

## Beautiful as a Palm tree

*Recalling a miracle while awaiting a delivery:*

### Part One:



On September 28<sup>th</sup> 2017, just as C. and I were about to leave Bosley's pet store with Pancho's ten kilo bag of kibbles, the phone call from TE—several days anticipated—finally came. She was nine months pregnant. Seen in several ultrasound images and already named, my daughter's expected baby girl would be my first grandchild.

TE, in her calm manner, reported that her contractions had begun and she was already in the prenatal ward at Royal Columbian. She knew that both her mom and I wanted to be at the hospital when she gave birth. She said it would likely be several hours before she would be in the delivery room. She said she would call again in the afternoon.

Her afternoon call was from home. Her doctor had told her to come back to the hospital when her contractions got stronger. She assured she would call again when the delivery was nearer.

At 7:00 PM, I was watching a TCM *film noir* when her next call came. TE was back at the hospital where her doctor said she would remain until the baby came.

I arrived at the Royal Columbian maternity ward just after 8:00 PM. My ex-wife, T., was already there in one of the chairs in the corridor. We exchanged pleasantries. Together we went into TE's private room. My son-in-law was faithfully standing by and TE, although dopey, was smiling from the bed. After taking a photo and a Flip video of the scene, I returned to the corridor. T. followed a couple of minutes afterwards.

Over the next three and half hours, my ex-wife and I sat in the corridor two chairs apart. Each of us took respective breaks—for the washroom and for refreshments from the vending machine in the closed cafeteria. Most of that time, T. texted on her iPhone or leaned back with closed eyes. I scrolled through files on my laptop.

It was strange sitting at length beside my ex-wife and mother of our three children. Although we were sometimes brought together by family events—we have spoken little in the seventeen years since our divorce. We have both remarried. Our children still bend over backwards to treat us equally...

Several times during that long wait, I was tempted to reminisce with her. I wondered what she remembered about her pregnancy with our beautiful TE, who was herself about to give birth...

Thirty years ago, we were in Zimbabwe, both employed as teachers. My wife's employment as a primary schoolteacher was directly with the Zimbabwe Ministry of Education. Mine as a secondary teacher was also with the ministry but under the sponsorship of a Canadian NGO.

Our school compound was about 60 kilometers southwest of Harare and 200 kms. north of the farm where my wife grew up. Our rented cinder-block house, clustered among others of fellow teachers, was furnished with running water and electricity. We had decent salaries, an old car and a TV—luxuries in that place and time. Our first daughter, MT had been born eighteen months earlier...

With my laptop screen slightly turned aside, I reread diary entries of 1987 digitized a few years ago.



In January of that year, my wife had been plagued by headaches and abdominal pain. Through the health plan of my Canadian NGO, we got an appointment with one of the most reputable gynecologists in Harare, a Dr. Glieman. He suspected ovarian cysts and scheduled an exploratory operation. I wrote these notes after her operation in early March 1987:

"How's MT?"

In coming out of her anesthesia in her private room in the Avenues Clinic, my wife's first concern was for our daughter.

"She's fine. Calista's staying over tonight," I said, referring to our domestic helper who usually only worked part-time. "She'll be with her while I'm teaching."

"Give her a big hug for me."

Leaning over the bedside to catch her whisper, I had to be careful not to disturb the IV tube.

"Sorry for shouting at you", I patted her hand. "When I lose my temper I say stupid things I always regret afterwards."

Even if she hadn't drifted back to sleep, she probably wouldn't have guessed I was referring to her father's demand for unpaid *lobola* [bride price]. That is supposedly the source of all our bad luck...

T. was not released from the hospital for a few more days. On the first evening after her operation, I called the clinic from my German friend, Hund's place. I was surprised that a nurse was able to take the phone to T.'s bedside:

T.'s wane voice wavered over the lightning-damaged telephone line.

"He thinks I might be pregnant."

I was stunned. "Pregnant? Why didn't we think of that?"

"It didn't feel like it. I wasn't vomiting. It was just the terrible pain."

"Well, Glieman's supposed to be a specialist. He should have thought of that before cutting you open. That's bloody negligence!"

Alarm rising, I immediately phoned her doctor's number. The secretary answered and connected me directly with Glieman.

"O., Mr. T., he breezed. "How are you?"

I was in no mood for the preliminaries. "Are sure my wife is pregnant?"

"Well, that appears to be the case. There were no uterine cysts but when we saw the fetus, we stitched up immediately."

"After opening her womb like that," I faltered, "can her pregnancy be normal?"

" That was no harm to the fetus from the incision," he soothed. "We're still doing a scan on Friday to make sure there are no abnormal growths we might have missed."

*Ass covering bastard!* I barely held my tongue.

On the evening after coming back from seeing T. at the Avenues Clinic, I called the office of WUSC, my sponsoring NGO. The following morning, I made these notes:

There was poor T., curled on the rumpled bedspread, tears welling in her eyes.

"Oh God," she moaned, holding her belly. "This is just like labour pains."

Gingerly, I touched the stitches across her abdomen. How will she bear the stretching of a barely-healed gash? Yet even as the stitches heal, her belly must swell—for at least for six more months. The stretching has only begun.

I did not want to alarm her, but inwardly seethed. The bastard has no excuse. If this was Canada—Glieman would be hit with a malpractice suit...

An hour later I was crouched on Hund's living room floor with the telephone receiver jammed to ear. The chief WUSC field staff officer was away from his desk so I was connected with Jeff, the new assistant FSO I have yet to meet. Trying to be succinct, I gave him an account of T.'s condition and my worries about her pregnancy due to the unnecessary surgery. Only at the end did I use the term 'malpractice'...

