

PLAIN PANCAKES

Fathers and Sons

by Guy Sprung

The Son looks over the pool of dark water. As happened every Spring in the early Fifties, the basement of the family home, not far from the Ottawa River, is flooded. The Son has ventured down the stairs to watch the Father confront nature. Electricity has been turned off for safety. The Father, a shadowy figure off in a corner, is working, - to fix the sump pump, or clear the drain. Like King Canute, struggling in vain to turn back the tide. The Son takes a step forward, thinking he will cross the intriguing pool of infinite to join his hero Father. A splash. A thrashing of little limbs. A howling panic. The Father sloshes over, face a mixture of fear, relief and awkwardness and grabs his Son - what do you do with a screaming, sopping-wet infant? Mother arrives to save the day.

Memory transubstantiated into fiction. I am either two or three years old. Two, most likely. Probably thought I could walk on the water. Who knows where fiction ends and the real begins?

Four-year-old Son and his Father are peeing into the toilet bowl. Son looks over at his father. "Yours is so big!" Father is a little embarrassed, tries to find the right thing to say. "Don't worry son, yours will grow big too." *I only now realize, this was probably the most intimate moment we had in 54 years of sharing a life together.*

"Dad's bump is getting bigger". The Son, now eight years old, whispered into his Sister's ear. Sister throws him back a smirk, "That's his brains sticking out, dummy. He is too intelligent and there is not enough room in his head for all his brains, so they push out and make his bump." She turns a page in her book, and shifts her body away from her Brother with all of the disdain she can extract from two years of greater proximity to the lofty heights of adulthood.

It is a warm mid-summer evening and the family is up the Ottawa Valley visiting a cottage rented for the summer by the Aunt and the Uncle. They weren't the children's real aunt and uncle, just close friends the Mother, a Berliner who had fled in August of '39, had made ten years ago while the Father was off in Europe fighting the War and she was vetting personal letters of the German POWs for the Government Censorship Board.

When I look at photos from that time, there it is, a bump the size of a marble cut in half, protruding from your right temple. The Father is sitting at the end of the verandah reading with an intensity that isolates him from the rest of the world, the light from the coal oil lamp turning his face a waxen yellow. A large insect bangs noisily against the outside of the screen. The Father reads on.

What were you reading?

Memory tells me it was one of Lawrence Durrell's novels from the Alexandria Quartet. All the rage with the intelligentsia in those years. The copies of all four books from that time are still on my/your bookshelf now.

As the Son watches the Father reading, snippets of the adult conversation over that afternoon's tea replay themselves in his mind; snippets infused with self-important tones, passed around with the pieces of toasted raisin bread with cinnamon and honey. "Egypt, of course was the cross roads of Asia and Africa and Europe at the time." "Oh, that passage on the totality of love." "Yes, the shifting point of view of the four novels is a reflection of the subjectivity of mankind, the solipsism of the universe." *How can I have remembered such details if I was only eight? This must be retroactive fantasy of some kind. The mind backfilling the pot-holes of memory.*

The Son switches his gaze to the other end of the verandah. His Mother is playing cards with Aunt and Uncle. The Father had played a few hands but, hating the triviality of cards, escaped to his book. *Gin rummy, probably. Mother/Mutti taught me the game that summer.*

The Uncle deals a fresh hand, a gentle smile lighting up every time he placed a card in front of the Mother. His, "Nordic beauty", he called her in public. Uncle and Aunt had no children and had formed an emotional attachment to the whole family, spoiling the Son and his Sister with sweets, comic books and knick-knacks. The Mother, who never had known, nor never would know any man in her life other than her husband, returns the smile as she picks up her cards, permitting herself a brief moment of harmless enjoyment as the object of the Uncle's admiring gaze.

A sudden puff of wind flickers the flame of the lamp, the whole verandah seems to shudder and the dark shadow of the Father momentarily hovers huge on the screens. He looks up briefly, turns toward the darkness outside, looks back in the direction of the Son, and announces to no one in particular, "might rain". Then returns to his book. The Son touches his own temple in the exact spot where his Father's 'bump' had flashed in the gloom. *I would probably have touched the wrong side of my head, my mind's image being the mirror reverse of reality.* The Sister has continued reading. *Her book? She was going through her Louise May Alcott period. Would have been Little Women.*

The next morning after breakfast, Aunt and Mother are washing the dishes. The Son watches his Father shave. A cracked mirror is set up against the cottage stairs outside. Water from a chipped white enamel jug fills a yellow china bowl. A cake of soap in a round wooden container is lathered up with a brush and then, with ostentatious care, the Father applies foam to his chin until he has a thick white beard, like Santa Claus. He picks up the shiny metal razor, twists the handle until the two flaps on the razor head open and inserts a new, flat, two-sided razor blade, then twists the flaps shut.

