feel most comfortable.”

After missing MH’s all-you-can-eat birthday meal at the Japanese restaurant, MT came belatedly over to Inlet Drive at 9:00 PM for a slice of birthday cheesecake. Afterwards, she spent a half-hour chatting with her younger brother behind the closed door of her vacated bedroom which he is now occupying.

She came back down the stairs, carrying her Marilyn Monroe wall poster and her ‘*MT’s room*’ door plaque.

“Where’d you put my other stuff?” she said.

“Don’t worry,” I said turning from the computer monitor. “It’s all in the storage room up there.”

I resisted the temptation to complain about having to sort through hoarded junk: cosmetics and trinkets mixed with receipts, greetings cards and old textbooks. Having seen an unpaid VISA bill, I was also tempted to ask whether she had paid off the debt that I would otherwise be on the hook for—having co-signed her credit card application...



Yet also amid the junk was a laminated photo of her mother and I thought long lost. It was taken at T.’s family farm in Zimbabwe in November 1984, on the day of our engagement. So it seems that my eldest daughter now regards herself as custodian of family history...

“There’s no need to move any of those boxes now,” I said “but when we move, I’d appreciate you taking them over to your mother’s basement. She has a lot more storage room then we’re likely to have in our new place.”

“Whatever.”

In sadness, I avoided the usual badgering—for which I always feel remorse. As she rolled up her poster, I thought of a comment she made a few months ago in the midst of one of our squabbles:

‘If I’m gone—who’s going to clean up for you and MH? Who’s going to take care of you when you’re old?’

“OK, I got to get ready for work,” she said.

As MT turned towards the door, I caught the sadness in her eyes. While there were obvious practical advantages for her to move back full time to her mom's house, up until her rebellious mid-teens she was a daddy's girl. Neither us can ever forget that...



2007, May

fwt

Of Christmases past:

“You looked so young then!”

In looking through the album of Christmas photos that I had placed on the coffee table, MT stopped at a photo from Christmas 1995, taken in our coop townhouse in Forest Grove, Burnaby.

We were posed in front of the Christmas tree. TE, with a face painting on her cheek was squeezed on my right side. MT with a beatific smile is hugging against my left side. I am kneeling with arm stretched over her to the back of the 3½ year old MH hugging against his big sister... Typically, the camera had caught me in a serious look. Still, my face did look remarkably unlined for a man of 44...

The photo was, of course, taken by T. The camera we used at the time had a self-timer—but our habit was to take one another’s photos with the kids. Sadly, there are few photos with the 5 of us together...

“You guys look so happy,” I said. MT nodded then blinked away what could have been a tear...

How strange to remember that at a time when I already thought myself old—at least in believing that my best opportunities had already been squandered—my eldest daughter had yet to be conceived...

Now, here she is touched by nostalgia for a ‘distant past’...

2007, December



Of critical testing:

After the Monday afternoon drive back through near gridlock, without changing work clothes I immediately set about preparing the evening meal. TE was in the living room and I assumed that MH was up in his bedroom. Yet as I was leaning over the stove, the call came from MH. He asked to be picked up at the school and driven to the friend's house to work on a joint homework assignment:

“So, you won’t be back for supper again?” I growled, “I was just putting your plate on the table. I am getting goddam tired of preparing food that you don’t show up to eat. Why didn’t you tell me in advance?”

“You don’t have to shout at me,” I’m tired of you treating me so mean.” I winced in his obvious reference to my yelling at him yesterday for not making recovery disks for his new computer.

“You don’t care about me,” he lashed, “All you care about is Romeo and TE and C... Well, I’m not coming there tonight. Don’t expect me tomorrow night, either. Or the night after that. I’m staying at mom’s.”

“Com’on,” I said. “Why would I treat a dog better than my own son? Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

That’s so not true!”

“OK, I’m sorry for shouting. But you should have called me earlier. You should have—”

He had already hung up.

I held the phone, thinking what I should have said: *‘I didn’t mean to shout—it’s just that I had a long day and a shitty drive home. I’m not keen to jump back in the car—but sure, I’ll be there in 10 minutes...’*

But it was too late—the damage was done.

Turning off the stove, I shouted to TE, “Can you wait 20 minutes or so? I’ll be right back.”

Within 2 minutes, I was driving to Pine Tree secondary. Just as I pulled up to the entrance, MH was getting into his mother’s car.

Watching T. drive away, I was stung with regret. No question: I have been rough with him lately; unleashing on him my own frustrations from work. In growing anguish, I wondered: is he struggling at school? Has he taken to weekend partying? Is this a *déjà vu*?

Silently, I drove home.



Soon after a glum meal of Shepherd's pie, MT called from the mall. She was shopping for a birthday present for her brother.

"Do you know his size?" she asked. "I want to get him a pair of jeans."

I told her about the episode just transpired.

"Well, he has been acting a little weird lately. Last night mom went, like: '*do you happen to know about anything that's troubling MH in his life?*'"

"And what did you say?"

"Nothing. He's just a typical 16-year-old."

"I just don't know."

