

For an old comrade, in Bardo



It's been several weeks since hearing that dear old comrade, JT, died. The news first came in a phone call from another old friend from New Brunswick who had in turn heard it from one of his chums in Halifax. She had heard it from another old friend of JT who knew him from grade school in his hometown of Saint John. JT would have laughed about such a grapevine stretching from coast to coast.

Following the shock were the questions: Was he felled by cancer, by heart attack or by stroke? Had he died alone? I knew that he had not been well. The friend who gave me the news had no details apart from the fact that JT died in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



In the first few days after hearing the news, almost every waking hour swirled with memories of my late friend. The earliest ones were of first meeting him in a high school class in Saint John, N.B., the fall of 1969. JT was the first classmate to make a friendly approach in the city high school to which I had transferred from the provincial hinterland. His initial query was about where he could buy pot. In that first approach, he looked like a Nordic skier with a goofy grin.

JT wore his hair a little too short to be trusted by other kids who knew where to buy pot and I, a shy kid with a hook in a new setting, was glad to oblige. In the tribal affiliations of the era, JT was not quite athletic enough for the jock crowd — but not cool enough for the resident 'freaks' let alone for the super-cool artsy set.

In that last year of high school, we became buddies at weekend gatherings and parties, most of which involved intoxicants and feverish talk.

I particularly recall one Friday night when we were smoking hash in a classmate's basement to the eerie strains of '*Court of the Crimson King*'. Each of us sitting on the floor challenged one another with the question: "Are you afraid to die?"

When JT took his turn, he defiantly claimed that he was not the least scared. "It's the final adventure and it's mine alone," he said. "No one can take it away from me!" He then gave his cackling laugh.



JT was the only child of a Latvian war bride (from whom he inherited his blue-eyed Aryan features) and a dyspeptic custom's officer. He grew up in his father's expectation that he would become a doctor. JT never quite forgave himself was his parents' disappointment in that unfulfilled hope.

After high school, JT did begin a pre-med directed BSc in Halifax. His summer jobs through his undergraduate years (obtained with father's influence) bolstered his medical school preparation. Memorable in such regard was his description of routines in the hospital morgue where he worked one summer as a lab assistant. With that distinct cackle he once described the hospital lab's specimens of reproductive organs in formaldehyde.

“They’re from human beings just like you and me,” he said, “but you’d think they’d be from dogs or pigs!”

A few times in those college years, he visited me in Fredericton, N.B. In one of those visits we hatched a plan to travel together after college. We fantasized an extended adventure in Mexico to be paid for with the pot we imagined smuggling back...

JT's self-destructive bent was nothing new, but during those weekend visits, he drank prodigiously. His boozing eventually alienated friends and drove away his willowy high school sweetheart. He admitted to blackouts. Yet no matter how dangerous the fall, he seemed to land on his feet. For example, once in falling asleep at the wheel, he woke up unscathed in a hayfield. 30 years later, he wrote in an email: *‘I shook hands with the devil so many times a cat's got nothin' on me!’*



In the summer of 1974 when I moved to the west coast, JT was one of the first friends I contacted from my new address. In his reply to my letter, he rekindled the fantasy of a “Mexican adventure.” He proposed joining me in Vancouver where we could set off for California, then buy a used car and travel south. I told him that in order to save for the trip, I needed to work at least six more months. He assured he could accommodate that. He was just wrapping up his summer job (collecting data on Atlantic salmon in northern New Brunswick) and breaking away from his paternally guided career path in medicine. A gap-year mentality was not aligned with my desired trajectory at the time—but I welcomed his company.

I met him at the Vancouver airport. He came through the gate unsteady from drinks on the long flight. On the bus back to the city, he assured that was in control of his drinking. I left him with a key at my rooming house in the west end before heading to my job in the downtown library. When I got back that night, he was eager to hit the town. It was immediately clear that the plans to travel together would not work out.