"I don't know what to do," I said. "I don't know what the laws are in this country for cases like this. I'm tempted to get legal advice."

I'd first thought the line had gone dead—but that was only his long silence.

"Well, all that is outside the responsibility of WUSC," he finally said. "If you sue, you'll have to bear the legal costs yourself."

I tried to backtrack. "Honestly, I haven't considered anything that drastic. Certainly not yet. I'm just informing you that I am worried that there might be further complications in my wife's pregnancy. I just thought it was appropriate to put WUSC in the picture."

"Oh yes," patronized the scoutmaster's assistant, "it's the right thing to do."

When I hung up, I was sweating from more than the sweltering heat.

The following day, I typed up a letter which I sent to the doctor and in carbon-copy to WUSC. A few days later during tea-time, I was called from the staffroom to the school office to receive a phone call. The caller was the chief WUSC Field staff officer in Harare. No reference to him in my journal thereafter is the least charitable:

While I did not expect much sympathy from the FSO, I was taken aback by his barely muted hostility.

"You've got the wrong man," he said. "Dr. Glieman's wife is up in arms. She thinks you're suggesting North American-style litigation."

Then came the sucker-punch. "I suggest you write a letter and apologize."

"Excuse me? Should it not be the other way around?"

'He's one of the best doctors in the city. I understand why you are upset but nothing good will come from attacking Dr. Glieman.'

"I'm not attacking. I'd just like to hear from him why he didn't think my wife might be pregnant before cutting into her uterus."

"Mr. T.," he said coldly, "Dr. Glieman is a professional. He is highly respected. It is not fair for you—"

“Look,” I interrupted, “my wife is in tremendous pain. Her pregnancy could be at risk. If there was any misunderstanding, it was bringing WUSC into this. Sorry. Yes, it’s our problem. We’ll handle it ourselves. Thank you.”

I clunked down the receiver...

Is he defending a lawn-bowling partner? The slimy Canuck with a Mountie’s moustache has been barely a year in the country but is behaving like a typical Rhodesian. His knee jerk response is to close ranks with fellow whites. How would he feel if it was his pregnant wife with a scalpel slash across her navel?

“Fucking Rhoddie bastard!” I muttered. Still, I felt a tremor of guilt. Was the letter crafted as carefully as it could have been? Was the tone appropriate?

At the same time, I thought of why the FSO had been chilly with us from our first encounter. That was in August 1985 at the Harare airport when we arrived from Canada to begin the second contract. Almost immediately, we pulled him into our spat with a customs officer over duty payment over our fancy boom box, bought in transit... Then a year later, our transfer from Kutama to Sandringham landed him extra paperwork. In his books, we are high-management whiners. Should it be surprising that he is not inclined to defend us?

At the same time I realized that in Zimbabwe a *n’anga* [witch doctor] would probably handle a case like this better than any lawyer. There would be some satisfaction in imagining T.’s pain transferred to Glieman’s belly!



My ex-wife’s delicate pregnancy took an alarming turn one morning in her sixth month when she needed emergency attention. The following was penned in June 1987:

T.’s complaint of abdominal pain this morning seemed no different than any heard over the last five months.

“It’s your skin stretching,” I said at the doorway on the way to class. “Don’t worry, you’ll see the doctor on Saturday.”

I would quickly regret that breezy response. Just twenty minutes later, a student came running to the staffroom to tell me that T. was in her headmaster’s office doubled up in pain. I rushed over to the primary school. With her arm over my shoulder, T. limped back home. She lay on the sofa, softly grunting with both hands on her abdomen...

“Is it a little better when you’re lying down?” I asked.

Still wincing, she nodded.

“You can’t teach today. You have to rest.” I glanced my watch. “On Saturday we’ll know better what’s going on.”

Assuming she would soon fall asleep, I walked back up to the classroom block. I was just starting my Form Four lesson when Mrs. Muringiniza, T.’s fellow teacher at the primary school, appeared at the classroom door. Her face showed alarm.

“Mrs. T. is in very great pain,” she said. “I think she needs to see a nurse.”

“She’s had stretching pains for months,” I said. “She’s seeing the doctor in Harare the day after tomorrow.”

“I don’t know. I think she should see a nurse this morning,” said Mrs. Muringiniza.

Nodding, I assigned my students some work and walked with my wife’s colleague back across the field to our house. We half-carried T. to the car. Mrs. Muringiniza kindly agreed to drive T. to the Chibero College clinic a kilometer down the road. She said she would immediately let me know as soon as they got back.

At the end of the next period, another student came running to relay Mrs. Muringiniza’s message. The clinic nurse had recommended that T. see her doctor in Harare— as soon as possible.

There immediately came the sting of not having a driver’s licence. Mrs. Muringiniza only had her learner’s permit and was too nervous to drive in the city. Who could I beg for help?

In raising panic, I made my plea in the staffroom and at several classroom doors. Every teacher I approached gave a stone-faced response. With exams so near they couldn’t afford to cancel classes.

Finally, I approached my German colleague, Comrade Hund.

He initially scoffed. “Are you sure it’s not hypochondria again?”

I told him that the alarm had come from the Chibero nurse.

He nodded. “OK, old bugger. Give me ten minutes to assign homework. You tell Jumo.”

It took longer than ten minutes of pleading the principal to get his permission.

Mrs. Muringiniza agreed to accompany T. in the back seat while Hund drove. Since I would only be taking up space, I stayed behind. As soon as they were off to Harare, I returned to class, somewhat relieved.