I used to have a razor like that, briefly, when I was in my twenties. Bought it at a flea market in the East End of London. I have probably confused the memory of watching you shave with the physical memory of shaving myself. The razor makes tiny scraping sounds as the Father, with neat short strokes, plows the thick white shaving cream off his face, after every second stroke dunking the razor in the water to wash the foam off with a flick of his wrist. On the Verandah, hidden by the screens, the Sister brushes her long blond hair with adolescent determination as she watches the Son watching their Father. A small black comb slicks the Father's jet-black hair straight

back on his head. Those lines of shiny black hair lying flat on his head remind the Son of the hair of his favourite hockey player. Except the Rocket does not have a mustache.

After a careful look into the mirror to assure himself he is to his own satisfaction, the Father packs the instruments of his morning ritual into a small brown satchel. *“Life is an aesthetic experience”, according to your favourite continental philosopher. You lived this, believing you were acting on the stage of Life. First as a soldier fighting for your country, then acting the role of a father for your son.* “Son, I’m just going for a little walk, might do a bit of target practice, would you like to come with me?” The Son can hardly believe his good fortune. From the verandah the Sister, her hair now woven in neat braids almost to her waist, jealously watches Father and Son pick their way down toward the river bank among the stones and cow-patties.

The sun hangs half-way up in a perfect azure sky. Across the mile-wide Ottawa River loom the greener hills of Québec. The two walk in silence, the Son trying desperately to keep up with the longer gait of his progenitor, the Father favouring a small Khaki bag hanging over his shoulder. Reaching the river, they head upstream. Way further upstream, hours by car, was the Army camp where the Father was stationed. The Son knew every detail of his father’s military life. Two pips meant a Lieutenant. One crown meant a Major. His Father was one crown and one pip - a Battalion Commander, the Commanding Officer.

Only a couple of months ago the husband of the Queen had come to inspect his Father’s troops. At home, they had a picture of his Father standing erect, his swagger stick tucked under his arm, saluting as the Duke marched between tight rows of his Father’s men standing, rifles shouldered, in perfect formation. *That photo could have been a still from a WW II movie. You took your role seriously. You acted your part to perfection. But you must have been a good CO, or the Army Brass would not have chosen your Battalion to be inspected by the Duke.*

The riverbank widens into a gentle sandy beach, enclosed by a steep rocky embankment. A textbook spot for target practice. The Father looks around, kicks a chewed-up wooden table leg, buried flotsam, from the sand, stands it on a rock with the embankment as backdrop. From the khaki bag, he extracts a large black pistol. Holds it out to the Son. “This is a German 9mm Luger. It is a pistol. Don’t ever call it a “gun”. A gun is piece of artillery. This was presented to me by a German Officer when he surrendered himself and his men.”

From the bag the Father extracts a handful of loose bullets and proceeds to insert them one by one into a long black magazine, then slides the magazine up the handle. It locks into position with a click. “This is the safety lever. When you can see the red that means the safety is off and you can fire your weapon. Red for danger.” Father walks to the river’s edge, as far away from the table leg as he can without getting his boots wet. “Stand back, off to the side here.” He takes up a position sideways to the target, feet apart, lifts his outstretched arm and points it at the table leg. “A Luger has a powerful recoil. Always stand sideways so your shoulder absorbs the kick. Don’t quite lock your elbow or the pistol will jerk up when you fire and spoil your aim.”

A loud bang echoes across the Ottawa, followed immediately by a high-pitched whine travelling over the Father’s head. The Father looks up, puzzled, worried. The Son looks at the table leg, disappointed. It is still standing, untouched. The Father once again takes up his stance, this time somewhat more carefully. A second loud bang, followed by the whine of

the ricochet whizzing just over the heads of Father and Son. Again, the Father looks up towards the sound of the ricochet, alarm flickers briefly in his eyes. The Son runs toward the table leg in disbelief. Not a mark on it. The Father motions the Son back behind him. Lifts the pistol a third time. The bang is followed by a sharp thud as something hits the sand right in front of the Son. He looks down. “Dad, Dad, look! Here’s the bullet!”