Still, for the rest of the fall of 1974, we shared a frowsy basement of a rooming house in the west end. Although JT was flush with his summer savings, he made some initial effort to look for a job. Yet by the end of the first week, he had already started his gap-year ‘adventure’. Many nights he took off alone and crawled back in the middle of the night. Among the late-night episodes recalled from that time, were the night a drunk JT pulled a bag of 8-track cassettes from an unlocked car; the night he dragged a yellow-blinking traffic barrier into the door and the night he staggered back coated in wet cement. On the morning after that, he slapped his own face in the mirror... Then there was the night he was waiting for me outside the library where I was working the night shift. Weaving drunk, he admitted that he’d lost the key to our basement suite along with the key to my bicycle chained on the lamppost.

“Sorry, I fucked up again!” he sobbed.

In the last few weeks of that fall, we rarely spoke. At the beginning of the new year, I found a cheaper rooming house away from the transient west end and JT headed off alone on his Mexican adventure. Still, we shook hands before parting.



JT sent postcards and a letter chronicling his southward journey. His self-effacing humour was sometimes reminiscent of Holden Caulfield of ‘Catcher in the Rye’. A surviving letter (dug up in the last few days) describes a harrowing accident: “*I was just starting to open my car door when a truck smashed into it putting my face through the window and busting my arm...*” Yet the upshot was a visit to the rural home of a friendly Mexican who came to his aid along with an insurance payout from the truck driver... As in all JT’s anecdotes of shit-lucky escapes, the cat landed (however unsteadily) on its feet...

During the months JT was in Mexico, I had become more abstemious in my habits. When he showed up in spring of 1975, I offered my old comrade a place to roll out his sleeping bag for a few days, but we both knew we would not be renting together again.

JT stayed in Vancouver for several more months, but we saw little of one another. We did have one memorable adventure along with a mutual friend. Hiking high in the back country of Whistler, we were caught in a blinding mid-summer blizzard. JT, who had earlier polished off a bottle of rum, nearly succumbed to hypothermia. Luckily, a pair of properly prepared climbers guided us to an alpine chalet. JT recovered just in time to join the group for a glorious morning summit of a glaciated peak. It was just one more of his cat’s lives, checked off.

Unfortunately, that one bright memory of JT from those months is offset by a dark one. It was on a Saturday night, when I was bussing back on Broadway Ave. from an aimless walk downtown. Suddenly, JT got on the bus. Not seeing me, he sat near the front. I kept my head down until he got off. Watching him from the window lurching away, would be my last glimpse of him for four years...



'We were cruel to each other—all that bullshit between us was so unnecessary!' wrote JT in a letter I received in northern Nigeria in Dec. 1978. I was days away from completion of a two-year teaching stint and glad to receive his invitation to visit him in Halifax after making my way back to Canada. In the same letter (again, dug up in the last few days) he admitted: *'I don't drink as much as I used to, but my body is wrecked by the way I treat it...'*

I flew into Vancouver from London in early spring 1979 but missed my old friends on the east coast. In a turn of restless nostalgia at the start of the Easter weekend, I flew on a one-way ticket to Halifax giving no one notice of my arrival. From the airport late that night, I phoned JT's number. His roommate directed me to a downtown pub called Gingers. Arriving by taxi, I found JT among a gathering of several old friends from New Brunswick. The mutual surprise and delight of that reunion is among the most celebratory moments in my entire memory stash.

JT's date for that night was D., an older lady with a beautiful smile. As JT got drunker, the red-haired lady turned her attention to me—keen to hear about my overseas experience. By last-call JT had disappeared and the generous lady (respectfully referred to here as 'D.') had offered me a place for the night on her couch.

The following morning, I phoned JT. He was justifiably suspicious but still welcomed me to spend the next few days at his place in Herring Cove just outside the city. Tensions eased in an afternoon of boozy camaraderie in his living room. Still, he remarked that D. was the "sweetest" among the multitude of women he had dated since his high school *femme fatale*.

