

Sweeter than honey

Of deep tenderness and two sharp tongues



Although my eldest daughter, MT, moved back east several years ago, she has managed to make about three visits home every year. No matter what time her flight arrives—no matter how inclement the weather—I am glad to be relied upon to pick her up.

In the drive to the Vancouver airport a few nights ago, I arrived at the cellphone waiting parking area at 1:15 AM, assuming the wait would be no longer than fifteen minutes. Due a long delay at the baggage carousel, it was nearly 2:45 AM before I got MT's text-message to meet her at the curbside of the arrivals' gate.

Blurily, I followed the signage through a construction zone that took me to the lower level of arrivals. MT was nowhere in sight. Unable to stop, I had to make the long loop back around the airport. Back in the arrival zone I pulled over and called her. She said she was waiting at the upper level...

"You went to the wrong level. Ubers are picking everyone up right here."

"But this is not an Uber," I said, in growing annoyance. "I'm not going around the airport again. You have to come down."

"Whatever." She hung up.

A few minutes later, she emerged through the sliding doors pulling her luggage. I opened the rear hatch of the SUV and got out to load her heavy rolling suitcase.

"Why did you go to the wrong place?" she said.

"I did not come to the wrong place," I yelled. "I followed the goddam signs."

"I don't need to be shouted at. Let's just go." Without our usual hug, she got into the passenger's seat.

"I did not come to the wrong place," I repeated before setting off eastward. "I followed the signs both times around."

“I had a horrible flight,” she said, belting in. “I haven’t slept for twenty-four hours. Don’t make it worse.”

“Well, if you would have been at the lower level we would have been out of here fifteen minutes ago.”

“You don’t have to be all bent out of shape,” she snapped.

“You don’t have to use that goddam snippy tone,” I snapped back.

In that moment, I realized that we were caught in an old downward spiral—trapped in the hopeless clash to get in the last word. But even in the middle of the night blariness, the escalation was jarring. Before we back on Southwest Marine Drive, fur was flying.

“You can never admit you made a mistake,” she said.

“I did *not* go to the wrong entrance—I shouted. “*You* were waiting at the wrong entrance.”

“Will you stop freaking out?” she cried. “I don’t need this.”

“What I don’t need is your snark at three o’clock in the morning.”

“I didn’t come her to be shouted at. You should apologize.”

“Apologize for what? You’re the stubborn one.”

She reached for the door handle. “I don’t have to put up with this shit. Drop me right here!”

“Get a grip, goddamnit. It’s the middle of the fucking night.”

“Stop swearing at me!” she yelled. I do *not* need this stress, Not after that horrible flight.” She began sobbing. “I have a nice home. I finally have peace in my life. I do not have to come back here to this craziness!”

For the remaining thirty minutes, we drove in silence.

At 3:30 AM we pulled into the driveway. The plan had been for MT to stay with C. and I for a couple of days before going to her sister TE’s commodious house for the rest of her visit. Yet when I motioned to carry one of her bags up the stairs, she insisted on leaving all her luggage by the door. Carrying only a toiletries bag, she went up to the spare room. We both muttered brusque goodnights.



'I finally have peace and quiet in my life. I do not have to come back here to this craziness!'

Those bitter words looped inside my pounding temple until dawn... Giving up hope of sleep at 6:00 AM, I sat listless my basement desk. The usual news sites blurred before what felt like sand-papered eyes...

Of course, I have had heated arguments with all three of my fledglings. Even with the even-tempered TE, bad feelings have not always worn off quickly. But only MT and I have gone ballistic...

Yet most of those bitter confrontations were in her mid-adolescence. From her later teens, we clashed only sporadically. Since her move to Toronto in her early thirties, we seem to have grown much closer. We regularly exchange text messages, share links and have thoughtful chats on the phone. Last spring, she and her husband (a former fellow law-school student and friend of my son) generously hosted my wife C. in their downtown Toronto duplex. In August 2021, I was delighted to be at their side in their informal wedding reception.

Yet within seconds of seeing one another for the first time in months— there we were— screaming at one another. It was nightmarish.

At 9:00 AM, there was a stir in the doorway. I opened my workroom door just as C. was taking her shoes from her basement rack. She said MT has asked her for a drive to TE's place... When I came out to the door, MT was bent over one of her bags. She looked very tired.

"Good morning," I said. She stiffly submitted to my half hug. "Are you sure you don't want to eat something before you go?"

"C. said she would stop at Starbucks," she said.

"So, I guess we'll see you again in a day or two?" I asked softly.

"Sure," she said.

Might our middle-of-the-night blow up be dismissed as a bad dream? My heart thudded as they drove off...



There was never any doubt that our family split up in the early 2000s was much harder on MT than on her two younger siblings. She was in her mid-teens—the worst time for a kid to endure parental warfare. Yet from her early childhood until that dark time—no father and daughter could have been more at ease than were she and I in one another's company...

When she was born in September 1985, I was nearly thirty-four. Marriage and fatherhood on the cusp of resignation to bachelorhood was profoundly transformative. My young wife acceded to my choice for the babe's given name. According to our baby names' booklet, it meant: *'sweeter than honey from the bees.'* My wife bestowed her middle name. It translates from her native Shona as: *'We are much pleased'*. That was an understatement for the welcome of a little girl miraculously born of parents who grew up 12,000 kilometers apart.

When my wife brought our infant daughter home from the hospital in Harare, I held her for a long time on my lap, gazing into her dark brown eyes. *'Who will she look like, grown up?'* I wondered. *'What will her personality be like?'* *'What will her voice sound like?'* In pangs of tenderness, I imagined her a young woman both gentle and self-confident...

Yet before she could even sit or crawl—all that emergence seemed achingly far away. By the time she turned sixteen, I would be fifty... How would she relate to a father that old?

In January 1986, Halley's comet made a faint appearance in the austral night sky. Once I woke in the middle of a moonless night and drove out to the end of the school gate. Through binoculars, amid the firmament of the African sky, I sighted what looked like a ghostly flashlight beam. It was the diaphanous tail of Halley's comet. Moved to make a wish—I wished to live to see my baby daughter as a young woman... Whether or not I would be so fortunate, I had no doubt that she would be beautiful...



Like so many kids, mine have hundreds of photos of themselves to someday show their children. Yet if they ever be interested, they will also find hundreds of little sketches of themselves in my diaries. Combing through those now digitized texts is rather like turning the pages of old photo albums... Many of those little sketches attempt to capture poignant moments—at home, in the forest, at the seashore or in the snow. There are

descriptions of partaking of family traditions: telling dark stories after lights out, jiving to Chuck Berry or making secret wishes at our pretend druidic stone circle on Burnaby Mountain...