Around 1:00 PM, the car rolled back into our driveway. Comrade Hund gave his customary salute and pointed back towards Mrs. Muringiniza before striding away towards the school. Mrs. Muringiniza walked up to the open door with a grave expression:

"We rushed Mrs. T. into the clinic. We got there just in time. The baby was threatening to miscarry. "

"Omigod." I bit back tears. Running over to Hund's house, I phoned the Avenues clinic. The call was transferred into T.'s room.

"My love, how are you?"

"Not good," she croaked. "They gave me a drug to stop the baby from coming out. I don't know. It still feels like labour pains."

"Please don't worry. You have the best care available. Dr. Robertson is great—he delivered MT. Everything will be all right now."

"I told you it was serious," she rasped. "You never believe me."

"I'm sorry," I sniffled. "I'll phone again tonight."

At 7:00 PM, I was back at Hund's place. After several breathless tries, I finally got through to the Avenues Clinic. "May I please speak with Mrs. T.?" I asked her ward nurse.

"She's been transferred to the labour ward," she said.

"Labour ward? I gasped. "It's three months early!"

My heart pounded in the wait for the call transfer. The nurse who answered was grave but succinct. T. had come very close to a miscarriage, she said, but in the last couple of hours, Dr. Robertson had managed to stabilize her condition. She was not yet out of danger.

"She's still awake," the nurse said, "I'll see if I can put you through."

Moments later, the dopey voice of T. came over the crackling line.

"It's not my fault," she moaned.

"Of course not, honey," I said. "You've done everything right these last six months. Just try to relax." My voice was cracking. "Try to sleep. I'll call in the morning."

I trudged back across the compound in an African night that never seemed so dark. What chance would a baby have in this country with only six months of gestation? How could poor T. cope with losing a child?

Turning on the light in little MT's room, I smoothed the blanket tangled around her legs. I leaned over the crib and gently kissed her cheek. My 21-month-old sighed in her sleep. Is she to be an only child?

A sob caught in my throat. For the first time, the pregnancy was not just a swelling womb that caused T. pain. It was a boy or girl—a child that I desperately wanted to survive...

After a fitful night, I called the Avenue's Clinic from the school office.

“How is Mrs. T?” I clenched for a heartbreak.

“She's out of labour back on the general ward. She was awake most of the night but she's sleeping now.

The reprieve was utterly unexpected. Even for a non-believer, it seemed a miracle...



That pregnancy was never easy, but after that crisis in June, T. seemed to do better. Upon release from the hospital and a few days of rest, she was able to return to the classroom. She began to look forward to the delivery. She knitted and picked out baby clothes. Until July, she was unsure about whether to choose little outfits in pink or in blue.

The following entry was logged in my journal following her ultrasound appointment that same month:

T. lay on the examining table as Dr. Robertson pulled the wand over her swollen belly. A pale greenish image pulsed up on the tiny ultrasound screen.

“This is the head,” said the drawn-faced doctor, “Let me freeze the frame.” He consulted his chart. “You're about 32½ weeks along according to the estimate. It's usually very accurate. That puts the due date at about September 7th.”

“Does it look normal?” I faltered.

“He pressed the sensor again over T.'s lower belly, glistening with oil.

“Hummmmm. That's an arm, you see?”

“OK.”

“That's the other one.... And that's a leg. Do you want to know the sex?”

"What do you think, T.?"

She lifted her chin slightly in Shona assent.

"Can you tell for certain?" I asked.

"Not 100%," said the doctor, "but we can be *almost* sure. Hummmmm." Again, he froze the ghostly image. "No scrotum here that I can see. Looks to me like you have a little '*musikana*'—a girl."

"But you don't otherwise see any abnormalities?" I asked anxiously. "After T. had that operation in February, we've been worried."

"No, it all looks fine to me."

"That's the main thing we are concerned about. The sex doesn't matter—as long as she's healthy." I smiled toward T. Her eyes were closed.

Ten minutes later, we were in the elevator descending to street level.

"Another little girl. All girls—just like your mother had!"

In the lameness of my joke, I gave her a peck on the cheek. Her eyes were wet. She'd hoped for a boy.



By August 1987, T. felt confident that pregnancy would come to full term. With her younger sister coming to stay with her, I took a two-week trip to Canada. The trip was ostensibly to scout out opportunities for our move the following year. The ulterior motive was to show off MT—still a month from her second birthday—but already talking. Our itinerary of stays in Ottawa, New Brunswick and Vancouver, would have us back home a week before T.'s due date.

While in B.C. near the end of the visit, I phoned T., who had arranged to take the call at Hund's place. With the time difference, she got my late-night call in mid-morning. She told me that due to his busy schedule, Dr. Robertson planned to induce her labour on August 31<sup>st</sup>. That was the day before our scheduled arrival. She said that she had tearfully pleaded with him to postpone it for a few days. His decision was pending...

In the anxiety of not knowing whether I would be present at the baby's birth, we set off on the trip back to Harare via Vancouver, Montreal, London and Addis Abbas. The following was written after our return:

In the first leg of our flight schedule from hell, we arrived in Heathrow at 6:30 AM local time. We had to wait until 8:00 PM for the Air Ethiopia flight to Addis Ababa via Cairo. By late afternoon, I was could barely keep my eyes open. Still, just to save \$50 on a day room, I subjected little MT to fourteen hours in her stroller. Luckily, the baby food and disposable diapers were packed in the carry-on luggage. I relied on a few granola bars and drinks from the fountain. I was too fatigued to worry about our luggage that failed to make our connection from Montreal to London. Meanwhile, anxiety was mounting in the growing possibility of missing the arrival of the new baby.