"Can you respect that?" he asked almost pleadingly. I was torn.

D. showed up at Herring Cove the following evening to accompany both JT and I to see '*The Deer Hunter*'. Although D. sat between us and held both our hands, she and I could not hide our being smitten with one another. Meanwhile, the movie's theme of undying loyalty in male friendship seemed ironically appropriate.

The next afternoon, I was back at D.'s house where I stayed for the remainder of my visit. It was difficult to say goodbye to such a warm and generous person, but I was obligated to get back to Vancouver to take courses for which I had registered.

In any case, on the night before I took the train west, JT showed up at D.'s house drunk and belligerent. After we locked the door, we could hear him banging fists on the hood of his car and screaming: "Come out you slimy little bastard—I'm gonna beat your fuckin' head in!"

Uglier epithets were roared before he screeched off...

It would be twenty-eight years before we were to see one another again in the flesh.



The following year, from Tanzania, I sent JT an apology for dishonourable conduct during the Halifax visit. *'Really pleased to receive your letter,'* he replied. *'Believe me there are no hard feelings.'* He implied that nothing—not even rivalry over women—was to be valued above our comradeship. We resumed a sporadic correspondence.

Through the 1980s, tales of JT's down-spiraling struggle with drinking were passed on in letters from mutual acquaintances. There were snippets of his being tossed out of the wedding of his high school sweetheart and his firings from plum jobs. Among them was a position as an international inspector of North Atlantic fish harvests, which he lost after being toasted into blind drunkenness by the officers of a Russian trawler.

In 1988, I was back in Canada from Zimbabwe with a young family. Once settled, I tried to reestablish old connections. At that time, JT was on unemployment benefits living in an apartment in Moncton, New Brunswick. When I first called him up, he was barely coherent. I wondered whether he would afterwards remember the call at all.

When JT did call back, his manic affection gradually turned into surliness. He phoned back several times over the next year, usually drunk and lonely. A couple of times my wife answered, alarmed as she handed the phone over. Even in the long silences, hacking coughs and curses—I could not bear hanging up.

"I'm afraid JT's beyond help," a mutual friend advised me. "One of these days we're going to hear some very sad news about him."

The call from JT most clearly remembered from that period came just soon the birth of my son, which JT must have heard about through the old buddies' network. At first, he offered warm congratulations but then the call took an ugly turn:

"Remember D.?" he growled drunkenly. "We could have had a relationship—but you fucked it up. You know what you reminded me of when you sleazed your way into her pants? You were like some little grilse that rushes in and squirts in its milt ahead of a mature salmon. The eggs get ruined—the weak fry die off if they hatch at all. You did that to me—you weaselly bastard!"

Immediately afterward, I got 'call display' and told my wife never to answer when his number came up. Nearly fifteen years lapsed before we communicated again.



On some lonely nights after my divorce in the early 2000s, I searched the Internet for old contacts. From a high school alumni mailing list, I tracked down JT's email. I had earlier pieced together from other renewed connections that JT had hit rock bottom, quit drinking and started on a new career. He had taken English teacher training and was working in Korea. Pleased to hear of his sobriety—presumably without needing to be born again—I sent him an out-of-the-blue greeting.

He immediately replied: *'Sounds like your soul is still intact. It will be great makin' up for lost time. I'll give you a call when I get the necessary phone card. I now try to wear life like a loose robe. Whatever happens, happens. I shook hands with the devil so many times a cat's got nothin' on me.'*

J.

For the next few years, we emailed regularly and chatted a few times on the phone. He spoke of his plans to return to Canada and I offered advice on the job market. He hoped to work in the Maritimes long enough to afford to retire in his early sixties in Thailand where he'd already spent extended periods. He spoke of his girlfriend in Chiang Mai whom he regarded "pretty much a wife." He said she would supply him with a range of cheap handicrafts that he could sell at craft fairs back in Canada.