The Son reaches down to pick up the tiny mangled object still spinning between his feet only to burn his fingers on the hot lead. “Aiihh!” The Father is white-faced with relief, a little humiliated. “Perhaps we’ll stop.” He flicks the safety lever, empties the chamber, extracts the magazine and packs the pistol back into the Khaki bag. The Son doesn’t understand why this exciting adventure should have to cease and is downhearted as they head back to the cottage. *What was that all about Dad? A scene staged to impress your son? Were you trying to teach him a proper respect for firearms? Were you deriving satisfaction from imprinting an image of the manly Father onto my spirit? But then had to abort the performance when, as it were, it backfired?*

The Son is ten. The family is on its way to Sweden where the Father has been appointed Canadian Military Attaché. In Munich, the family stops to visit an old university friend. The Father goes out and buys himself a green Loden Mantel. “I had always wanted one as a student”, he declares, “but I could never afford it.” For the next forty-three years that green Loden Mantel was the signature of his strolling, meditating self. He also had a Tyrolean hat and an Austrian walking stick. *What a bizarre image for a Canadian Military Attaché. Green Loden Mantel, Tyrolean hat and an Austrian walking stick swinging as you stride with that unique sprung rhythm to your gait through the Swedish drizzle on your Sunday constitutional walk. Living your life as an aesthetic experience.*

In his late forties, the Son now in his teens, the Father starts to hanker back to his own teenaged summers on the Lake of the Woods near Winnipeg. He needs to head into the wilderness in a canoe, to touch base with the infinite. Like everything he does, the Father attacks canoe trips as if planning a military maneuver. He has duffel carrying-bags sewn that are the precise size of the sleeping bags he buys for the whole family. He investigates the latest light-weight Egyptian cotton for a tent, buys funny little plastic containers for the sugar and metal ones for the eggs. He answers an ad in the newspaper and for \$25 buys an old Peterborough canoe. The family goes on canoe trips.

What were you searching for? A communion with nature to complement your fascination with Eastern Thought acquired as you anticipated your retirement from the army? Or, -pure conjecture here-, was it an attempt to grapple with the daemons of your own family, revisit your own youth, and, perhaps contemplate your own father and mother? Were you a snob, Dad? Is this why you fled Winnipeg? Ashamed of your father because you had managed the remarkable feat of a Ph.D. in Philosophy in a foreign language, while he had little more than a grade-school education? You never talked much about your parents. They were church people, you said. If you played baseball on a Sunday you got a severe licking.

The Father buys special rain slickers for the canoe trips, ones with wide sleeves that snap around the arms and leave them free to paddle in the rain. The family has rented a cottage in Québec north of Ottawa. A summer thunderstorm is approaching. Torrential rain and fabulous heavenly fireworks. The Father insists on testing the new slickers in the downpour. Father and Son are standing outside under the chimney, an impressive stone structure. The eye of the storm is overhead, the rain torrential, the slickers keeping Father and Son dry.

There is a flash of lightening and a loud clap of thunder. The two share a worried glance. The Father, with a tight smile, acts nonchalant: “Oh”, he says, “that was pretty close, wasn’t it?” The Son nods, petrified. *The next thing I know I am lying on the ground surrounded by huge rocks. I look over. You are also flat on your back. The rain continues to pour down. I look up at the chimney, or rather where the chimney was.* The bolt of lightning has destroyed the chimney. Father and Son look in awe over the pieces of rocks and concrete, spewed on the ground like monstrous confetti. Miraculously, the skull-crushing boulders have fallen everywhere but not on them. *It dawns on us what has happened. Lightning hit the chimney and the electrical charge of the fragmenting bolt knocked both of us unconscious.*