The flight to Harare from Addis Ababa was five hours delayed. After landing in the Ethiopian airport at 9:00 AM local time, I wheeled my 2-year-old, half asleep, about the cavernous lounge. I pushed her stroller from the filthy ablution block to the Ethiopian *Objets d'art* shop displaying ugly and ridiculously priced carvings...

In killing time over the following hours, I engaged in some bored banter with fellow prisoners. Among them was a wide-eyed British lad off to Zimbabwe on his first assignment after teacher's college. It was hard not to come across as the cynical old expat. Another brief chat was with one Comrade Mutasa, a ruling-party member of the Zimbabwe Senate ("This is such an awkward way to get home," he sniffed). Also stranded was the Zimbabwean badminton team, fresh from a tour of Moscow. They clumped into the lounge toting their ghetto blasters—obviously purchased in a duty-free shop in transit through capitalist territory.

Finally, at 1:30 PM, the Air Zimbabwe flight boarded. Almost weepy with relief, I sunk back with my amazingly tough little daughter asleep in my lap. Yet my eyes were also misting for the little girl whose birth I assumed by then to have missed...

Three hours later we landed in Harare airport. In coming down the ramp with MT in arm—there was a joyful surprise. Standing beside Comrade Hund on the observation deck and furiously waving was T. herself—still big-bellied.

"Good timing," grunted the loyal chauffeuring Comrade Hund on the drive back to our school compound.

Dr. Robertson had agreed to wait until tomorrow for the induction. T. was delighted that just as with the arrival of MT, I would be in the delivery room...



At about 11:00 PM, my son-in-law, CC, opened the door of the delivery room. He was wearing the blue-paper operating room smock.

“The nurse says, it won’t be long now,” he said with a nervous smile. He looked at his watch. “The baby might even come before midnight.”

My ex-wife half rose from her chair. “How is TE doing?”

She’s doing OK,” said CC. “She hardly feels anything below the waist after that—what do you call it?”

The epidural,” said T. who has the same procedure thirty years ago.

“As soon as it’s OK for you guys to come in—I’ll call you right away.” He nodded at me. “You can take some pictures.”

“We won’t go far,” I said.

When the delivery room door shut behind CC, my ex-wife let out a sigh.

“She’ll be fine,” I said.

“I hope so,” my ex-wife whispered.

After a meditative moment, I reopened my lap-top... This time, I looked at the journal entry made on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1987—the day after TE’s birth:

We were up at 4:45 AM after just a few hours of fitful sleep. Again, in the spirit of loyal friendship, Comrade Hund drove us back to Harare for T.’s induction at Avenues Clinic set for 7:00 AM. We left MT in the care of her *Ambuya*. T.’s mother had already been staying at our place a week before MT and I arrived.

By 7:15 AM, T. was in the labour ward and hooked up to the oxytocin drip. Her contractions began slowly and intermittently.

When the nurse informed labour could take several hours, I left her bedside and joined Comrade Hund in a café on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue for a light breakfast. I then checked in at the WUSC office and spoke briefly with Mariam, the friendly Zimbabwean office manager. I was pleased to hear that a new FSO was arriving in replacement of the Mountie-mustached dick. At 9:00 AM, I returned to Avenues Clinic to pace the delivery room.

T. was in a good mood but too drugged for much talking. In any case, with barely four hours sleep after the grueling two-and-a-half day journey, I struggled to stay awake.

At 10:00 AM, her contractions were still far apart. I listened to the ticking of the IV tube and watched the digital fetal heartbeat on a monitor screen. The technology had improved in two years since MT’s birth.

Around 1:00 PM, Dr. Robertson arrived on his second round of attending to several coordinated deliveries. He announced that the time was ripe. Turning off the beeper on his hip, he scrubbed up, donned his OR suit and with the assistance of a nurse, made ready. Over the next twenty minutes, the nurse coached T.'s feeble pushes while I helplessly held her hand. At length, a suction device was applied. The bedraggled babe was thereby dragged into the world.

As the ultrasound had predicted—we had a new little girl. The top of her little head was molded to the shape of the suction and the poor little creature's face was swollen... Yet unlike her older sister, within seconds of her birth, she gave a cry. When her dark eyes first opened, there burst forth a flood of affection for the girl we had already decided to call TE.

According to our baby-name booklet, her given name means '*beautiful as a palm tree*' in ancient Semitic. Her middle name will be similar to that of her paternal grandmother...

As soon as the nurse swaddled the little bundle, she put her in T.'s arms. I pulled out my camera and motioned to the nurse. Gently holding the blanketed babe, I crouched close to T.

"Welcome to the world, little girl." I whispered. "We are so happy to have you staying with us for a while." As the nurse snapped a picture, T. beamed.



"You can come in now..."

At about 11:45 PM, my son-in-law reemerged in the corridor. He said the baby had been born twenty minutes earlier and the nurse had said we could see her. My ex-wife and I followed the new dad into the delivery room.

TE was cradling her infant to her breast. My son-in-law was leaning over the bed, grinning. A tremendous relief it was knowing that both the babe and her beautiful mom were healthy. In the late-night fuzziness, I took photos and several minutes of Flip video. Both my ex-wife and I had a chance to hold the little girl whose name, Mya, we already knew even before seeing her first ultrasound image. In my turn to hold her, I whispered the same words as I had to her mom thirty years before: "*Welcome to the world little girl!*"



As we stood together at the back of the hospital room, my ex-wife asked if I wouldn't mind driving her home. Her husband would be glad to come, she said, but she was reluctant to get him out of bed. Of course, I would have obliged even if she and her husband didn't live just a few kilometers from my wife and I...

We were both too tired to feel nervous in the thirty-minute drive from the hospital to her place in Pitt Meadows. Still, we scarcely spoke. In the silence, a memory welled up of TE when she was little...