On the journey back from Korea, he promised to stop over in Vancouver. He wanted to buy a van and drive back east. ("My Canistan heartland adventure," he joked). Before that, he was looking forward to spending a few days with me and meeting my kids. He asked to forward boxes of handicrafts to my address.

In May 2007 on the Friday morning of the Victoria Day weekend, I drove to the Vancouver airport to meet the flight arriving from Seoul. Pacing outside the international arrivals gate, I pushed away the memory of the sordid confrontation in Halifax in April 1979. Instead, I thought of how JT looked in coming through the domestic arrival gate, fresh from New Brunswick, five years previous to that. That image of the boyish 22-year-old was in mind when I caught sight of the stout middle-aged man pushing a heavily laden trolley out of the glass doors. Spying me, he raised his arm and smiled. The wry expression was unmistakably JT's.

We spontaneously hugged. He was stiff from the ten-hour flight but mentally sharp. I suggested that he take a nap, but he was keen to hit the ground running. After dropping off his heavy bags, I drove him to a bank and afterwards we took a walk around Minnekada park by the Pitt River. JT lumbered along panting, but he insisted on continuing to the top of the high knoll for the expansive view. In kneeling at rest stops along the way and at the top of the cliff, we talked of growing old and mortality... I asked about the miniature Buddha dangling from his neck.

"It's a gift from my Thai girlfriend, Lo," he said. "I'm a practical guy and most religion is mumbo jumbo to me—but Buddhism—far as I understand it—is common sense."

Even with the dreary weather, JT seemed to enjoy his visit. He appreciated having a quiet place to catch up on his jetlag. In every night but the last, I left him alone (My son, MH, kindly giving up his room for the weekend) and stayed over at C.'s apartment. Beforehand, I hid the bottle of liqueur from the cupboard—but it wasn't necessary. JT really was, thankfully, on the wagon and eager to get on the road.

Most of the long weekend was spent searching through used car lots. Driving around the Tri-cities in the rain we swapped stories and shared a few hearty laughs. On the final afternoon, we found a Chrysler minivan, fire engine red, that was in decent shape and within his budget.

Given our history, I was admittedly reluctant to introduce him to C. I could not deny that for my youthful transgressions, there was karma owing. Still, in the outing downtown by Skytrain accompanied by C., there was no tension. C. found JT charming, despite what she observed as a “tendency to embroider his tales”. She was later surprised when I showed her JT's high school yearbook picture.

“Well, he's certainly not that adorable blonde bad boy anymore!” she chuckled.

On the final night of his visit, JT suggested that we watch the '*The Last Waltz*' together. We had both been fans of the Band from high school, so it seemed the perfect choice of entertainment in the spirit of both friendship and transition. Yet it was a work night, and I was too tired to stay up for a couple of hours past the usual bedtime... I was to deeply regret that denial of spontaneity...

The following afternoon, with his van loaded with camping supplies and a makeshift bed, he set off on his road trip across Canada. A week later, I received a letter send from Saskatchewan. He gave thanks for the stay and in over-size script at the bottom scrawled: '*Friendship matters! Your old war buddy, J.*'



Over the following four years while JT was back in New Brunswick we regularly kept in touch. He fulfilled his dream of buying a piece of dirt-cheap land. He even lived on it for a while in a cabin without running water. (*'It didn't cost much more than the van,'* he wrote.) Although selling Thai handicrafts in the Maritime flea market circuit did not work out, he found a job teaching English to international students in his hometown of Saint John.

In August 2011, I took my family back in New Brunswick for the memorial service of my late mother who had passed back in the previous winter. The day before the service in the natal village, I took C. on a brief tour which included a half-day in Saint John. We arranged to meet up with JT.

We met at the uptown City Market. JT looked to have aged double the four years since we last met in Vancouver. He had put on weight and had a rattling cough. We chatted over fish and chips and then drove out to Red Head Beach where C., for her first time, could see the Atlantic.