Father and Son rush into the cottage. The bolt has traversed the inside and out the back door, leaving burn marks on the wood adjacent to every metal bracket or screw along its path. A spur of electricity hit the Sister, she lies in a fetal position paralyzed on her bed. There is a small fire in the kitchen. The Son puts the fire out. The Father comforts his daughter who, after twenty minutes, has her full movement back. No seeming lasting side effects. *Those early teen canoe trips. You taught me to inspire the wilderness. To look, and feel and see and wonder. How many fathers and sons have been hit by the same bolt of lightning and survived? I tell my own kids now, whenever an electric storm approaches, to remember that lightening never strikes twice in the same spot, if they want to stay safe, they should just stick close to me.*

The father extracts his pocket watch with ostentatious solemnity from his trousers. Holding it in the palm of his hand, he glances down to check the time. Nods as if he his assumptions about the universe have been confirmed, rewinds it a few twists, then slips it back into its trouser pocket, lifting his head to gaze off into the distance. *You had a pocket watch that you treated with iconic deference. I grew up watching the way, with studied formality you would extract it from the watch pocket you had in all but your work trousers. You would glance down at it, perhaps rewind it and lift your head, gazing into the distance as if planning your next entrance onto the stage of life.*

The story of that pocket watch is the only story you ever told us about your own father. And you told it to us more than once. On your fifteenth or sixteenth birthday, I can’t remember which, your father gave you a pricy pocket watch. A significant outlay for the family’s frugal finances. Perhaps my memory is faulty and it was for your high school graduation. In any case, it was intended to mark your attainment of manhood. As you told the story, you lost that brand-new watch, very quickly, somehow. The casual negligence of male teenagehood. When you faced your Father to admit to the loss, you assumed you would get a severe licking. Instead your father just nodded. The next day he went out and bought a second watch. This second watch was even more expensive than the first one. It was, as you tell the story with your hyperbole, the best watch money could buy at the time and more than your father could reasonably afford. “Here”, says your father, “now don’t lose this one.” You never did lose it. I have the watch now. I had it repaired, twice, to keep it ticking. Once I lost it for six months. A friend found it buried under the seat-cushion of my scruffy second-hand reading chair. It lives on my night table these days. I don’t have the courage to carry it around with me. Don’t want to lose it. Every morning after I wake up, I wind the watch, gaze into the distance, and take a moment to respect the conundrum of existence and my good fortune not to have been born in Syria or Iraq.

The Father returns home from work, opening the front door of the family home and lets out his whistle, announcing his arrival to the Mother. Low long; high short; high short; medium long. *Like a Kabuki actor pulling focus for his entrance. I have adopted that whistle, sometimes, and Jenna, our family dog, comes wagging her tail to greet me.*

After supper, the Father retires to his study. The Son now in his late teens, peers briefly through the glass doors, checking his father out. Father sits at his desk, hunched over immense tomes of books with unusual lettering. The Father is teaching himself Sanskrit, preparing his retirement from the Army, a return to his first love, philosophy, and a second career as a University Professor. Takso, the family budgerigar, hops about on the Father's balding head, chirping noisily. 'Takso', short for 'Takso-muecke', - 'thank you very much' in Swedish. A small reminder of the family's stay in Scandinavia. The Son has sped out the back door. He has things to do and places to go and people (girls too) to see.

Then came the separation years. The Father went to India to study Sanskrit. The Son went to university and discovered a passion for theatre, ending up in Europe on his "wandering apprenticeship years", learning his craft. The Father started teaching philosophy at a university in Ontario and the Son started travelling the country and the world directing theatre. One trying to put thoughts into words, the other trying to define words through action on stage. Years passed, each comfortable ignoring the other existed. *Why theatre? How and why did I discover a passion for theatre? Was I, unknowingly, trying to understand the reality behind your acting existence?*

The family is gathering to celebrate the parents 60th wedding anniversary. Sister has arrived from Vancouver with her new husband. The Father, his dementia getting worse, is watching the preparations for the outdoor meal with no idea what is going on. *As I was setting up a table for the food with one of your granddaughters, you shuffled over, lost, humiliated. "Have we had the party already?" Were you panicking because you didn't know what to act anymore? The smile on your face as family and neighbours toast you and Mom and your 60 years together was empty, searching.*

New Year's Eve, 1999. The Father, the Mother, the Son, now himself a father, and his two children are watching TV in the living room, watching as the Millennium arrives around the world on its way to Canada. A magnificent television spectacle, an amazing conjunction of technology and pagan bacchanalia. Father, now Grandfather lasts as far as Paris. The Gallic phallic explosions of the Tour Eiffel. Exhausted from another day of trying to stay alive, confused from all the young energy in the room and the TV noise, Grandfather rises and stumbles over to Mother, now Grandmother. The pair blocking the view of the television spectacle as he leans into her, forehead to forehead, -having in the last years shrunk down to her size.