As eldest child, MT would find not only more baby pictures of herself than of her siblings—but also more references to herself in her father’s journals. Among the very special father-daughter experiences with MT was attending a Bob Dylan concert when she was only eight. Then when she was thirteen, there were the PADI diving lessons we took together in Dubai followed by an open water dive in the Arabian Gulf...

Whether touched, charmed, amused or mildly annoyed— I often made notes of memorable moments. An early one of MT’s speech development is dated October 1987, a few weeks after her baby sister was born:

Coming out of the bath, little MT saw a cockroach that skittered from under the bathtub.

“Don’t touch it, honey.’ I warned.

Before I could wrap her in a towel, she plucked up the bug and licked it.

I slapped it out of her fingers. “Daddy told you not to pick it up. You put a dirty thing in your mouth— a dirty bug. That’s bad!”

It was her first slap from me. She looked startled— but didn’t cry... I was just as startled. It was inexcusable that I should have slapped— however softly. Still, I had to be consistent.

“Bug are dirty,” I repeated. “I don’t want my precious baby to get sick.”

She swooped towards it again as it skittered away.

I said ‘no’, MH.” I said sternly. “Don ‘t touch it. It’s bad!”

Her little face screwed into anger. “No!” She yipped. She stamped her foot and pushed the towel away. “Bad daddy!”

What future battles of will, I wondered. She’ll likely be a stubborn lass— my little darling...



MT was the youngest of all three of my fledglings in acquiring speech. Before turning three, she was a precocious talker in both English and in Shona (which alas, she lost). The following note was taken soon before we left Zimbabwe in August 1988:

The house grows more barren by the day. Books have been already shipped or given away. Most of my papers are in ashes in the backyard garbage pit. With departure only a week away, my once-cluttered workroom is left with a desk lit by a lamp attached to the end of a broomstick.

The echoing emptiness was upsetting to little MT this morning. Upon watching the dismantling of the bookshelf, she shouted in a voice she seemed to mimic that of her mom's in annoyance.

"F.," she called me by my first name. "Look at the big mess you're making! I'm going to cry, and cry and *cry*!"



A few months later, we were in a stuffy apartment in a Vancouver suburb. The anxiety of fruitless job searching in those first months is almost too painful to recall. Even little MT felt something of the 'culture shock.' The following dialogue was noted in December 1988. We were on the carpet, looking at photos of Zimbabwe:

"Do you miss *Ambuya* [grandmother] and auntie Rosie?" I asked MT. She was biting the corner of a photo of her 6-month-old self, sitting in an orange plastic washbasin.

"Do you miss them?" I repeated flipping that photo along with others back into the shoebox.

"I want to go see *Ambuya*," she declared. "I miss her." Her baby sister, playing with her 'duck says quack' squeeze book, squeals as if in assent.

"Aren't you a Canadian, honey?" I said teasingly. "Isn't this the place you want to stay?" At that instant, snow-white Canada seemed more exotic than Africa.

She began imitating my flipping of photos back into the box.

"So are you Canadian or Zimbabwean?" I asked.

"I'm Zimbabwean!" said she.

"What am I then— Canadian or Zimbabwean?"

" Zimbabwean, daddy," she snuggled into my knee. "You and mummy."

I smiled sadly, as we continued to flip into the box, images of a seemingly brighter life, left behind....



MT also took an early interest in reading and writing. My ex-wife, having more time with the kids before she began her own elementary school teaching career, tutored her with flashcards. The following journal excerpt is from November 1989:

"Daddy, how do you write carrots? "

There was 4-year-old MT with her pencil and crayons on the floor, printing words as I read *'the Guardian Weekly'*:

"C-a-r-r-o-t-s."

"How do you write 'Shakespeare'?"

I knew she was thinking of the folio of the collected works, gifted to me by students a few months before. I'd showed it to her several times.

"Shakespeare? you can just copy the word from the cover there," I lifted my chin toward the heavy tome, prominent on the living room bookshelf.

She slid over to the bookshelf and copied. A moment later, she thrust her paper onto my lap.

"Is that right, daddy?"

"Perfect."

"Daddy?"

"Honey," I shuffled the pages. can you just give me a couple of minutes to finish this article I'm reading?"

"But daddy," she persisted, "how do you spell: *I love you*?"

"OK," I put down the newspaper. "OK, let me write down a few things. About things you like? Then you can copy them."

I scribbled down a few words for her to copy then resumed reading the *Guardian* article: *'World evil has its roots in the north-south divide.'*

Lying back on the floor, she kicked her legs up behind her and copied in even greater earnest. Moments later, she thrust another foolscap under my nose.

"Daddy, what's that spell?"

"It's, um, 'Kmart', the name of the department store." I glanced over at the front of the open closet. "Kmart in the store where we had the photo of you and TE taken last week." I continued reading.

She took back her paper and flopped back on her tummy. With knitted brow, she continued printing.

She knows she has the blessing of her mom and I— along with a good supply of books and stationery. Still, couldn't I be doing *more* to abet her thirst for knowledge? I had to feel a little guilty.



In 1989, a 4-year-old MT was attending a Catholic pre-school and getting some exposure to French. Having started with a bilingual (English-Shona) brain, she was ripe for French immersion. Unfortunately, the nearest French-immersion school was a fifteen-minute drive from the coop to which we moved. Sadly, it was more for walking distance convenience than for her best education that we enrolled her in an English-only primary school. Her lost opportunity is glimpsed in this journal entry of December 1989:

We were watching the PBS evening news hour with the girls playing on the living room floor. MT, seemingly bored, climbed up on her mother's lap. For a few moments she played with her mother's fingers— then with mine.

Unexpectedly, she turned her hand over and piped up. "Look, my hand is different from yours, daddy."

My wife then turned over her hand to show the contrast of the three.

"You are brown," said my wife.

"Beautiful brown." I intoned. What about mommy?" I then playfully asked.

"She's *brun*," she said, in her Lady of Fatima French. "She's *brun*, I'm *brun* and TE's *brun*."

"What am I, then?" I said, putting arm over her shoulder.

"He's not white," said T., "look, he's pink!" She reached over with a smile to pinch my cheek.

"Daddy's *brun*, too. We're all *brun*!" MT circled her arm like Tiny Tim blessing us every one...

"I know Santa Claus in French," she said.

"Yeah?" I chuckled.

"*Pere Noel*."

I'm so glad you are learning some French, honey," I said.

Will her innocence, I wondered, outlast her belief in Santa?



From the age of four, MT visited her grandmother in New Brunswick almost every summer. She was always at ease with the paternal side of her family.

Unfortunately, growing up so far from the land of her birth, the connection with her African heritage in her early years, was tenuous. A Zimbabwe family visit was just too expensive. The kids did not see most of their Zimbabwean relatives until their trip there from Dubai in 1998. When her *Ambuya* came to Canada in 2016 for the wedding of TE, MT was thirty-one.