I have a video snippet of that visit. C. and JT are sitting on a log looking onto the grey Bay of Fundy. Holding the camera, I am asking JT an extended question about forest practices of the notorious Irving conglomerate. Cigarette between clasped hands, JT nods and grunts short answers. He did not like being filmed.

When the camera was off, he spoke of his weariness of poorly paid beginners' English work. The impression was that his students were mostly unmotivated Saudis and his colleagues, catty matrons. He was fed up with that job and spoke of the possibility of finding work in a college in the high Arctic. In the meantime, he said he planned a "vacation" in Thailand.

Perhaps a little embarrassed by his furnished rooms in the gritty south end, he asked to be dropped off in front of the old *Telegraph Journal* building which was within walking distance of his place. Almost solemnly, we hugged goodbye and promised to keep in touch. He later admitted that when we saw him that last time, he was already laid off and his unemployment benefits were running low.



Not surprisingly, JT's next message, received a few months later, was from Thailand:

F.,

I'm having a great time here in Chiang Mai. The weather is fantastic, and some friends are coming to visit. I'm almost 60!! So, I might as well enjoy myself. However, reality (work) does raise its ugly head. I won't bore you with the details but the paperwork for working now is insane. Speaking of which I can't get a criminal record from a DUI 15 years ago purged!!! Again I won't bore you with the details.

J.

Despite his difficulties, his old bravado seemed to be back. In earlier conversations he had spoken of a scheme to raise exotic birds on a small piece of land owned by his Thai 'wife'. The idea was to export exotic bird feathers for fly-fishing and fly-tying hobbyists in Canada. Yet with resources diminished and with the old drunk driving charge blocking his Thai resident visa, he had to head off on spec to look for another English teaching gig.

The next email was from Taiwan:

Hey F.,

Good to hear from you. I'm in Taipei right now, trying to check out the job situation. I can only imagine how hot it gets here in the summer. Also, I got a lung infection which was only made worse by a pharmacist who would not listen to me and give me the medication I knew I needed. I went to the hospital yesterday and hopefully I will start to feel better soon.

I really don't like being in this situation (no job!) but a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. I really do think I'll end up in Iqaluit [Nunavut] as hopefully I can find some meaningful work and I really do have to think about health care etc. 3 more years is my mantra as well. However, it's -48 C. there now and being cold and sick here in Taiwan I just can't see myself jumping right into that. Right now, all I can think about is getting my health back and trying to stay positive.

The teaching situation in Taiwan basically sucks: even young attractive couples get the run around. In many ways it's a no-brainer for me to head back to Canada. If I wash up on the streets of Vancouver toss me the odd quarter. I guess if I was writing a book about my life I wouldn't mind the last couple of chapters including a "northern" experience; although I have no illusions about it being a bed of roses. All I can do is give it my best shot.

Wish me luck.

J.

However much JT was given to self-mythologizing, it could only have been in desperation that he was preparing to bail out of Taiwan for the high Arctic. The anguish of being in ill-health and almost broke was particularly touching in the email he sent in early 2012:

Hi F.

Your email meant a lot to me. As you know it can be hard at times. I seem to be on the mend now. I was so relaxed and basically happy in Thailand and now this!! It's amazing how after all these years I'm still paying for my alcoholism but it is what it is. Also it's becoming increasingly obvious that going up north is really my only option. I just have to get my strength back (physically and emotionally). You mentioned in a previous email that sometimes all one has to lean on is courage—so true!

Love and kindness

J.

The straw at which JT was grasping at that moment was his contact with an old friend from New Brunswick who was a long-time resident of the far north. He apparently had offered JT a place on his sofa while he pursued job leads. JT had hopes of a position as a biology instructor at the Arctic Community College, or at least some prospect for substitute teaching. Even with his disadvantage as an older applicant, I thought that his schmoozing prowess could give him a decent shot if he got to the interview stage. I wrote him a reference.