They stand there for a moment, two great Apes, toe to toe, like exhausted heavyweight boxers leaning on each other at the end of a title bout. A blank look wafts over his eyes, briefly. Then her presence brings him back to the present. She feels for him, helpless. "Perhaps I better go up to bed now", he sighs. Then he shuffles towards the kitchen. Near the door he stops, turns, with a little forced smile, he gives the Son, now Father and his Grandchildren that characteristic wave of his hand, and then disappears. *Even this near the end, Dad, did the responsibility of putting on a show guide your actions?*

Soon, under the din of the TV, the Family can hear the familiar sounds, the clunk of dishes coming out of the cupboard and the washer. For no matter how tired or disoriented he might be, the Father sets the table for breakfast before going up to bed. No matter how many other new items have slipped from his memory that day, no matter how enfeebled or dispirited he might feel, he had to act his duty and that was to set out the table, to lay out the

cutlery and the grains and cereals and the little metal jar of maple syrup so the next morning all could sit down to what the kids called, “Granddad’s special breakfast”. *Was this a desperate reenactment of a ritual driven by your body memory, no longer by your mind? Trying to stem the tide of your leaking brain and hold back the chaos of gathering darkness?* Then the drone of the electrically operated chair as Grandfather heads up to the second floor. The house echoes, vibrates. Silence. Grandfather settles in for another night fighting for sleep to come, wrestling his daemons and the fear, if he actually does get to sleep, whether he will wake up the next morning.

Our last conversation? In the week between Christmas and New Year we were sitting in your study, trying to have a father-son talk. Neither of us knows quite how to begin. I am too awkward to cross the chasm of groping confusion and confession that separates us. Your embarrassment at your own feebleness has internalized and isolated you. We both know this may be the last time we get to talk, but we don’t know that we know this. The life-long suspicion of sentiment and your Eastern philosophy’s distrust in the ability of words to capture reality, passed from you onto me now locks up our lips. The silence I think, I hope, is eloquent. Your eyes wander slowly over your bookshelves. Those wall-to-wall custom-built bookshelves of your study. Room only for the windows and a fireplace. With a quiet voice, you break into our silence. “You know, I was worried that putting all my books up on display like this. That it might be ostentatious. As if I was trying to show off. It was your Mom who persuaded me it was all right. She told me to go ahead and put the shelves up.” Your eyes sweep around the shelves again, more slowly, “I guess these books have been my companions, really. Yes, they have been my friends.” There were tears in your eyes. It is the one and only time I can remember seeing you cry.

On New Year’s Day, Grandfather talks about wanting to drive into town to get a newspaper. The Son, now Father, explains to him that he no longer should be driving. Explains to him that he is endangering himself and others on the road. His eyes, his short-term memory, his physical strength, all could cause an accident. He has to understand that he has no right to drive anymore. The Grandfather’s fierce pride flares up and he refuses to accept this. “I can drive better to-day than I have ever driven in my life. Why, if there was a war on, I would be driving a jeep through the desert.” *Yes, you did that, nearly sixty years ago.*

Only five days later, late evening, early January. The entrance hall of the Peterborough Regional Health Centre is all but deserted. A small, chunky Security Guard has met the Son beside the information desk. At the elevators the Guard, with an exaggerated, almost Dickensian humility, stands aside, “My condolences. It is a most difficult time.” *Awkward, even false, to be accepting such sentiments from a total stranger.* In silence the two descend two floors.

The expanded silence of mourning. The Guard ushers the Son into a tiny office adjacent to the hospital fridge. The body has been rolled here temporarily, to allow the Son a chance to say his good-byes. With studied sombreness the Guard holds out a box of Kleenex then, with another half bow, departs leaving the door slightly ajar. The Father lies on his back on a hospital gurney, the sheet covering the body has been draped back to expose his face. His eyes are open. His skin gleams with a white waxen sheen. He looks alive, peaceful. *Those wrinkles I watched grow over time, those liver spots, the bushy, upturned ‘devil’ eyebrows.* A few drops of dried blood are caked in one corner of the Father’s mouth.

