

# *The Solace of Fortitude*

(Celebrating Twenty Years of Well-Intentioned Futility)

*“I have no desires, save the desire to express myself in defiance of all the world’s muteness.”*

*-Vladimir Nabokov*

I’m a dreamer. Always have been.

I’m prone to sudden, unexpected fugues and waking fantasies. It’s why I’ve never seriously contemplated getting a driver’s license. One day, while on my way to Saskatoon for my monthly used bookstore crawl, I might just *drift off*...and when you’re behind the wheel of a ton and a half of metal and molded plastic hurtling along at 110 clicks, well, that’s not necessarily a good thing. There might be life-altering consequences.

When I was a kid, I loved role-playing. I drew my inspiration from television and in the late 60’s and early 70’s that meant shows like “Land of the Giants” and “Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea”. I guess you could say one of my earliest influences was Irwin Allen, and I’ll thank you to wipe that smirk off your face.

In the games we played, I was always the intrepid commander, my sisters and friends shanghaied into serving as my stalwart crew. We moved stealthily through the trees or explored the cement culvert on our property, venturing inside its cave-like interior once the spring run-off had subsided. We had to be wary of traps and ambushes—our unseen enemies were very clever.

Sometimes the plots got convoluted, hopelessly muddled. I resented my shipmates' attempts to assume a larger role within the drama I was creating. Thanks to my autocratic leadership, they gradually slipped away over the course of the afternoon. Soon I was the only one left who hadn't been captured or slain, courageously struggling on, devising plans and elaborate schemes to free my imprisoned companions.

An imagination is a wonderful thing and I've always counted mine among my most precious attributes. It enables me to bear the slings and arrows of everyday existence, the physical and emotional pain we all must endure over the course of our lives. The steady accumulation of losses, a body count that rises with each passing year. My imagination provides an escape hatch, access to places far from mundane reality; *an endlessly receding corridor, an infinite number of doors to choose from...*

I can't remember when I *didn't* write stories. Mostly I put pen to paper to entertain myself—boredom is the bane of my existence and making up a universe from scratch is a good way to kill off a lazy Sunday afternoon. Or an interminable math class. Zoning out, *a la* Walter Mitty--only drawn back to consensual reality by a sharp rebuke from an exasperated teacher.

One early tale, approximately 150 words long, involved an Indy car hurtling into the stands during a race and killing dozens of onlookers. Hideous injuries were described in minute detail. I suppose I was nine or ten.

Sadly, my entire early canon, all those works of a budding genius were lost in various floods, relocations and family misadventures. Too bad. They would have confirmed that from a tender age I possessed a surreal streak, a weird and somewhat ghastly sensibility.

I don't know where it originated. My father was a morbid man, it's true, irreverent and profane but I don't think he's to blame. Just a kink in the wiring somewhere, a glitch in the brain chemistry. My skewed perspective at once a blessing and a curse: it strains the mental faculties to their limit yet is the source of my desire and ability to tell stories.

I suppose being a writer was a form of empowerment. I was a shy, withdrawn kid—thanks to my fertile imagination I could live a whole other existence, truly a life of the mind.

I want to emphasize, I was no prodigy. My early prose efforts featured plotlines and characters lifted from “Star Trek” and other movies and TV series. The aforementioned intrepid captains, fearsome space battles, bizarre aliens and interstellar conspiracies figured prominently in my early oeuvre. With my friend Brent, I concocted countless ideas for 8mm films. These cinematic efforts rarely got beyond the drawing board, although I did write a number of short scripts and scenarios. Lots of sketches of spaceships never built, a few attempts at stop-motion animation using plasticine figures, the process so slow and laborious one marvels at the likes of Ray Harryhausen, the patience and attention required, months of work for a few minutes of screen time.

Then my father died and everything changed. I started churning out (excreting? expelling?) what my friend Christine calls “That's me in the corner” poetry. Very self-absorbed, very bad. I confess I'm still not much of a poet. I don't seem to have the mindset for it. I try but too much of my verse comes off as either contrived or self-conscious. Perhaps poetry still represents a form of therapy for me, even after all these

years. Unfortunately, therapy is rarely conducive to good writing, at least in my experience.

One of those lucky breaks, twists of fate or preordained events (depending on your theological p.o.v.): in my final year of high school (Scott Collegiate, Class of '81), our English class was given an assignment, worth a substantial proportion of our final mark. We were to write a short story at least 2000 words long on any subject we wished and hand it in by a certain date. I had sort of a plot in mind but waited until the night before the story was due to actually begin putting it down on paper. I started typing. And typing...