Still, considering the exorbitant cost of airfare to the high Arctic and his dwindling resources, in flying from Taipei to Iqaluit in spring 2012, JT must have known he was on the closing chapters of his story. A few weeks after his arrival, there came this report:

Hi F.,

It's 'toonik' time here (spring festival) I'm at the library right now. Yesterday I watched an igloo-building contest. One dude was working with his bare hands whilst I was feeling a bit chilled. Typical spring weather one day it's -25 C. the next it's up around zero. I'm dealing with the cold quite well but jet lag doesn't help any. The wind is what everyone complains about the most.

I have to be patient, but I think- and hope to purple Jesus- that I made a good choice by coming up here. Got a good look at the northern lights like a green river in the sky.

Three more years, three more years, three more years...

J.



Keeping to an old habit, he also sent a postcard from Iqaluit. It showed a road sign in Inuktitut and English declaring 'Road to Nowhere.' The self-deprecating humour was intact but it was plain that plans were not working out. The job at the Arctic Community College had gone to a younger fellow and he was stuck working as an intern in a hospital ward. He was worried about contracting TB from the Inuit patients:

Hi F.,

Yep, I'm still up here. However, the only work I've been able to find so far is as a security guard/psychiatric attendant at the hospital. Not much pay for a pretty demanding job. However, I do get along with the nuts pretty well. I seem to have a way with people. A few other irons in the fire but if things don't improve in a few months it'll be back to Thailand and from there I'll probably look for some bullshit job in China.

It's "spring" now which means the snowy time of year— kind of like January in Halifax (need I say more). The social problems here (mostly related to substance abuse) are sad. But at least I'm working and getting by.

Sorry to unload on you like this but it's really nice to know that I've got a few friends out there.

Best

J.

PS— I wish I was 65!

The ‘PS’ was alarming. How many 60-year-olds would wish to be five years older? At that stage, it seems that five years was all he believed lay between himself and a paltry Canada pension which could sustain a modest retirement in Chiang Mai. Yet even as he wrote that email, maybe he sensed that sixty-five was already out of reach... When I gave him the sad news of the sudden death of my brother-in-law who had been his biology teacher in high school—along with his condolences was a hint of grim prescience:

F.,

It was sad to hear about G. as you say—we never know. Things aren't going that great in Iqaluit so I'm thinking about heading back to Thailand. I've probably got it but send your phone number again please it would be nice to talk (I have reason to believe the guy sitting next to me here in the library has active TB—need I say more?)

Buddha had it right,

Best

J.



Expecting him to be passing through Vancouver, I looked forward to his call from the airport. I would certainly have welcomed him to stop over for a visit with C. and me. In the first week of September when I guessed he was travelling, I waited for a confirming email. Once during that week, I failed to reach on time the ringing phone that was displaying an unknown number. There was no voice message. Could it have been JT?

Through the fall there were no emails from him. Disturbed by his silence, I sent three more messages but received no response. I wondered if in increasing bitterness, he was remembering some of the more unsavoury episodes in our history. I wondered whether he preferred not to be reminded of my good fortune (with decent job and wonderful partner) compared with his...

The following was my final email to him sent in mid-December, 2012:

Hi J.,

Had a dream about you last night—we were at some kind of reunion at our high school in the gritty south end of Saint John, unchanged from 1970. We were crusty old timers cackling on to a group of teenagers about how the world had changed in the last half-century, while they were smirking and poking away at their cell phones. Meanwhile, you were camped out in the basement of the old school. You asked if I could put you up but I was stuck, too—spending the night in a tent in the cold fog of New River Beach—the camping destination I most detested as a child.

Depressing dream it was— it must have been triggered by the email I got a few days ago from one of our mutual old friends, MC, who said his job has shifted from Fredericton to Saint John. Being too far to commute— he said he had no choice but to rent an apartment in the north end of the city. I asked him why he wasn't renting nearer downtown where he works. He said there were "too many drug dealers and hookers." It was probably that comment that was rattling around in my old head.

Anyway, it's been a while since I've heard from you. Are you in the Land of Smiles?