She could not have been much older than three that day I took her on a short walk along the woodsy path behind our coop townhouse on Burnaby Mountain. We had stopped over a culvert to toss a few pebbles into the creek below.

It must have been the same time she was seeing a speech therapist because I was trying various ways to nudge her to talk. I cannot remember the words that came before, but while we were looking into the stream, I asked her if she was going to get married when she grew up.

She did not speak, but she nodded. In further nudging, I asked her if she wanted to be a mommy herself someday.

“Yes,” she said with a little smile.

I was surprised because she so often (perhaps teasingly) answered every polar interrogative with a firm ‘no.’ At the same time, there was something in her dark eyes that gave me a tingle of poignant hope. In that moment, I sensed that if I were to live to see a grandchild—that second generation would probably be through her...

“Will you let me visit your kids?” I remember then asking.

“Yes,” she said staring into the rushing water, “yes!”

I was tempted to mention this recollection to T. Yet for the remaining minutes of the drive, the new ‘*Ambuya*’ [grandmother] and I both remained lost in our private thoughts...

\*\*\*\*\*

## Part Two:



My granddaughter, Mya, born in September 2017, was joined by a little brother in February 2020. Another brother, Mic, arrived in February 2022. I partly disguise the given names of my grandkids here but all three of their names really do begin with the letter ‘M’. The closeness of their mom to her sister, MT, and younger brother, MH, probably added to the appeal of the bilabial nasal sound...

Over the last six years, my wife, C., and I have seen a lot of our little grandkids. Living only a fifteen-minute drive away, along with regular visits we sometimes have them for sleepovers. We have minded them once a week since their mom returned from maternity leave to part-time teaching. Whether in *ad hoc* baby-sitting or school pickups— we are glad to be available... Of the greater joys of spending time with them are the many reminders of their mom and her siblings at their ages three decades ago...



It was last year, when I was driving 5-year-old granddaughter, Mya, back from her pre-school that she told a tale taller than herself. After I mentioned that how much her mom and aunt had liked ‘*The Lion King*’ when they were little, she leaned forward in her car seat and began with her usual gambit: “Papa, can I tell you something?”

She went on to tell me that that she had recently visited Africa with her *Ambuya*. She knows that her mother’s mom [my ex-wife] is from an exotic place called Zimbabwe....

“O really?” So, what did you see there?” I asked.

She said she had seen “lots and lots of animals.” Among them? “Gorillas with pink eyes,” she said.

I was not surprised that pink-eyed gorillas could live freely among fairies, elves and unicorns in Mya's imagination. While her chattiness is more reminiscent of her aunt, MT (whom she resembles) than that of her mom, her imagination does harken to that of her mom as a little girl.

In 1997, I made the following note of a dialogue before a bedtime story when her mom was ten:

Before my dark story, TE, across the pillow, told her 4-year-old brother how he came to be...

"You started out in limbo-land where all the babies float around before they're born. Some get to come into the world and some don't. It depends on the wheel you get to spin."

"The wheel?" asked her 12-year-old sister on the other side of the bed.

"All babies in limbo-land spin that wheel," said the 10-year-old authoritatively. If it lands on a 'yes', you then get to cross over the line where you look into a crystal ball."

"Like the crystal ball in 'Snow White?'" asked MT.

"Yeah," said TE excitedly. "So, when MH looked into that ball a voice asked him: *"How would you like to live in a family where your mother is T. and your father is F.? How would you like to have two sisters?"* If MH had said 'no', he'd have got another spin..." Under the sheets, she gave her 4-year-old brother a little kick. "Don't you remember that?"

MH did not react.

"After that," she continued, "he went down this long tube with light at the end." She gave MH another little kick. "So that's why you came to this family!"

"No!" Said MH, who sometimes enjoyed being teased by his sisters... At least in this story his name hadn't been changed from "Matthew Blackstock", a waif found under a bridge... That is the story his sisters tell their little brother when they want to hear him howl...



Listening from the door Mya's playroom, I have heard her talking to her stuffed animals just as her mom did a quarter century ago. TE once wrote about this in a composition titled '*Something I used to believe in when I was little*'. I took note of it in a journal entry in 2002:

TE was a little shy in asking me to edit her English class composition. When I set to it with a green ink pen, she sat awkwardly beside me at the kitchen table. I tried not to be the grammar cop which once brought a writing workshop student to tears.

"*I thought that my stuffed animals would dance and sing to music all night long,*" I read aloud.

“I remember peeking behind your door and hearing you talk to your stuffed animals,” I smiled.

She nodded.

“Well, that a great opening line for your paragraph. I would just change ‘*I thought*’ to ‘*I used to think*...’”

She slightly grimaced.

I continued pointing out minor errors of agreement and pronoun reference. In glancing round to catch her eyes rolling, I knew it was time to stop. “Those are just suggestions, honey. You can take them or leave them. But in general, I’m impressed. Really.”

Wincing, she plucked up her paper.

I remembered that few weeks ago, she came to me for a hand in cleaning up after an overflowed toilet. That request probably left her feeling less vulnerable than did the ‘help’ with her writing... In such regard, is my skin any thicker?



Just like her mom was at her age, my granddaughter seems sensitive to the feelings of non-human creatures... She loves not only dogs and cats but even showed concern about stepping on ants or disturbing a spider’s web...

Last year on a Facetime call, she spoke of the unfairness of animals separated in cages at the zoo, where she had just visited.