The Son looks at His Father and can’t put any name to the miasma of feelings coursing through his veins. *What was the short story where one of the characters says: “The best thing a Father can*

do for his son is to die.”? Well, you did that for me. The inverse of the Isaac/ Abraham story- you lie on this alter of sacrifice for my sake, but no voice from the sky will save you.

The Son pulls the sheet to expose his Father’s feet. One ankle swollen and purple with broken tiny veins. He recognizes symptoms they share. *The doctor explained at one of my annual check-ups, “Weak valves in your veins. A congenital disease. You got it from someone in your family.” The virtues of inheritance.* The Son looks at the wizened toes. Those yellowed toenails. He remembers the fascination with which, as a small boy, he watched the Father trim those toe nails with meticulous care. He looks to the door left ajar, sensing the Security Guard looming outside in the corridor. He moves to close it. The Son touches the toes tentatively. *“Should I have done that? Am I allowed to do this?” Holds them. Touching your father’s feet. It is a sign of reverence in India.* The feet don’t feel cold at all. *Here lies Cronus. You castrated your own father by geographical displacement, you tried to eat your own son by devouring him with self-criticism. Now you lie here dead yourself.*

The Son pulls the sheet back to the waist. The doctors have crossed the arms on the body’s chest. No undertaker has yet touched the body. The plastic hospital identification bracelet is around one wrist. The gold wedding ring hangs on a shrunken finger. Sixty years of marriage. The Son puts his right hand gently over the right hand of his dead Father. The skin warms to his touch. It is still surprisingly supple, even moves to the pressure of his fingers. Only if he presses down harder can he feel the cold of death in the flesh beneath the skin. A wave of nausea punches the Son’s stomach. His body convulses as if he were being sick. Tears shoot forth. He grabs for the Kleenex box, angry at himself for losing control, yet at the same time relishing the grief. A small bulge where the sheet covers the corpse’s crotch. The Son tries to laugh. *Wonder what it looks like now? My maker so to speak.*

The Son stands there alone with his Father. So many questions he had wanted to ask, so many things he had wanted to say. Looks around. Such a silly little office this is. Some junior technician’s, or intern’s, probably. Empty vials and petri dishes and a few manuals on shelves. A tiny desk. A very tiny desk. *And you, shoved against the wall on that silly hospital trolley. Fifteen years ago, you were in a similar hospital for your quadruple plus heart by-pass operation. Catatonic with worry but putting on a brave front and trying to chat amiably. The nurses came and wheeled you off to the operating room on a gurney similar to the one you are lying on now. Just as you are rounding the corner out the door, with a show of acted bravado you grinned and waved your hand casually, like royalty acknowledging a crowd.*

In the parking lot the Son slams the door of his ten-year-old Jetta, takes a deep breath then turns the key in the ignition. *I was born to parents who had lived the Depression, then lived through the irrationality of a world war that proved, if there was any doubt, that God was dead. Did I grow up watching two people whose only path through a meaningless universe was to impose a meaning on life? Words get their meaning through action. This was your mantra. Was acting your parts in life the only way to confront the chaos of irrationality? Was I condemned to try and understand this world in which the road to survival was an acceptance that life is a performance? Is this why I ended up working in theatre? To try and define the meaning of words through acting and action?*

After an overnight downfall so intense it nearly swamped the family boat, the sun rises in a silken blue sky. First rays slip through the canopy of trees that surround the porch where I am alone, wrestling with these words, wrestling with my questioning. Inside the cabin my kids are still sleeping. I breathe the air, the dappled greenness of health and life and the birds' morning (mourning?) chorus so insistently loud it is almost noise. Conscious, with a leaven of guilt, that I am one of the privileged on this earth. Born into this paradise rather than fleeing the bombs in Syria, Gaza, or choking on the pollution of Beijing.