I was a slow, clumsy typist. Still am. My technique reminds me of that old tequila ad that teased: "Two fingers is all it takes". Hunt and peck? Naw, with me it's more like *pursue* and *pound*.

I finally finished the tale around 5:30 in the morning. So whacked out and frazzled that I failed to notice I'd typed the final paragraph twice. Didn't seem to matter. The story received an A+. Not only that, my teacher then entered it in some kind of student writing competition and I proceeded to win it.

Suddenly I was no longer a sensitive poet, I was a...*sensitive short story writer*. Keats and Byron heaved sighs of relief and stopped rotating in their musty tombs.

I compulsively filled looseleaf binders with incidents and anecdotes drawn from real life, mostly borrowed experiences of more adventuresome friends. Went to university for one semester, bombed out. Agoraphobia, a chronic problem, flared up; a prevailing sense of being one lowly ant in a massive, seething colony. Needed to survive so got a menial job in a restaurant. Lots of drinking and after hours carousing.

Scribbling, always scribbling. Met my future wife at a party one night, blitzed out of my mind but we bonded immediately—

Another paradigm shift. Suddenly found myself writing for someone else, shedding my self-absorption and telling *stories* with actual *characters*, sketching out ideas on a stack of paper napkins I kept on top of the Hobart dishwasher at work. The new stuff wasn't science fiction or fantasy; it was somewhere between Kafka and Gary Larson. I showed each finished tale to Sherron, my ideal Reader, who also turned out to be an ideal editor. Once the stories passed muster I submitted them to a mix of literary and genre publications...usually striking out on both counts.

It was the mid-Eighties, Reagan was president and we were involved in the peace movement so a good proportion of my fiction, inevitably, dealt with the horrors of nuclear war. “Day after” worlds populated by shambling revenants, scarred *hibakusha*, the survivors eking out a Stone Age existence amid pulverized, radioactive ruins. It was grim stuff but tales in this vein were among my first professional sales. To *Rubicon*, a literary digest published by McGill University, and CBC Radio. In 1985, I applied for and received a Canada Council grant for emerging writers.

It was a period of tremendous growth for me, personally and artistically. I was building a life with Sherron and easing up on some of the self-destructive behavior that characterized my “lost” years. The stories flowed and I bent to the task of sharpening my skills, working hard at getting better with each sentence. I've never taken a shine to creative writing classes or writing groups, preferring to learn by trial and error. No guru, no method, no teacher, as Mr. Van Morrison would say. If I need a lesson, I study the

great writers, try to figure out how they created a certain effect, executed a difficult transition, etc.

Lack of professional contacts, little or no affiliation with writers' organizations and a not so secret contempt for arts administrators and the poobahs of culture has taken its toll. My career has had, ah, rather an uneven arc. It's true, there have been a good number of acceptances and publications but never anything like a steady stream. No invitations to submit to closed anthologies, no Svengali-like editor who spots my talent and takes it upon him/herself to help develop me into a writer of stature, and certainly no legion of fans eagerly awaiting each new offering. It's still a struggle to get into print, even when I'm at the top of my form.

My tales are routinely rejected *dozens* of times—they have acquired no special status or cachet and languish in the same slush pile as the guy who submits manuscripts written and illustrated with magic marker. My literary reputation, if indeed I have one, definitely does *not* precede me. Not as far as the people who count are concerned.

And there's been a lot of *weirdness* along the way too. In the late Eighties I put together a "Best of..." collection of my tales and shopped it around to publishers. Few expressed enthusiasm for an anthology of short pieces published in American genre magazines or small press rags no one ever heard of and Canadian literary digests no one gave a damn about. Besides, and I heard it over and over again, *short story collections don't sell*. Then, as now, folks in the publishing industry cared little for short fiction; a dying art, as irrelevant as poetry to ye garden variety Reader.

After more than a year of frustration, a small publisher in British Columbia agreed to release the collection, now titled *Sex & Other Acts of the Imagination*. We discussed

possible cover art, design and layout. Then came the fateful day when I received a letter from my publisher explaining that he was suffering from a form of mental illness and his literary press entirely the product of his fevered brain.

As far as future dealings with publishers were concerned, it was an unsettling harbinger.

It took awhile but I finally scraped up the money and printed the collection myself. *Sex & Other Acts of the Imagination* debuted in early 1991 and sold out its print run of 500 within 4 1/2 months. Reviews were positive and the book even earned a glowing blurb from one of my literary heroes, the late, great Timothy Findley.

There have been other titles published under my Black Dog Press imprint over the past thirteen years. I became a self-publisher out of desperation, the same kind of fury and frustration that compelled Ani DiFranco to put together her *Righteous Babe* record label. I'm determined to express myself, get my work into the hands of the public and if publishers aren't willing to cooperate, to hell with them.