Things are OK here— I'm still beavering away— if the luck and the health holds, I'm down to the home stretch. My aim is to make twenty-five pensionable years. Of course, I would be ashamed to admit this to 25-year-old self who had so much higher expectations...

Meanwhile, we have reached the age at which we can no longer refer to ourselves as "middle-aged". We are OLD— and well along on the Road to Nowhere... Still, just as the late Levon Helm did in his "Midnight Ramble" concerts he held right up until a couple of weeks before he croaked— until the final breathe, let's keep ragin' on....

Take care,

(Old comrade), F.

It was only in the week after hearing of his death, that I realized my emails were going to cantrash52@hotmail.com. That was an old address (a pun on migrant English teachers) he hadn't used for several years. I had a more recent email address but somehow missed it last fall. I wondered whether in his last desperate weeks he might have reached out to me— if he hadn't assumed I'd cut him off. That thought will never fail to torment...





A week after first news of JT's passing, I received an email from one of JT's former colleagues— a retired government biologist in Fredericton. He had come across my name on a list of names and email addresses found in JT's personal effects:

Hello F.,

I'm not sure if you have already heard this sad news but, if not, I regret to tell you that our good friend, JT., has passed away in Cambodia on or about January 23rd. I am still waiting for more details but JT was in poor health at the time. His remains will be cremated in Cambodia and his ashes repatriated to Canada for burial.

We haven't met but some time ago J. asked if I would manage some of his affairs in the event of his death and gave me access to some of his friends and contacts. Please pass this on to anyone you think should be informed.

Thanks,

BR

Although I have never met BR, I was grateful to be contacted in such a manner. His announcement in the capacity of a dutiful executor and loyal friend of JT, was solemn and heartfelt— quite in contrast to the first news passed on almost as village gossip.

Thereafter, I exchanged several emails with BR. In true loyalty to our “dear departed friend”, BR discretely divulged the few details he knew I had to hear, while avoiding lurid speculation on the unknowns. Through the details of BR, the final pages of JT's story became clearer:

Unable to renew his Thai visa, in December of last year he left Thailand for Cambodia where he managed to find an English teaching job in Phnom Penh. Then came the wrenching detail: ‘*J.'s death certificate provided little detail, but loss of blood is indicated.*’

As already suspected: our dear friend had ended his own life.

Amid the shock of that confirmation, questions swirled: ‘*Where exactly was he and what was he thinking? Was it a spontaneous act or was it planned? Did he cut his wrists or his throat? What were his final thoughts as his lifeblood ebbed away?*’ The unknown details are left to torment.

Still, some further details in BR's email evoked stark glimpses of JT's probable situation: Added to his chronic health woes, was a diagnosis of diabetes. Yet even in sickness, he needed to work. To remain in Southeast Asia, he had to teach English. At sixty, he barely qualified for the lowliest under-the-table work in the private English teaching mill. In his despair, he might even

have backslid—waking up in self-disgust after a bender... Several times I recall his use of the Churchillian phrase: the “black dog of depression”. Through all the tribulation of his final days, he was surely hounded by it...



One concrete detail which BR furnished was that JT's final residence was a place called the Golden Star guesthouse. In a web search I found the address is: Road 172, # 142a3, Phnom Penh. The place is on a street filled with other backpacker hostels. The photos of the Golden Star on '*Trip Advisor*' show a room with green walls, narrow shower stall and a tube TV. On the wall behind the double bed is a picture of a goddess of Buddhist mythology.

If JT's last room was similar, it would have been more inviting than one in some nursing home in Canada. JT would probably have felt that Phnom Penh was a far more appealing setting for the end of his story than a frowsy room in the south end of Saint John, New Brunswick. Maybe that was part of his grim calculation...

Remembering his Buddha necklace, I wondered whether he had considered whether an act regarded as a mortal sin in Christianity might be similarly condemned in Buddhism... In a Google search ('*Buddhism + suicide*') I found a parable in which a devotee of the Buddha commits suicide by cutting his own throat. As for that means of release from “unbearable suffering” the Buddha, apparently neither approved nor condemned...