In their first years, apart from a few reprimands in muttered Shona, my ex-wife spoke to our kids in English. Perhaps that habit originated in her upbringing in Rhodesia, where the first language of those of mixed race (identified as 'coloured') was English. Queries MT made to friends and teachers, indicated that she wanted to know more about her African heritage... I was admittedly negligent in not encouraging more exploration...

Whatever the cultural deprivations of Burnaby, British Columbia, our kids grew up somewhat sheltered from harsher racial divisions they might well have experienced elsewhere. Of course, I would be blind to suggest that MT grew up unexposed to racism—however subtly manifested...

I do not know the extent to which my ex-wife talked with our children about her experience of racism—nor how my kids' experiences outside of family shaped their sense of identity. For my part, I hoped our kids would be able to ignore the social pressures of racial identity and be secure in unique selfhood... Understandably, some would claim such hope is rooted in a taken-for-granted 'white privilege'...

In any case, I noted a few revealing moments of my eldest daughter's disquiet with identity. An early one was in August 1995, when she was ten:

"So, what *is* my blood type?"

I was at the kitchen table helping MT fill out the I.D. card in the change purse of the new handbag (an early birthday present) when we were momentarily stuck on that line.

'I'm not sure, honey... Off-hand, I'm not sure what mine is. I think it's 'O'—that's the most common type. Yours is probably the same.'

"Do you know mom's type?" She mumbled. "I suppose mine would be the same as hers."

"Not necessarily," I said, seizing on a presumed teachable moment, "you have an equal chance of getting either of your parents' blood types. It has nothing to do with the colour of your skin."

She looked at her hand, "The brown is melanin, right?"

"Right. The amount you have determines how dark your skin will be. That's inherited—but everyone skin gets some melanin from the sun. People with lighter skin gets tans in summer that fade in winter. When you have naturally darker skin you can't tell the difference so much when the summertime melanin fades."

"Yeah, I know all that." She pulled at the tag on her new bag.

"Yeah? Did you learn that in school?"

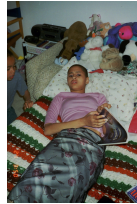
"No, I heard it on T.V. On *'Bill Nye the Science Guy'*."

I held up the back of my tanned hand. "Look—right now my hand has almost as much melanin as yours."

She laughed.

“So, let’s put ‘O’, honey.”

Moving on to ‘Emergency contact number’, I was much relieved that MT— unlike her white father—seems quite at ease in her own skin...



When I review my record of events in MT’s teen years, I despair that her bad memories may outweigh the sweet ones. Of course, there were birthdays, Christmases and family outings, some poignant sequences of which are recorded on home video. As the oldest child, she knew there was once tenderness between her parents which her siblings were too young to remember. The parental tensions that followed must have seemed all the uglier to her.

Domestic tranquillity shrank to poignant interludes then disappeared entirely during our sojourn in Dubai (1997—1999). There, the cracks in the already shaky marriage split wide open...

Back in Canada, our fragile family endured three years living apart under the same roof. As painfully aware as both my ex-wife and I were of the harm of pulling our children into our conflict, sadly, they were not spared. MT— again as the oldest— was most affected. In those years of domestic warfare, she was inclined to take one side or the other— shifting her alliance back and forth before the divorce...

Before the return from Dubai in July 1999, MT was already entangled in the parental tensions. As noted in a diary entry of October 1999:

“Why does everything go wrong for this family?” bemoaned the 14-year-old on our walk back from the corner store. “Why?”

Twenty minutes earlier, MT had been sitting before her congealing plate of microwave lasagna, covering her ears. Her mother was shaking her finger from behind: (*“Even if you don’t give a damn about me,” T. had roared, ‘I deserve the same respect you show your father!’*)

“I’m not going to eat anything she cooks,” said the teenager. “Never again. Either she gets out or I get out.”

“So where would you go?” I asked.

“I’ll go live with Nana.”

“Do you really think you’d be happier in a village where everyone minds everyone else’s business?”

“I couldn’t be more miserable than I am here. This family is so messed up!”

As we walked along in the chill wind, I thought of her recent discovery of ‘*Catcher in the Rye*.’— the inspiration of 16-year-old rebels for nearly three generations. A few days ago, she asked me if had also read it as a teen...

I could not deny that I too, had briefly “identified with” Holden Caulfield— but not until the age of sixteen... She had two more years to go before reaching the same age of that epitome of eternally self-centered— and self-destructive— adolescence...



Despite my reputation for broken promises, I kept at least one promise to MT: letting her pick out a mutt from the SPCA. The timidity of poor Nikki was hardly eased by the insecurities of her adopted family. Meanwhile, my relationship with MT was increasingly strained by her school reports. The following entry was written in November 2000:

All three kids joined in the evening dog walk around Lefarge Lake. I was especially surprised that MT had come along given the scorching she’d received in the afternoon for her abysmal report card results.

TE walked ahead with Nikki on the leash. MH rode his bike slowly beside her. MT and I walked slightly behind. Knowing that I would bring up the report card again— she was ready to defend herself:

“You failed math in high school,” she said. “So why are you being hypocritical?”

My anger had given way to sadness. “OK, even if we forget the ‘F’ in math— what about the ‘Cs’ in English and history? You know you should be getting ‘As’.”

“You don’t know what I’m good at,” she said shrilly. “You’re not inside my head!”

“Yeah, right now I’m not. But I watched you grow from a baby. I know you’re smart. I know you’d enjoy studying at university. But unless you start making some effort— you won’t have a hope in hell.”

“Why can’t you encourage me?” She lashed back. “Why do you always put me down?”

Nikki pulled around— eyes rolling nervously in the raised voices.

“I’m not putting you down. I’m just warning you what’ll happen if you keep getting these lousy grades. I can’t lie to you. I don’t want you ending up taking orders at MacDonalds.”

“Isn’t that what you expect?” She begins sobbing. “The way you’re always putting me down?”

“Shuhh, calm down.”

Both TE and MH looked away glumly. Do they also feel I’m being too hard of their big sister?



On a bleak day in early January 2001, my then-wife and I took our dispute to family court. Thirty minutes before a judge (while paying lawyers’ retainer fees) were enough to convince us that further action would result in mutual self-destruction. We pulled back in an uneasy truce.

Compounding the gloom of that domestic stalemate were insecurities at work. I had lousy shifts and felt unwelcome in the department into which I had transferred. I considered heading overseas again. I sent out applications to colleges in the Gulf and in Japan. If none of my three kids would accompany me, I felt sufficiently defeated to go alone...