I stared out the glass door into the gloomy patch of back yard. Does 'typical' even come remotely close in describing MH? He has so much promise—and so much vulnerability... Perhaps a moment of the most critical testing of our relationship is upon us...

2008, May

Poignant glimpses of Reality TV:

After setting up the new VCR/DVD player (only \$58 from Liquidation World) TE and I watched the video which Hund W., my old colleague from Zimbabwe days, made during his visit with us in Burnaby 17 years ago. After returning to Germany, the Hund sent us a VHS tape with nearly an hour of footage taken over his 10-day visit. He pointed the camera at us at home as well as on the day trips to Hell's Canyon, Horseshoe Bay and Lighthouse Park.

I found the images of myself at 37, quite unnerving. My banter was idiotic and my movements jerky. I had terrible posture—especially seen from the right side at which the Hund (AKA “Lizardman”) seemed to be consciously aiming. Given his sadistic tendencies, it was no surprise that his lens lingered on such details as my empty sleeve swinging as I walked. Some scenes brought to mind a reality TV show documenting the ‘normal’ activities of a family of freaks...

Yet the sequences with MT, 5½, and TE, 3 ½, are adorable. In one scene they squealed with delight in being galloped on my shoulders around the living room and dropped on the sofa.

In one scene from the interior of the car, T. and I were bitterly arguing about directions. It struck me as a miracle that we managed to muddle our way through 10 more years of marriage.

It also occurred that despite my awkward ‘performance’, the Hund’s production remains the earliest video recording of our now ruptured family. That alone makes it as precious as the black and white photos in a family album of an earlier era...

While I reflected on the video in such manner, the 21-year-old TE was completely absorbed in it. At the end, she was softly in tears.



2008, June

While renting a 3-bedroom townhouse in new housing development in Port Moody:

Emerging character:

“Well, it wasn’t wrong to support your friend. You just have to be more careful.”

It was tough balance to strike. On the long drive back from the Sunday soccer match in Chilliwack, I wanted to convey to MH that taking a moral stand has to be balanced against the dangers of rash action....

45 minutes earlier, he had been thrown out from the game in the 3rd quarter. From the sidelines, all I could make out was a scuffle and shoving match in the midst of which was MH. He shoved a boy in the Chilliwack team and then argued with the referee who came between them.

“Well at least, I wasn’t red carded,” he stared straight ahead. “That’d be a 5-game suspension.”

He had explained that he was jumping to the defense of his team-mate and friend, a son of Persian immigrants, who was slurred by a red-haired boy of the opposing team.

MH admitted that as he had shoved the offender and called him “a fucking racist” which the referee overheard.

“Wasn’t Silas able to defend himself?” I asked. “He’s taller than you.”

“Well, I just hate to hear people talk like that,” he said staring straight through the windshield. “To me or to my teammates.”

“Do the other guys kind of look to you as a leader?” I probed.

“I don’t know. Maybe kind of.”

“Well, when you feel you have to get involved on someone’s else’s behalf—just watch your temper,” I said. You’re just lucky the referee was fair-minded.”

While I feigned a measure of censure, I was grateful that he had found comradeship in sports teams rather than in street gangs. More intensely, I was proud that at only 16 he was emerging as a plucky defender of justice...



Meanwhile, I have been considering his request to prepare him a list of 10 novels to read in the coming year... He asked after I mentioned that at his age, I was reading about a book a week.

Of course, his motivation is rather more practical than was mine at his age (I couldn't have given a damn about SAT preparation). Still, I am tempted to recommend a few of the classics that moved me in my 17th year... Given that he will likely read '*Brave New World*' and '*1984*' at school, I am tempted to include a few of the 'Ur' texts of the '60s: like '*Steppenwolf*' or '*Siddhartha*'... Also, as touchstones in his unique quest for identity, I could recommend '*Invisible Man*' and '*Autobiography of Malcolm X*'—texts which I did not come across until my early 20s.

Given the recent culling before our latest move—I may have to return to the Sally Ann to buy back some of my own books...



2008, October

fwt

A moment by the campfire:

From her first trip to Canada with me at the age of 2— my eldest daughter has been several times, my solo travel companion...

It was no doubt in the tenderness of such memories (preserved in several photos) that MT proposed last week that we go together on a camping trip to Oregon. She may well— just as I— have hoped to restore our recently flagging rapport.

As it transpired, we didn't talk much through the long road trip down I5— but at least we avoided bickering— even when I accidentally exited in the freeway spaghetti of south Seattle.

We reached Nehalem Bay in northern Oregon in late afternoon and pitched our tent behind a dune. The weather was ideal for camping: sunny with a moderate temperature. We took an early evening walk along the breezy beach and came back in the growing dusk to dine on Kentucky fried chicken at the picnic table. A little later, in the glow of a few beers and the coziness of the campfire, we began to talk more freely. MT spoke of her memories of visits to her grandparents' lakeside cottage in New Brunswick. We then reminisced about the cross-country family road trip in 1995. That sadly, she chiefly remembers for the parental blow-ups...

I asked her about her job. I wondered whether she felt she has a future with ICBC where for nearly a year now she has been working as an auto claims adjustor.