Following upon the email exchanges with BR, we had a lengthy phone call. He had no further details of the suicide and I did not want to seem morbid by further inquiring. Through most of the conversation, we traded stories about how we came to know JT. BR said he met JT in the 1980s in post-grad biology classes at the provincial university. Toward the end of the chat, he remarked:

“You know, when I have been contacting JT's friends—I'm been amazed that all his friends on this list are such intelligent professional people.”

The implication was that JR's network of connections were not typical of a man with such an erratic history... I can only speculate that BR and the others on JT's list of friends—including medical doctors, scientists and even a psychiatrist—cherished the wit and spontaneity of JT at his best. At some level, perhaps they regret not having themselves indulged in something of JT's free-spiritedness...



Through BR's group email list, I got in touch with GB, who was acting as the co-executor of JT's meager estate. Also from greater Saint John, and a few years younger than JT (we had never met). His mother had been a Latvian immigrant, like JT's. GB informed of the plans for a memorial service in Saint John in late spring.

I was tempted to damn the expenses and fly back for that one day. But I knew JT himself would have thought it foolish to spend much money flying across the country for thirty-six hours. Instead, I decided to make a donation to Lo, JT's 'widow' in Chiang Mai. GB assured it would be passed on after the payment of expenses for repatriation of his ashes and burial—presumably beside him parents in old Saint John. Without brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins—or children—JT was the last of his line...

I was hesitant to ask GB whether at the time of his death, JT still had in his possession of the 'heirlooms' he showed me during that Victoria Day weekend visit in 2007. Included was his grandmother's fat diamond ring—which he probably had to pawn before leaving Canada.

What he did with his Nazi artifact is more a mystery: He had an official letter sent to his mother in the early 1940s from the office of *Der Führer* in Berlin. It was an expression of gratitude for her services as a nurse for the *Wehrmacht* in Nazi-occupied Latvia. The letter bore the authentic signature of Adolf Hitler...

Before that road trip across Canada, JT secreted these 'treasures' in the cavity of a false book he'd bought during our excursion to Granville Island. If he'd hung on to that letter to the end, he might well have wondered about the evil it attracted...

Still, JT's most precious gems were not of the kind to be unloaded in a pawnshop or on a creepy Nazi souvenir website. Those were his stories:

Even in high school, he told of how his mother met Field Marshall Rommel; how she trekked from Latvia to Vienna to escape the Red Army. Then there was JT's own experience of attending the Republican National Convention in Miami in 1968 as a youth delegate, sponsored by his father's American friend. He spoke of shaking the hand of Richard Nixon ('He looked like a guy in an awful hurry!') Of course, there are his tales of reckless adventure and shit-lucky escapes. Even unembellished, all that would have made for an exciting read...

In the last minutes I saw him on our drive back to Saint John from Red Head Beach in August 2011, he hinted that was working on an autobiography. I wonder how far he got in writing it and what was his working title. It could have been '*My 109 Lives*'.

I regret not asking GB if any of JT's writings were among his possessions. Now that his friends are old, memories of his passage—of all our passages—will soon disappear forever...

Therein I think of the climactic scene from *'Blade Runner'*—one of the movies on the list of favourites that JT mentioned in our wide-ranging chats during his visit in 2007.

As his pre-programmed life span expires, Roy the replicant, played by Rutger Hauer (to whom JT bore some resemblance) says: *"All those moments will be lost in time, like [coughs] tears in the rain. Time to die..."*



Finally, I think of that night back in the fall of 1969 when JT* spoke of death as “the final adventure”. Now only to him—and only for an unrecorded instant—was it revealed whether or not that final adventure was what he'd once hoped for, forty-three years before...

Hope you make it safely through *bardo*, old friend. Back on this side, we miss you.

2013, March



Depiction of bardo

*My friend's identity respectfully kept in confidence