Here, on this porch, over the past twenty years in the summers, you have worked too. In this very spot, you have wrestled with your friends Friedrich and Ludwig and with the radical Eastern skeptics, especially your special friend Nagarjuna. You too have, in this very spot, marveled at the invisible whisper of the wind in the early morning leaves. That yellow bird with the white beak that now flits from one branch of the oak tree to the next, throwing suspicious glances in my direction, you have sat here and watched the bird's grandfather and great grandfather do exactly the same. This little Nirvana you have passed on to your son and your son's children. You are here now, with me, and I wrestle with you, like Jacob with his shadow. Have I become you? How frightening. How distasteful. How...glorious. I am teaching myself the names of these birds singing their cries and I want to mint this moment with perfect lyric wordsmithery.

There, look, to describe my intentions, I hit upon terms of aggression or base currency. Minor illustration of what your Nietzsche admonished: "Words are not a reflection of an objective truth. Words, names, are merely a tool in man's imperializing of the universe." As I learn more to identify more birds, I feel more self-satisfied and more in control of my/our little plot of paradise. Naming is a way of owning, of controlling. It does not mean I know the nature of the bird any better. But I am going to learn the names nevertheless. That yellow bird, is an Evening Grosbeak. And the ubiquitous twee-taweeep is the call of the Red-eyed Vireo. This is the light drone of the Ruby-throated Humming Bird buzzing the verandah screens.

For years you too sat here in silence and astounded. There, now I inhabit your reality, and it is named. Can I accept it with the same grace with which you passed it on? When I was eighteen, I had a month to spare before starting my summer job. I came up here. I built the foundation of this cabin. Alone, bitten by bugs, dragging the lumber and the bags of mortar and the cinder-blocks up this long hill. Like Sisyphus in a mythical Hell. The concrete pillars that support this cabin, badly laid as they are, were fashioned by my hands. The wooden two-by-twelves that support this porch, I lined them in place and hammered them solid. You sat here over the years, writing, *grace à moi!* And you never even bothered to say thank you. It pissed me off. I may have taken your place, but You sat here on this veranda for thirty years on the back of my labours, unacknowledged.

This is too complicated. Even trying to deny you only confirms your present presence. How much is you and how much my need for you? Or a figure like you? Are you merely a convenient image filling out a template in my soul? No Dad, "friends" is not a term to describe our relationship. But there always was, and still is, some unworded covenant between us. And oh, that little bump on your head, your protrusion. Over the years, it shrunk and miraculously disappeared. I can't even remember when I ceased to notice its existence.

This is fiction. Of course. Everything that can be thought must be fiction. Truth is itself a fiction. Like much fiction, it is based on facts, or true-isms, filtered through prejudice and bias reinforcement, or it plays with some combination of the above. Who can actually know when fiction ends and truth begins? We manipulate fiction to create reality, to sharpen, sharpenwhat, our thoughts? Our self knowledge? Our self love? To clothe our naked selves in a cloak of myth, metaphor? To allow the process of becoming to occur?

The last time you were taken to the emergency in that Peterborough hospital. I phoned to get an update on your condition. There were no beds free in the ICU so they had you in a corridor. The nurse said you were doing fine and predicted a speedy recovery. “But he is restless, he is trying to pull out all the life support systems.” Twenty minutes later I phone again. You are dead. You had said, loudly, repeatedly, “I don’t want to end up a vegetable.” Did you fashion your own exit? Were you too proud to continue when you were no longer able to act the part of Soldier/Philosopher/Grandfather to your self-satisfaction? Pulled the plug early on your earthly being to leave a more dignified afterlife performance in the memories of those you touched?

In your last attempt to use words to explore existence, your last published groping after truth, you talked about everyday inner and outer existence being a kind of “durable stage setting in which life is enacted”. Your life quest was to transpire these everyday beliefs/illusions blocking/concealing our vision/understanding. You were seeking to identify the underlying Thrall, the enabling presumption that accompanies and permeates all judgments of sense that arise within it. You used the word, “Mystery”, to adumbrate that which lies behind this everyday theatre-like construct we live in. A larger life? –A mystery human beings have a need to keep searching out/for? And words, feeble, bias–reaffirming, solipsistic and slippery as they are, are the imperfect tools of this search. But can words without acting and action have meaning? Here our beliefs, the beliefs of Father and Son are congruent.

My son, your grandson, finally awake, comes onto the porch where I have been writing since dawn. Eight years old, wearing pajamas with the insignias of the original six NHL teams on them. His voice is clear, authoritative: “Dad! I don’t want banana pancakes for breakfast. I want just plain.”

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