“Well, I’m learning a lot every day,” she said. “I don’t do the value estimations— but I get the figures from the estimators. I think I am good at negotiating with customers... So far, my manager has given me great feedback.”

“Has there been anything that has been, um, tougher to deal with?”

“Well,” she said, “looking at the write-offs is scary. Especially when there’re fatalities. Some of them give me nightmares.”

She went on describe a wreck involving 4 young Chinese men who left the Langley Casino in the middle of the night, zigzagging along the freeway towards Vancouver at 180 kph... Their black Mercedes slammed into the rear of a stationary dump truck... Only one passenger survived— critically injured. The other 3— none of whom were wearing seatbelts—were killed instantly. Their limbs were torn off. 2 of them were decapitated.

MT shuddered. “The estimators warned me not to go out into the lot. It was obviously a total loss— there was no need to confirm it... But I was curious.”

She hesitated. “It didn’t even look like a car. Only the back seat was intact. There were flies buzzing all around it. The coroner has to examine the wreckage before they washed it down. The worst thing was the stink. It was far more putrid than rotting meat.”

For an instant I thought of the grisly war story once heard at the knee of MT’s grandfather, animated by rum: ‘*Nothin’ in the world stinks like the smell of a dead human bein’!*’”



MT shuddered and took a sip of beer.

The moment in which I was clutching the 2-year-old while running full tilt through Heathrow airport to barely make the Air Canada flight seemed but a heartbeat away. Now that little girl (who later loved fairy tales) has to work with such grisly details.

“That must have been tough, honey,” I said softly to the resilient young woman my eldest has become.

2010, August

fwt

Of the Costco birthday cake:

The highlight of TE's 23rd birthday for which a few of her friends had gathered in the living room to partake of an ice cream cake and a couple of bottles of fizzy wine, was the video of TE's eighth birthday.

The scene that brought laughter was at the kitchen table on the evening before the birthday party. Her mom and I were pretending that TE was unlikely get the ice-cream cake with the Lion King decoration that she wanted.

“What’s wrong with a birthday cake from Costco?” T. asked. “It’s nice enough!”

“I don’t want a Costco cake!” the 8-year-old sobbed.

“Com’on— you’re just spoiled,” said T. “When I was a little girl, I could only *dream* of getting a cake as nice as one from Costco.”

“I told you— I don’t want a Costco cake!” TE wailed.

When T. took the camera and turned it on me, I continued to tease:

“Look, at it this way, honey. If you get a Costco cake tomorrow— you will always have something to blame whenever you feel miserable.”

TE buried her face in the sofa cushion, still sobbing.

I winked at the camera. “The Costco cake will give you a life-long excuse. Whatever troubles you might have— you can always blame your mean parents who traumatized you on your 8th birthday by substituting the Lion King ice-cream cake you expected with a Costco cake decorated with a clown!”

The video blacked out then flickered back on in the midst of the birthday party on the following day:

Several little girls in paper birthday hats, are sitting at the dining room table in anticipation of the cake. TE’s big sister begins the chorus of ‘*Happy Birthday*’, along with which I am heard droning from behind the camera. T. then steps into the frame bearing the cake shimmering with 8 candles. It is of course, an ice cream cake from Dairy Queen decorated with Simba, the Lion King. When the cake is placed in front of her, the 8-year-old TE looks a little sheepish...

The 23-year-old TE looked from the screen looked at her friends, all smiling.

For an instant, TE also caught my eye. In her look was something of amusement and of gratitude. Perhaps her unspoken message could be roughly translated as: ‘*I am lucky to have such parents.*’

I then reflected on how lucky many kids are today to have such video chronicles of their lives. No previous generation has been so privileged! Viewing one's past self in such detail is almost like seeing from beyond the grave...



2010 September

fwt

A photo on the cusp of turning 60:

Perhaps the highlight of the summer will be this morning's hike up the Diez Vistas trail with TE:

Through the 90-minute slog up from the north side of Buntzen Lake along the Halvor Lunden Trail (rising sun dazzling through the mossy cedars) I had taken several pictures of TE—and even a couple of selfies with her. There was almost an unspoken mutual understanding that these images might be viewed—perhaps even by her children yet to be born—long after my absence.

When we finally reached the rocky ledge opening to the first vista of Mount Seymour and Indian Arm stretching far below, TE was holding the camera.

At the moment when she took the photo of me leaning on my hiking pole gazing down, I was reflecting that in just a month, I would turn 60.

That awareness came not with anxiety or gloom—but with gratitude. Even if the body was like an old car on the 3rd time round the speedometer—the engine was still purring. My knees will not likely hold up as long as the old Swede who maintained this trail into 80s (and who was rightly honoured in its naming), but the 60-year-old legs and leathery lungs are still able. Even if this was to be the last trip up Diez Vistas—I reckoned that I'd had a damn good run...

For a soaring moment, I was deeply grateful that despite many humiliations, I could count a few little victories. I had had a few glimpses of beauty as ethereally haunting as any human could have witnessed.

So, when that photo was taken by my second daughter and oft hiking companion amid late summer light bronzed with the first hints of autumn—I was saluting the mysterious forces by which I have been so immeasurably blessed...



2011, August