Meanwhile, MT was understandably disgusted with both parents. My confrontations with her worsened. The following entry is from late January:

“Why are you so paranoiac?” huffed MT, slamming the car door.

She jerked down her seatbelt then glanced back at the blonde girl and gangly boy in front of the corner store. She was livid. “Why do you have to embarrass me in front of my friends?”

“You said you were going for a few minutes. to pick up the video. TE’s been waiting for over an hour.”

Slowly, I drove back along Nestor St. before turning up Torey Ave.

“You think I’m seeing that guy? He’s just my friend.”

“Why shouldn’t I be suspicious when you don’t get back until after midnight?”

My worry about her apparent trysts with a 17-year-old ‘boyfriend’ far exceeded those heard from TE about her drinking and smoking pot...

Before we stopped in the driveway, she was already grabbing for the doorhandle. “Well, if you think I’m drinking or taking drugs—you’re wrong. Just because you took drugs when you were young—don’t think that I’m that stupid.”

Foot on the parking brake pedal, I turned. “Listen MT. I don’t think you’re stupid at all. Just naïve—like most girls your age.”

With a loud ‘tsk’, she got out, slammed the door and ran into the house.

For a moment, I sat behind the wheel, staring at the house. What will become of her a few months hence if I really do end up isolated half a world away?



In the following months, red alerts were received from MT’s school with growing frequency. The following was noted in Feb 2021:

The information that MT had cut her afternoon gym class came in an automated call from Pine Tree School. I confronted her in the doorway just as I was preparing to head out for my evening class.

“What?” she scoffed. “I never skipped a class. ‘Where’d you get that crazy idea?”

I glared at the stud in her nose— just one more exclamation of supposed liberation.

MT,” I took a deep breath, “The school phoned. Don’t insult me with a lie. Please.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Please.”

Unexpectedly, her defiance collapsed. “I hate gym—It’s so depressing.”

“Learning about how to exercise is really important,” I said. “You don’t have to be an athlete.”

“But I hate it,” She whimpered. “The gym teacher is so stupid—and you know I’ve always had this bad ankle.”

“Don’t you see how worried I am about your future?” I touched her shoulder. “What’s to become of you if I go overseas to work?”

He defiance snapped back. “You think that nothing good can happen while you’re not around? If you’re miserable here—then you better go away. Don’t worry about me.” She bent down massaging her ankle.

“Well, maybe my wallet is more important to you guys than my being around,”

Her expression made me instantly regret the self-pitying tone. “I just hate to think of not being around to help if something bad happens.”

She sniffled. “So don’t go away then.”

“Well, we just can’t go on like this.” A lump swelled in throat. “Something has to change.”



Fortunately, I heeded the nightmare warnings against fleeing overseas. For sixteen months longer, the in-house separation continued. Meanwhile, my soon-to-be ex-wife, was struggling with her demons. Despite her best intentions for the kids—between her sometimes erratic behaviour and my night shifts that were inevitable lapses in domestic supervision. The teenage MT was more inclined than her younger siblings to take advantage...

The following episode was noted in a diary entry of May 2001:

Perhaps the letter from MT’s school received today would not have so deeply stuck a nerve had it not been for her excuse missing school yesterday afternoon. The letter informed that MT was failing math and not handing in assignments in other subjects.

Yesterday she apparently missed school for an ‘appointment’ with a modelling agency in downtown Vancouver. That fantasy of a glamorous career was ignited by a business card handed to her at a 98 Degrees concert at GM Place in Vancouver last Saturday... When I angrily told her the enticement of a ‘free’ beauty shot was a scam— she talked her mom into driving her to the interview...

I crumpled up the school note and left it on the top of my filing cabinet. At 6:45 PM from my school office cubicle before going into my class, I phoned the home landline. TE picked up and called MT. There was a wait— but at least she came to the phone.

Having little time, I got straight to point. “So, what’s this about not handing in assignments? A letter came today from your school.”

“I didn’t tell you because you’re so negative,” she said.

“And what’s this about signing up with the modeling agency? Who’s going to pay for that?”

“I don’t have to pay anything. I can earn a lot a money. Even before I finish school— I can model and do commercials on the weekends. “

“Half the girls at that concert probably got the same business card. Not many of their parents wouldn’t have fallen for it.”

“Why are you so negative? You think everyone needs to have a boring life—like you?”

A jolt of rage sprang into my throat— but I swallowed it back. “Listen, MT. You’ve got to realize that a person can’t expect to get by for very long on good looks. You have a brain—I want you to use it. You don’t want your teachers to think you are not interested in learning. I hate to think that you’re getting channeled into a path of low achievers.”

“Well,” she said snottily, “if you’re worried about paying for the sign-up fee—don’t worry. Mom’s going to help me.”

An image jolted forth of MT with her mother last weekend. While I was hastening down the stairs from the kitchen, MT was on the sofa with her mom’s head cradled in her lap, stroking her Rasta braids. T. had apparently offered to braid the hair of MT’s friends... She was becoming the cool mom while I was the tyrannical moron....

“Just because you have your mother wrapped around your finger now, “I blurted out, “you think failing at school doesn’t matter?”

“You automatically believe I will fail. You are always so negative. Get a life!”

“You are so good at changing the subject— turning the tables. When in hell are you going to start handing in your assignments?”

Suddenly, there was only a dial tone...She had hung up. I looked through the fishbowl office window. Was I too loud? Hopefully, no antennae in the corridor had perked up to my little domestic melodrama...



In reviewing my diaries of those same months, it is hurtful to note the occasions when MT deserved praise for her achievements—praise which I neglected to offer. The following excerpt is from November 2001:

Home from the late shift 10:30 PM, I found a note on my basement desk: *‘I brought these photos from my photo class so that you can look at them... Love, MT.’*

She obviously wanted to show me that despite screwing up on math, she had a creative flair. I glanced through the black and white close-ups of flowers. I made a note-to-self to compliment her first thing in the morning...

I was sitting up in my sleeping bag on the pull-out sofa in the basement when MT came down the stairs from the kitchen.

“I saw those photos last night.” I said, “they are very well done.”

She stopped behind the sofa. “Did you read what was written on the back? You have to read the descriptions before they make sense.”

I’ll look at them again,” I said yawning, “later this morning.”

“They’re all part of a theme. That’s supposed to be about time. How everything keeps changing.”

“Unhuh. I see.”

“Dad!”

We both turned as TE appeared in the doorway.

“Did I tell you I put a story in a short story competition?” she said excitedly.

“You didn’t, honey,” I said.

“Well, some kid in my English class said he saw my name in the *‘Tri-City News’*. I guess I was short-listed for some prize.”

“That’s amazing,” I grinned. “Can you get me a copy?”

“It’s at school. I’ll bring it this afternoon.”