I was reminded her mom’s distress in witnessing a strange phenomenon affecting seagulls in a park in Dubai in March 1999. TE was then eleven:

We could only guess what felled scores of seagulls in Safa Park... Minutes before they flopped down twitching in the grass, they were wheeling among hundreds of other gulls in the bright blue air. It could have been the extreme heat, collisions with other screeching gulls or attacks by dive-bombing crows.

Across from TE and I, an Emirati family sat picnicking on a blanket. They ignored the dying birds while munching from a barrel of Kentucky fried chicken.

We were sitting under one of the few shade trees. I had claimed the spot earlier in the morning to set up one of the check-in stations for the college ‘Paper Rally’ in which I was on duty as ‘assistant station marshal’. In Dubai’s grotesquely hyped-up fashion, the event involved young Emirati men racing their SUVs around the city in a glorified scavenger hunt...

Also ignoring the birds falling around us was a Filipino helper from the college who began handing out box lunches. When given her lunch, TE set it down uneaten on the grass.

Although slightly nauseous amidst the dying birds in the blazing sun, I forced myself to eat half a MacDonald's cheeseburger. Meanwhile, TE got an armload of bottles of water stacked for the students passing through. She began walking around our area pouring from the bottles. For upwards of a half hour, she dribbled water on the feathers of every bird showing signs of life...

"They're going to die, honey," I said when she finally came back into the shade. "I don't think they're anything we can do to save them."

"I don't want them to suffer," she said.

"Com'on, take a few bites," I nodded towards the box, "It's a long time before supper."

She shook her head.

As hour later, the last SUVs had moved past our station and the 'passports' of their student commandeers had been stamped... The college helpers had taken down the portable marquee. The south Asian park attendants in red uniforms were picking up the garbage. Amid the furnace heat they stuffed water-bottles, Styrofoam containers and candy wrappers into giant green bags...

Last to go in the bags were the dead birds. Only one, spared by having fallen within the shade, still twitched. The poor creature had been kept alive by TE's water.

"Time to go, honey," I said.

As I took her hand she looked back, sniffling where no Abrahamic deity saw the 'sparrow' fall... No surprise that this was the same girl who at age of four, lifted worms off the hot sidewalk into the cool grass...



Also like her mom when she was little, Mya can be stubborn. In certain moods (noted during her sleepovers) she can be fiercely resistant to shutting off the TV or even in coming to the dinner table... In her 'terrible two' stage, she sometimes stamped like Rumpelstiltskin... (Fortunately, she has now outgrown tantrums). Still noted in more than one shaking of mane and biting of lip, she reminds me of another little girl in certain moods—about thirty years ago...

The following incident occurred in December 1991, when TE was only four:

"TE," I leaned forward from the sofa, "are you going to listen the next time mummy is teaching you the alphabet?"

Face stubbornly set, 4 -year-old TE remained silent.

"I don't think I'll send her to school next year," grumbled T. wrapped in her comforter on the other side of the sofa, "she's not ready!"

Sprawled on the carpet beneath the coffee table, TE glowered.

"TE," I affected sternness, "You have to be ready for kindergarten. You have to know your ABCs. You need to pay attention when mummy is helping you."

"No!" She dropped her head and crawled under the table.

Only then did it occur that the letters on the paper she had been scribbled on under my desk in the morning were printed by her mother. No wonder she had looked a little guilty when I hugged her and proclaimed: *"Wow, those letters are so clear. Good job, honey!"*

Sitting on the rug holding her story book, MT turned round: "TE doesn't want to learn the ABCs,' said her older sister. She doesn't even want to learn to talk. All she says is 'no'!"

From the other side of the sofa, hands on her growing belly, T. tsked. "Mind your own business, young lady!"

Now, TE," I ducked to meet her eyes, "Your sister has a point. If you say 'no' to everything, you're going to miss a lot of good things coming your way. Please, honey- you've got to start saying 'yes'."

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

A teen rebel in the making? I wondered. Surely, it is too early to worry about that...



Middle child, Moe, looks more like his dad than his mom. Born just before the pandemic lockdown, like most many Covid babes, those first weeks of isolation might have affected his social development, in a manner yet unknown. Yet in motor-development he surpassed his siblings—walking at only ten months.

However, when just over a year old when he fell from a playground merry-go-round and injured his mouth. The painful healing may have hindered his speech development... Yet in his meeting

(or exceeding) all other milestones of development, there is every hope that he will catch up in language— just as his mom did from her late start.

Three decades ago, the quietness of that little girl (who would become a teacher) greatly worried her mother and I.

I noted our concerns numerous times in my journals... The following excerpt from May '91, when TE was four, is typical of how worry was dispelled by delightful reassurance:

On the walk with TE on the path behind the coop, I was almost delirious with the fecund green of late spring. "Do you remember, honey," I squeezed her hand, "Do you remember the sunny winter day we walked here?"

"Yup," said my 4-year-old, returning the squeeze.

"Do you remember the little worm we saw wiggling on top of the snow?" The ghostly reminder of winter's bleakness was brief.

"Yup," repeated my daughter skipping forward on the muddy path.

"Do you remember how we helped it?" I stopped to touch a green salmonberry, barely a week from ripening.

"I remember—" said TE tugging forward. "We saved it."

"Exactly!" I squatted down to speak to her at eye level. "That's exactly what happened, sweetie. What a wonderful memory you have!"

"Where is she now, daddy?"

*How clearly she was speaking!* In that instant, anxiety whisked away in the glorious spring air...

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

"Look, daddy!" She pointed towards the underbrush. There were three birds, hopping away through the underbrush.

I stood up. "O, yes— those are robins. They're looking for food. Do you know robins?"

No." She ducked her chin.

"They're birds honey, birds. And what do you think they eat?"

"I don't know,"

Her mumble sent my hopes teetering...