In the sound of her thumping back up to her bedroom, I turned to MT. I realized how closely she had been watching my reaction to TE's news.

"I didn't tell you that I got 91% in my Social Studies test," she said.

"Great," I said flatly. "But I'd be happier about that if we weren't still getting letters from the school about your missing math tutoring appointments. Are you handing in your assignments now?"

She 'tsked'. "I get one of the best marks in my class on another subject and you don't give a shit, do you?"

"MT, that's not true. I was just—"

My sentence was cut off by the slamming of her bedroom door. I dropped back on the sofa-bed, duly shamed...



The confrontations with MT escalated in the months before I moved out from the erstwhile family home. However nightmarish to recall, several are unflinchingly described in my journal. The following excerpt is from late January 2002:

The New Year's resolution to restrain my temper with MT was short-lived. Yet again the anger was triggered by her school performance. Instead of the usual automated phone warning from her school, this time it was a personal call from her math teacher. Ms. R. crisply informed that MT's current 45% grade could be pushed lower by further neglect of homework assignments. Wearily, I assured the teacher of a step-up in parental supervision...

After her little brother and I returned from the dog walk at 4:30 PM, MT stood in the hallway with folded arms while I wearily unlaced my boots. I waited until MH bounded up the stairs. Then with as much self-control as I could muster, I rose up and began:

"Ms. R., your math teacher called. She said you still have a chance to pull off a borderline pass. That's only if you attend every class and hand in every assignment from now on."

"I handed in one yesterday," said the teenager. "She must not have finished her marking."

"I don't know about that. She wouldn't have phoned if she wasn't concerned about your falling further behind."

She scowled.

“Look,” I urged, “why don’t you stay home for a change tonight and catch up on your homework?”

“How do you know how often I go out?” she said sharply. “You’re not around.”

“So, I work nights. That’s how I get to pay the bills around here.”

“You don’t know that I often take my books with me. J. and I like to study together in her rec room.”

“Com’on, you’re telling me that when you go out to J.’s place— or wherever you go—you get your assignments done? You think I’m an idiot?”

I stared at her for a moment. She did not blink. I tried again. “It won’t kill you to stay home for a couple of weeks. Get all your assignments done and prepare for all your tests. Pass your math and then at the end of term you can celebrate. OK?”

I expected some show of defiance, but not a grenade blast of vitriol.

“I *hate* staying in this house. It’s cold here and none of my friends want to come here. They’re all think you’re creepy.”

I clenched teeth against the sting. “Look, I don’t give a shit what your bimbo buddies think of me. But for a change you’re staying in tonight!”

“You can’t make me!” she snapped.

“You don’t think so?” I grabbed her wrist, squeezing.

“Let me go!” She twisted away. “You are nothing but a miserable person. A miserable person who wants to everyone else to be miserable!”

“No, I just don’t want to see my daughter end up working at the mall. Or worse.”

You are a big failure yourself,” she screamed, “and such a fucking hypocrite!”

Before slamming herself into her room, she kicked the drywall and flung a mop into the wall. Staring at her closed door, I thought of the old priest in the *‘Exorcist’* adjusting his vestments under the spattering spray of green vomit...

“Dad?”

I twisted round from the basement doorway. there was MH on the steps and TE standing behind him...

“Will you guys stop fighting?” asked the 9-year-old. “I can’t even hear the TV!”



By early spring 2002, my ex-wife and I were taking our first wary steps in negotiating an official separation. I was preparing to trade the house for her claim on my pension. Yet at the same time, I was surrendering to the advice given in the single session with a marriage counselor before whom both T. and I had squirmed: *“In the process of the divorce,’ he had said, ‘one of the parents has to make the sacrifice so that the kids can maintain the lifestyle to which they are accustomed. That parent is almost always the father.’*

As promised to MH and TE, I found a two-bedroom rental within walking distance. While my ex-wife and I had yet to sign a joint custody agreement, both my 10-year-old son and his 15-year-old sister were ready to spend equal time at two domiciles.

In contrast, in the weeks leading up to my move out, the 17-year-old MT made it clear that she would staying full-time in the house. At the time, I was bitterly convinced that MT looked forward to her supposed freedom from paternal tyranny. Yet in looking back, I wonder whether she was feeling abandoned when she was most in need of guidance... My part in that failure, I cannot deny. It will always haunt.

A glimpse of the tensions of the days before my moveout is rendered in a journal entry of April 2002:

Not unexpectedly, there has been petty squabbling over some of the items I heaped together for the move. Twice, T. dragged the rocking chair from the basement back into her bedroom. Bought in a garage sale, she probably imagines it a precious antique. Then there is the small chest freezer, with rust on the bottom.

“Touch that and I’ll take you straight back to a lawyer,” she warned. “Then we’ll see how we’ll divide things!”

Most revealing was the emergence of MT as arbiter as to what must remain in ‘her’ house. “You’re not taking that drying rack,” snapped the 17-year-old. “I need it to dry my pants.”

“Am I taking the washer and dryer?” I asked in derision.

“You’re *not* taking the drying rack,” she snapped.

A few minutes later, MT was pulling towels from one of my cardboard boxes.

“You are *not* taking those towels. You expect me to go buy towels for myself? You have money and I don’t.”

“MT,” I yelled, “I’m moving out— leaving you and your mother with the house and still paying the mortgage. Is that not good enough? Do you have to begrudge me a few towels?”

“She threw down the towel. Like the cobra against the mongoose, she lashed back: “You just pick on me because you’re scared to fight with mom. You are so immature!”

“Immature?” I scoffed. “Who’s the one who lies about where she’s been when she drags herself home in the middle of the night? Who’s the one that hides her report card because she’s failed every subject?”

“You don’t care how I feel. You try to suck up to TE and MH and don’t even treat me like your own daughter!”

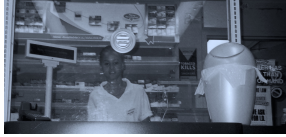
With a sharp kick to one of the boxes, she pushed past me and bounded up the stairs. Minutes later, she was bounding back down the stairs, one arm in her jacket...

“MT,” I faltered, “we’ve got to talk.”

She brushed past, out the door... Minutes later, a cherry red PT cruiser, pulled into the driveway. It was one of her Barbie friends ‘rescuing’ her. From my workroom window, in anguish, I watched them drive away...

I thought of our first dive together in the Arabian Gulf: she tapping my shoulder and pointing to angelfish fluttering into pink coral... At that moment, could I possibly have imagined this— four years later?





As sadly anticipated, I saw little of MT in the weeks that followed... Rumours from MH and TE were so distressing that for a couple of weeks, I stopped asking about her...

I did hear that she was working parttime job at the gas bar of the local Superstore. Soon afterwards, I stopped to fill up there on the way to the evening shift. As noted in a journal entry of May 2002:

Instead of handing over my credit card before filling up, I told the boy at the pump I would pay inside... In seeing MT behind the till serving another customer, a catch came to my throat. She looked up and nodded. There were two customers behind me when I got to the window. She did not smile.

“What time do you get off work?” I slid my credit card under the window.

At 10:30 PM,” she said brusquely.

“I’ll be back from work by then. Will you need a ride?”

She glanced over at her supervisor, a West African immigrant, who sat stone-faced in the corner.

“Mom’s giving me a ride.” She pushed me back my card.

Shrugging, I turned away. The customers behind would never have guessed we were father and daughter...

Icon

Still, on a fill up at the same gas bar on the way to work a couple of weeks later, there was a welcome change in my reception:

Parked at the side waiting for the return of my credit card, I recognized the West African immigrant girl seen in the last visit. Bulky-armed in a duct-taped bomber jacket, she was joking with the kid in football sweater who pumped gas.

“Dad!”

I was jolted by the sudden appearance of MT herself at the car window, handing me the credit card and slip to sign.

“Dad, will you pick me up at 10:30 tonight?”

In the bitterness of our long silence, I did not want her to think I was pleased to be asked.

“Won’t your mom pick you up?”

“Well, she said she’d pick me up if you couldn’t.”

“Well, you’d better ask her first. I might be sleeping by 10:30 PM.”

“Are TE and MH sleeping over at your place tonight?”

“I don’t know.”

“If they aren’t— can I stay over there?”

“Of course, MT. You know you can stay with me any time you want.”

What an utter contrast to the last time when she greeted me haughtily as if to ingratiate herself with her supervisor! So, what has changed today?

“Give me a call if your mom can’t pick you up,” I said a little gruffly, turning the starter key.

I drove away, in a stab of anguish. In the exchange that lasted barely a half-minute—our first meeting in weeks— I had hardly made eye-contact.



In the days that followed there were hopeful signs of a thaw. We talked a couple of times on the phone. Then one Friday evening when TE and MH were staying at their mom’s, for the first time, MT came for dinner at my place. As noted in June 2002:

I was warming up the chili when MT arrived.

I gave her an awkward hug then stepped back before the stove.

“It’s way too hot in here!” Scowling, she pulled off her jacket.

“Usually there’s a breeze from the balcony door,” I pointed. “It’s a little stuffy this evening. Sorry.”

“What is the humming sound in the hallway?”

“I don’t know.” I stepped over and opened the door. “I don’t hear anything. Maybe someone in another apartment had an appliance running but turned it off.”

“It must be irritating.”

“No, no,” I forced a smile. “It’s actually a pretty quiet place. Mostly retired people live on this floor, I think. Do you mind setting the table?”

She did as bidden, but fell into a silence and only pecked at her food...

She stayed to watch some TV. In about an hour, looked at her watch and rose.

“I’m meeting K. at the mall at 8:00 PM,” she said. ‘We’re going to a movie.’”

“I thought you were staying over.” I nodded towards her stuffed handbag. You brought a change of clothes and a toothbrush, didn’t you?”

“I might be back around 10:00 PM.”

“Do you need a key?”

“No, I’ll ring the bell downstairs.”

“Whatever suits you,” I said.

She did not come back. Still, it was a first step towards acceptance of a new *status quo*.



MT hardly ever showed up at my door again through that summer of 2002. She did call to ask for rides to or from work... Concerned about her safety late at night, I was glad to oblige. Living in the same neighbourhood, we bumped into one another a couple of times. The following note of such an encounter was from July:

Stopping on the pathway near the tennis court after the walk around Lefarge Lake, I watched the approach of two girls along Pipeline Road. The shorter one was blonde. The slender one holding the cell phone in one hand and in the other a smoke— was MT!

Only as they drew abreast did she recognize me. She flicked away the cigarette (or joint?). Tentatively, she and her friend crossed the road. Unable to dodge the encounter, they stopped up on the path.

“Going for a walk?” I chirped.

“Yeah,” said MT. “Where’d you get that jacket?”

“It was the first time I’d worn the brown suede, bought last weekend at the thrift store.

“From the Sally Ann,” I touched the sleeve. “Doesn’t it fit?”

“It looks OK.”

“When you coming to stay over?”

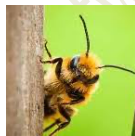
“Sometime soon.” She looks over at her friend, who seems to smirk.

In a jolt of anger, I blurted. “MT, why do you keep asking me to drive you from your work— but you can’t even visit for more than an hour.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll get mom to drive after this.”

“You have a father, you know— whether or not you’d prefer to forget it. You—”

“Excuse me,” She glanced at her friend, “I don’t feel like fighting.” Abruptly, she turned. Hugging close, they walked back towards her mom’s house on Torey Ave.



There was an uglier confrontation the following month in the supermarket near where MT worked. Yet again, I was left ruing the inability to hold my tongue:

At 7:00 PM, along with MH, I was pushing the trolley toward the Superstore checkout when I did a doubletake on the tarded-up girl in tight jeans approaching down the aisle. It was MT. Seeing the plucked eyebrows and heavy eyeliner, my first thought was: *if that really is MT— what in hell has she done to her face?*

Stopping before us, my eldest ignored me and began scolding her young brother:

“Mom’s angry with you,” she sniped. “You left the garage door open again. Nikki got into the garbage. She scattered it right into the hallway.”

“I didn’t leave the door open. I came straight to dad’s place after school.”

“Liar. You come and clean it up. I’m tired of cleaning up your messes!”

In the midst of her tirade against her young brother, I was shocked to see that that her exposed navel was pierced with a ring. I could not hold my tongue:

“MT, you have beautiful eyebrows. Why do you have to pluck them off and paint them back in?”

“What?” She twisted round. “How I look is none of your business. Grow up, will you!”

“You’re the one who needs to grow up, goddammit! No father should have to see his daughter painted up like a trollop.”

“I’m not talking to you,” she yipped, turning on her heel.

A shopper looked back in alarm. We had definitely made a spectacle.

‘Let’s go,’ I muttered to MH. I jerked the cart forward in the realization that a reconciliation with my eldest had just been set back at least by a month.



Before the actual signing over of the deed to the family house, I found myself in the uneasy role of ‘landlord’, worrying about upkeep and repairs. Rumours of “sleepover parties” in my ex-wife’s absence were particularly upsetting. The following notes were logged on a Saturday afternoon in early summer, 2002:

After dropping off MH at baseball practice at Town Center Park, I drove over to Torey Ave. to pick up TE. In the usual place of T.’s car in the driveway was the red PT cruiser. After parking the van at the side of the house, I saw beer cans and liquor bottles scattered on the back lawn. Instead of ringing the doorbell, I entered the front door with my old key— the lock still unchanged.