"Just guess, honey. Just guess!"

"Worms!" she shouted back, "--and pugs!"

"Pugs?" I squeezed her hand breathless on the edge of a breakthrough. "Just say that again, honey."

She carefully formed her lips. ""Pugs. Worms and pugs." She turned, assuming I was disappointed. I dropped back to knees and scooped her up.

" Yes, bugs," I emphasised the voiced 'b'. "You got it honey. You were close enough. I'm so proud of you!"

I touched my forehead to her tiny heart. As her arm tightened round my neck, I recalled how she had walked after me, stretching her legs to my boot prints on that sunny winter day, five months ago... That was just a few minutes before we saved the worm—which indeed—might have gone on to nourish a robin...



Like her mom did more than three decades ago, Moe has begun seeing a speech therapist... In one of her home visits, my wife and I (who were babysitting) overheard the therapist's attempt to elicit his speech by reeling in plastic fish... The young woman did not seem to realize that Moe's sullen silence was due to his feeling patronized with props more suitable to a younger child...

C. intervened by bringing out Moe's box of magnetic tiles. An infant Buckminster Fuller with a Meccano set could hardly have been more creative than Moe is with his tiles. Using them, the therapist was at least able to coax forth Moe's nods and head shakes....

While eavesdropping, I recalled my own entreaties with his mom, thirty-three years ago. I made note of one of our practice sessions in a journal entry of November 1990:

*"Patty was a tidy girl, Betty was a messy girl. Patty was a tidy girl; Betty was a messy girl..."*

On the bed with TE's tiny hand over my larynx, I croaked the cutesy chants prescribed by the speech therapist. The chants were designed to help her with differentiating voiced and unvoiced consonants.

As much as I appreciate the exercises—I was still uneasy... Is the *cause* of TE's speaking problem being properly addressed? What of her larynx and her inner ears? Should she not have had a more thorough physical exam?

I slid out another of the coloured flash cards. "Say it, honey: '*Patty and Betty were two little twins, Patty and Betty were mermaids with fins...*'"

I continued clasping her hand to my throat. While she listened intently (one hand around my neck) she remained silent.

But why should I despair? I thought of how at bedtime a few nights ago, she had surprised me.

"What do you want for Christmas, honey?" I had asked.

The shifting of the little body at my back indicated that she had understood the question.

"Tell me, sweetie," I had urged.

There was another rustle in the blankets.

"A sweetie kitten," she whispered.

"I think one of Santa's elves heard that, honey," I whispered back.

She is shy, yes—but how many 3-year-olds are so sensitive? And so beautiful. In her teens, she will surely blossom to one of those girls in whose presence I felt tongue-tied...

"Tell me the story of King Lear,"

Just then, MT in her pajamas jumped onto the bed.

My eldest has been curious about the mysterious 'Shakespeare' since I brought home the collected works folio that was a gift from a class of departing students...

"OK, honey. But TE, you can listen, too."

I turned off the light. With TE still tight in my arm and MT squeezed beside, I began the story:

"Once upon a time, there was an old king who had three grown up daughters. He knew he was getting too old to rule his kingdom, so he called his three daughters together. He wanted to tell them his plans for them after he was gone... He started by asking each of them how much she loved him..."

I was getting to the foolish old Lear's banishing of the youngest daughter, the beautiful Cordelia, when the sound of breathing began to soften. My two little girls were falling asleep.

Gently, I pulled TE's arm from around my neck and tucked it under the cover. '*Patty and Betty were two little twins,*' I murmured to my two sleeping Cordelias: '*"Patty and Betty were mermaids with fins..."*'



Also, like his mom as a little girl, Moe expresses feelings in his deep dark eyes—so clearly that there scarcely seems need for vocalization...

The first time he visited us alone, his forlorn expression over dinner were clearer than any cries of: "I want mommy!" His mom was similarly sensitive—and sometimes easily hurt—as noted in a journal entry around Christmas, 1993:

The girls were bouncing on the sofa, singing along with the tape of kids' Christmas Music. From across the coffee table, I joined them in '*Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*'.

The next song on the tape was "*Deck the Halls*.' When MT and I were bellowing 'tis the season to be jolly', TE was still crowing, 'Rudolph with your nose so bright...'

"Shush, TE," I carelessly blurted with a frown, "you're way behind!" I could have bitten my tongue.

The 5½-year-old, embarrassed, ran to her room. The door slammed.

After a few minutes, I went up and asked her to re-join the songfest. Curled fetal on her bunk facing the wall, she did not respond. I went back to the sofa where MT, joined by T. was singing '*Frosty the Snowman*.' Even 18-month-old MT was toddling along to the music.

"Just leave her," said T. "She'll come down when she's finished sulking."

A few songs later, I tried again. This time I knelt at the foot of the bunk, and gently stroked her shoulder. "I'm sorry, honey," I said. "I didn't mean to be gruff. You have such a sweet voice. I just wanted you to be in tune with us."

She sniffled.

Yet again I realized how just how delicate is the flower vouchsafed to our nurture...



For all his sensitivity and the scrapes he has sustained, Moe is not deterred from climbing and tumbling. He did not even cry for long after the bash on the merry-go-round that damaged his

emerging front teeth. In comforting him once during that recovery, I thought of a time I held his mom, bleeding from a pulled tooth. I described that moment in a note from June 1995:

"Just wiggle it- O.K?" said my 7½-year-old with a whimper.

]

Touched that TE had come to me for the loose baby tooth—I was determined to be gentle.

When I touched the loose incisor, she jerked back. "You said it wouldn't hurt," she clasped her mouth.