On the pull-out couch which had been my bed, TE was sleeping. In hearing me enter, there was some commotion upstairs. While her two girlfriends were dressing, MT came down to the basement. She looked guilty and hung over.

“What to hell went on here last night?” I shouted. “Does your mother know you have parties when she’s away?”

“She knew I was having a sleepover.”

“Sleepover, bullshit. All that booze and you kids underage? A neighbour could have phoned the cops.”

“Sorry,” she said groggily. “My friends and I just had a couple of beers. Most of those bottles weren’t ours. Some older guys showed up. We tried to tell them to leave but they wouldn’t go.”

“They could have trashed the place, for christsake!”

“That’s not your problem,” she muttered.

“No? Who do you think is still paying the mortgage? Who do you think is accountable if some kid gets into trouble and a parent complains?” My forehead throbbed in caustic rage. “Tell your friends to leave immediately.”

“We’re all going,” she huffed, turning back up the stairs.

Fuming, I waited in the doorway for TE to dress and come with me.

Later, we waited in the car at the Coquitlam Center sports field parking lot for MH to finish his baseball practice.

“Where were you last night when all that craziness was going on?”

“I was in the basement watching a video,” said TE.

“You didn’t drink anything?”

“I don’t even like the taste of beer!” She sounded annoyed by the interrogation.

“What if those party crashers had come into the basement. What would have you done?”

“I’d have called you,” she said.

“Look, you shouldn’t have stayed there last night. With MT going wild and your mother having her own issues—I’m really worried about you and MH. I wish I had a bigger place where you both could stay with me full time.”

She stared out the window in silence.

I changed the subject. “You are still going take enriched English in the fall, right?”

Bearing the burden now of a father’s hopes, TE glumly nodded.



In the fall of 2002, MT started her final year of high school while continuing to work part-time at the gas bar. Fortunately, the festivities around graduation provided enough motivation for her to stick it out and scrape through. Yet in that final year of her high school, in almost every encounter, we locked horns. One such regrettable incident was noted in late November:

It started in the driveway of Torey Ave. where I pulled in to pick up MH.

Suddenly, MT rushed out the door, climbed into the back of the van and slammed the door. “I need a drive to work.”

“So why didn’t you ask me earlier when MH phoned?”

“I told him to tell you.”

“You could have come to the phone.” I met her eyes in the rear-view mirror. “Hey, do you have to wear your makeup so thick?”

“Whaddya mean?” she scowled. “I always dress like this for work.”

I loosened my seatbelt and turned around. “Listen, we need to talk. About cutting classes and smoking pot.”

She grabbed the door handle. “I don’t smoke pot.”

“Com’on.”

“Did you hear that from TE? She’s a liar.”

“It’s not the pot I’m worried about, it’s cutting classes.”

She glowered. “Why did you phone my geography teacher? I had permission that day to be absent. You don’t know *anything* that’s going on in my life— and you don’t really give a shit.” She stepped out of the car. Just go back to your *little* apartment,” she said, holding the door. “You dork!”

A spasm of fury leapt to throat. “Don’t you dare call me names— you’re the *little* liar.”

“I hate you!”

“What I hate,” I yelled after her, “is seeing you screw up your life!” The door slammed behind her.

A few seconds later, it reopened. Both MH and TE emerged from the doorway. Dolefully, MH got into the front seat. TE came up to the driver’s side window.

“Can I come to your place?”

“Weren’t you staying with your mom tonight?”

It was an unusual request for TE, who was always judicious about dividing her stays equally.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she said, glancing back to the door...

Was there really any consolation in supposing that two out of three might be saved? Surely, it can’t be too late for MT!



I was not the sole parent with whom MT clashed in those turbulent years. In the first eighteen months after my move out, I received several angry calls from my ex-wife. The first were about items she demanded I give back (*e.g.* dishes and sheets) but later they were complaints about our eldest daughter (“*She treats me like shit— You take her!*”)

After her high school graduation, MT continued living in her mom’s basement but tentatively began drawing closer to my orbit. More often she asked for lifts or to borrow my van. I gave her a key and she began to come to my apartment for meals outside of Christmas, Thanksgiving and birthdays. Still, she did not stay overnight.

That was until September 3rd 2003. The events of that day I recorded as follows:

I suspected that something was brewing when TE and MH showed up for supper. I had assumed they would be staying with their mom since the plan was to have TE’s birthday dinner (with cake and balloons) at the apartment tomorrow. I took their silence at the table as reluctance to reveal something that was going on at their mother’s place...

When the phone rang, they both looked nervously at one another. It was MT— her voice near hysterical.

“Mom hit me!” she cried. “I called the police.”

“What? You’d better get over here right away.”

She paused amid muffled voices in the background. “The police are here, now. I have to go.”

While waiting for her arrival, I paced.

“It’s this big statue mom put in in the living room.” said TE, still at the table. When MH withdrew to the computer, she told me more:

She said an old Filipina lady from her mother’s church brought a statue of the Virgin Mary into her mother’s house. Believing in its miraculous power, T. set it up on a table. For the last few days, she had apparently been praying around it with lit candles and incense. TE said her older sister told their mother she was crazy...

Before TE finished her story, the phone rang again. It was her mother.

“It’s you who tells them there is no god,” said T. bitterly. “And you who tells them I’m crazy, isn’t it? Listen, mister, you know I’d do anything for these kids. They’ll never have a better mother on this earth. But when they’re under this roof— I won’t have them treating me like dirt. They can all stay with you!”

“I don’t need to hear this,” I said. “All I want to know is— did you hit MT?”

She hung up.

Within five minutes, the phone rang again. This time it was an RCMP officer. “If you don’t take action,” he barked, “Social services will have to step in.”

“I will take care of this officer,” I faltered, “right away.”

“Well, I will bring your daughter over. She and her mother will need to be separated for a while.”

“That will be fine, officer. I don’t have a lot of room, but she is welcome here along with her brother and sister. As long as she wants.”

Waiting for the cop’s arrival, I walked out to the balcony, staring out into the twilight. With a new class starting tomorrow— it seemed the timing for a domestic crisis couldn’t have been worse.

About a half hour later, a youngish Indo-Canadian RCMP stood in the doorway. MT slid around him and immediately joined her siblings in watching *‘Survivor’* on TV. I looked the officer straight in the eye.

“She’s safe here, officer. When things cool down my wife and I will certainly settle our differences. All in the best interests of the kids, of course. I’ll have to start looking for a bigger place.”

He nodded, even though his head was cocked to his earphone that was probably relaying details of his next dispatch.

As soon as he was gone, I sat beside MT on the sofa.

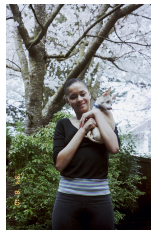
“Is my nose pushed sideways?” she asked. “That’s where she hit me. How can I work if it’s all swollen up and gross!”

“It looks a little red,” I said gingerly touching. “But it’s not swollen. Still, it’s disgusting what happens when your mother loses her temper.”

“She’s such a hypocrite!” She blubbered. “She was *so* nice to the cops. There were three of them— one black officer, that Indian guy who has a typical cop attitude and a white guy. ‘*Can I make you a cup of tea?*’ she asked them. They were all so charmed by her. I was crying and she was all smiling. She made me look so bad. She made them think it was all my fault. O, I hate her!”

However sympathetic, I could hardly forget that a few weeks ago— I was the evil parent...

Still, it occurred that this episode could be the smoking bolt of lightning that jolts open the prison door...



Within a few months of their epic fight in September 2003, MT reconciled with her mom. Yet for the following three years, our eldest daughter’s primary residence was with me.

From the apartment, I moved to a low-rent townhouse. It was run-down but there were bedrooms for each of the kids. In 2006, MT moved back to her mother’s house. That was soon after I entered a relationship with a new partner...

On the verge of submitting to solitary aging, I was granted a miraculous reprieve. In 2008, C. and I moved to a townhouse in much nicer neighbourhood not far from the university where TE (and later MH) would attend. MT was always welcomed there and sometimes stayed in her sister’s room when TE was at her mom’s.

Even through the trials of her late teens, MT was a diligent and responsible worker. In her early twenties, she got the break she deserved. With the encouragement of C., she got a job with ICBC, the provincial auto insurer. She took advantage of training and certification opportunities. Eventually, she developed expertise in negotiating complicated bodily injury claims. In her early thirties, she moved to Toronto. It was there she began dating a fine young man who would become her husband.

In speaking at the dinner of MT's informal wedding reception in August 2021, I held up one of my most previous mementoes. It was a naturally heart-shaped rock that ten-year-old MT had given me as a Father's Day gift. She painted it with tiny valentines and inscribed it with 'DAD'. As I told the guests around the dining room table of her new parents-in-law, MT and I were like buddies at that time...

On every Father's Day in the last few years, MT has posted on Facebook photos of us together followed by long inscriptions. Last year, she wrote: *'Happy Father's Day... Thank you for always being there for us with your love and guidance when we need you (and even when we think we don't). You are truly the best of the best!'*

Meanwhile, no birthday has ever passed without a sweet card from MT. In the most recent one she wrote: *'I am sorry I won't be there to celebrate this year but know I'll be thinking of you and love you more than words can describe...'*

Remembering all this makes the blow up on the drive from the airport all the more painful... Of course, we both should have known better. Our equally sharp tongues tend to be equally stubborn in getting in the last word... Still, should it not always be the responsibility of the father to rise above the fray? There are countless examples of the fate of old fools caught in the endless repetition of their folly...



Just as I had often done in darker days after bickering with MT, I remembered the long night of September 16th-17th, 1985. Late on that following morning at the desk of a Harare hotel room, I wrote a couple of pages in my notebook. The following paragraphs are transcribed from those notes:

For more than six hours last night and early this morning, I crouched by the bedside of T. anxiously watching the monitor of the fetal heartbeat of the babe struggling to be born...

For the first three and a half hours, the red numbers on the diode display averaged 160 beats/minute. Then in the quickening of the oxytocin-induced labour, the numbers jumped up past 160 to 180, 190—even to 200 beats per minute. It almost seemed that the display was hooked up with my own bouncing heartbeat...

Poor T. was herself attached to a labour monitor: seemingly a torturer's instrument with the pen scratching upon an unwinding scroll of graph paper. It dropped into deep troughs before jerking up almost vertically as if in orchestration of her cries of agony: *"Amai, Amai* [mother, mother] she wailed, *"I'm dying!"*

At some point her pain was mercifully lessened by insertion of the epidural needle. Yet even with sensation below the hips dulled, she clenched and unclenched her fists... As she moaned, I held her hand—tortured by helplessness. I could only desperately hope that exhaustion would not overwhelm her or harm the little creature trying to push its way into the world...

Then after the indeterminable waiting, the delivery room scene jarred forward like a suddenly speeded-up film... In a blur, Dr. Robertson, in green scrubs and face mask was standing over T. and the nurse was holding an oxygen mask to her face...

I stood at the foot of the bed, wary of getting in the way but close enough to view the opening in the blue surgical sheets. As T. responded to the nurse's urgings to push, the top of the baby's head tentatively bulged out and drew back...

When the doctor murmured that the baby was in position, he leaned down with his suction device. Too squeamish to watch, I turned back just as a little body gelidly slid into his gloved hands... Our daughter!

The nurse held the tiny creature, close to T.'s stomach. The babe's eyes were shut and her lips reddish against her drained face. Seemingly exhausted by the effort of being born, she emitted only whimpers, almost like kitten meows.

I glanced at my watch—it was 2:30 AM.

"Is she good?" asked T. through the drugged haze, holding the new-born on her midriff.

"She's beautiful," I said, hiding my worry about the effects of oxytocin and the long labour.

"Give her time to take to the breast," said the nurse softly.

Before the cord was cut and I first held her, I stared into the tiny face. Perhaps succumbing to instinct, I looked for glimpses of myself... The reality of a little human in whose engendering I shared—whose protection is entrusted to me—humbled in a manner never imagined...

The eyes misted in reading that again. At the same time, I recalled something else MT might have said on that 2:30 AM drive back from the airport. In the middle of the night blariness and absence of hearing aids I did not catch her exact words. Yet I am almost certain she muttered: *"I don't need this stress now—not when I'm trying to get pregnant."*

If she did say that, the need to apologize is even more dire. I vowed to offer it before she flew back east... After a quarter century of apologies, can she forgive once more?

In regard to her hopes for a child, I worry that my dear daughter is putting too much pressure on herself. While the potential for self-fulfillment grows with maturity— it is still a biological fact that fertility ebbs. Perhaps MT’s best chance to conceive in her late thirties is to lower expectations while being ready for a surprise... The truth is that I can neither resist elevated hopes for another grandchild. What a joy that would be!

Still, if another grandchild were to arrive even in the next year or two—I will be older than the age of my paternal grandfather was at the time of my birth. To another grandchild, yet unborn, I will be a slobbering fossil— if remembered at all...

That prospect makes the impression I leave here all the more poignant. So, to MT’s potential child— I offer this message to be read— hopefully, twenty years hence: *‘Know that your mom had a dad who loved her more than words can ever describe...’*

—2023, August



fwl