"Look honey, I can't promise you won't feel anything. I can only promise to do it quickly. It'll be over you know it." I shook her finger. "Pinky promise!"

"O.K." She wiggled back.

I swivelled sideways in my computer chair and gently pinched the tooth between thumb and forefinger—then yanked.

Accompanied by a shriek, the tooth twinged out. TE's slender shoulders quaked in choking sobs. She covered her mouth.

"There, there, honey." I patted her back. "That was brave."

As always in her tears, the heart swelled in an image of the new-born with bandaged eyes in a bassinette under an ultraviolet light...

Gently rocking her, I wiped the bloody spittle from her chin. "So, where'd that old tooth go?"

She pointed to the carpet. Then with a whimper, she touched the gap at the side of in her mouth. "I'll look funny," she cried.

I recalled looking down at the swollen faced babe whimpering under the purplish light. "*Don't worry little girl,*" I murmured. "*You will be beautiful and you will be happy...*"



Of all three of her children, little Mic bears closest physical remembrance to his mom...

At only eighteen months, his personality, is of course, only in emergence—but every indication is that he will be more like his dad—charming and out-going. Few toddlers make warm eye contact with such ease...

A few weeks ago, I enjoyed an outing with Mic and his siblings at Crescent beach... With shovels and plastic buckets, all three kids walked far out onto the tidal flats. At one point little Mic squealed and pointed to the sky where sea gulls wheeled in the stiff breeze... That tableau harkened to an afternoon with his mom at the seashore thirty-four years ago:

Little TE's back was shivering as I held her in the tepid shallows two hundred metres from the shore of Locarno Beach. Holding her tight to my chest, I bobbed in the water and soothed:

"Don't be scared, TE. Don't be scared of water."

"Mommy, mommy," she sobbed, jerking her tiny forearm toward the beach where her mother lay on a towel.

"Look at MT. Look, MT isn't scared," I whispered, nodding towards her older sister crouching in the shallows with her pink bucket.

"Mommy, mommy!" Little TE kept flailing her arms as if summoning some magnetic force by which she would be lifted through the blue air and dropped gently in her mother's arms.

I tried a different strategy: "Look at the birds, TE. Look at the white ones!"

Directly above us, two seagulls banked and hovered in the steady wind. Seeing them, she crooked her arm and slowly waved her fingers. Suddenly, she was squealing with delight.

For at least a minute, the instinctive need of maternal protection was overwhelmed by the pull of curiosity. I held her tightly in the thought that by such tugging forces, her trajectory will soon be set...



A few weeks ago, I was pushing Mic on the backyard swing while he was intently watching my face... It seemed he was trying to gauge whether he could trust in my pushes... Meanwhile, I was trying to judge whether he was more like his mom or more like his uncle, MH, used to be on a swing. Did he prefer soft pushes—or did he want to keep going higher?

I thought of how I used to speculate, a generation ago, about the emerging personalities of my kids while watching them on the playground. One such speculation about TE I noted in a journal entry of August 1990:

At the top of the playground slide, the eyes of 3-year-old TE were wide with anxiety...

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

Three times before, she had climbed up and hesitated before edging back down the ladder.

"I know you can do it, TE. I know you can."

Barely restraining the urge to gently push her down the slide, I stepped away. She looked backwards to see whether any kids were impatiently waiting. Meanwhile, my patience was fraying. *'How will she cope with the rough-and-tumble? Will she always be chary of taking risk? Will she be stymied by timidity?'*

Suddenly TE launched forward. With eyes shut tight—she leaped into the unknown.

"Good girl, TE you did it," I yelled. "I knew you could!"

For the prior doubt, my little sweetie gave me a chastising look...

Another such moment that was recorded in a journal entry of April 1990:

"Is the moon following us daddy?" asked MT pointing twelve o'clock high in the twilight.

"No, we're following her," I said. A few minutes later, both MT and her little sister were swinging high into the darkening sky. The waxing gibbous moon brightened directly overhead.

"Catch it, TE!" I urged as I pushed her from behind. "Catch the moon between your knees."

Grinning joyfully on the upswing, my 3-year-old framed the moon between her tiny fingers... Who needs a camera for such a cherished snapshot?



Of all her expressions as a child, nothing could compare with that of TE's look of wonderment...

I have seen flashes of that look in all three of her children—especially on the recent June morning, on a farm field in Langley where we picked strawberries together—putting more in mouths than in our buckets...

Still, I have yet to behold in any of their faces such enchantment as that seen in their mom's one afternoon in January 1989. It was her first winter in Canada and she was just sixteen months old:

I twisted round from my desk to the squeal of little TE pointing out the sliding door towards the darkening sky over the apartment balcony. It was beginning to snow...

Stepping through the scattered toys, I lifted her in the crook of arm and slid open the balcony door. In the blast of cold air, I stepped barefooted out onto the balcony deck.

Shivering in her pajamas, my little girl looked up in delight at the snowflakes wafting through the dark sky. Transfixed, she watched them drifting to the playground two floors below.

“Snow, honey. It’s snow.”

I held her up to the balcony rail, deeply moved that winter’s dreariness could seem magical in a baby’s eyes. I then thought of our daughter’s naming: ‘*beautiful as a palm tree.*’ That was partly in my hope to be reminded of the dazzling colours of Africa back in the land of dull green conifers...

“Aren’t they beautiful, honey?” I whispered.

I held up my darling high enough for her to catch a feathery flake in her mouth...

There is no greater pleasure in this eighth decade than witnessing the juxtaposition of such memories with recent moments with my grandchildren... Even in acknowledging that I have already had more than my share of fulfillment—I cannot help wishing for more...

—2017, September; 2023, July

\*\*\*\*\*



fwt