But it's an exhausting process. You have to do *everything* yourself, a million different details including providing a camera-ready copy of the text to the printer (trust me, it saves a heap of time, effort and money), choosing a cover, finding someone to bind the book (a dying art in its own right). And, of course, once it's printed and bound you have to handle your own shipping and distribution, with all the attendant accounting and paper work.

The last Black Dog project was *The Reality Machine* (1997; yet another collection of stories). It cost us \$6000 and nearly broke us.

But what's the alternative? Book publishers won't touch short fiction with a long, pointy stick, the marketplace is drying up...so I'm forced to adopt a D.I.Y. ethos, fight the powers that be.

I've had manuscripts for novels and short story collections languishing in publishers' offices for two, even three *years*. When the manuscript is finally dragged out from under the pile, some assistant editor with a degree in English Lit. and a correspondingly tiny brain gives it a cursory glance and staples a photocopied form rejection letter to it.

A few years back I wrote a short novel that I thought had some real commercial potential. I spent ages doing research on pharmaceutical drugs and various mental disorders, collecting boxes of books and articles. The novel, *Lost*, took twenty months to write--when it was done I sent the manuscript to all of Canada's major publishers.

The responses I received were...interesting. The majority of the replies/rejections were variations of "Well-written but not our type of book". Three reactions in particular stand out, however. Keep in mind, please, that the following editors are affiliated with the most prestigious publishing houses in Canada.

One editor told me she liked my novel but thought it was "too American". Another editor opined that it was too bad I wasn't an East Indian writer because "they're hot right now". A third, with an East Coast press, advised me to try my manuscript on a male editor since she, as a female, couldn't really relate to the protagonist.

These are the folks who determine what books will be published in this country (Canada). How sad. How *frightening*.



So, in light of all this, the hard work, the idiotic editors and public indifference, why keep at it? Why, after twenty years of discouragement, do I still come into this office every single morning (even Christmas) and chat up my prickly, bi-polar muse?

A great American author, Robert Penn Warren, once described writing as the pain he couldn't live without and I guess I can relate to that. Because writing is literally a painful act for me. Years of bashing away on all manner of typewriters and keyboards has permanently damaged the nerves and connective tissues in my fingers. If I type more than a certain number of pages, it feels like my finger bones are splintering, jolts of agony shooting up to my wrists.

I have acquired terrible posture having spent a good portion of my life hunched over like Glenn Gould, my face edging closer and closer to the keyboard the more rapt and focussed I become. When I bend to pick something up off the floor, my lower back cracks like Arctic ice.

But the cruelest affliction is also the most undignified. Each morning, as soon as I enter the office, my stomach seizes up in nervous cramps that take the breath away in their severity and intensity. It's the anticipation of another hard day of work, the stress that overwhelms me when I think of the battle that lies ahead. My guts turn liquid with fear, my lower intestines clenching and knotting ever tighter.

The only thing worse than writing is...not writing. Left to its own devices, my mind begins to turn on itself; the recriminations start, doubts and fears manifesting themselves, assuming cruel, wheedling voices—these are the *real* monsters of the id. I'm not even as good as my last story. I'm no good at all. I'll never amount to anything. I'll die forgotten and bitter and obsolete—

I must stay productive. I must constantly be immersed in a project that challenges me creatively, spiritually and intellectually.

The alternative is too terrible to consider.

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*“The shame I win for singing is all mine,  
The gold I miss for dreaming is all yours.”*

Those lines, from a poem by Edwin Arlington Robinson, are posted over the inside of my office doorway and if there’s one tenet that I live by—other than never skate through the neutral zone with your head down—it’s that one. It’s a personal mantra, of sorts, one that has helped me put up with the hundreds of rejection slips I’ve accumulated over the years. It’s how I endure the braindead editors and why I accept lousy pay or no pay at all as long as a periodical publishes the story *as is*, with nary a comma changed.

Forget about gold, it’s all about *dreams*. Sharing mine with as many Readers as I possibly can, revealing my obsessions and preoccupations, what’s swimming around in my murky subconscious, night terrors that stretch back in racial memory to a time when gods still walked the Earth and thunder accompanied their footsteps.

Each time I begin work on a new story or radio play I’m trying to create something that will inspire an authentic sense of wonder, the same feelings I experienced as a kid when I read a tale by Ray Bradbury or Richard Matheson or watched a George Pal film. I love the thought of writing something that will blow someone’s mind, perhaps even alter the way they look at the world. I do my best to write without pretension, telling my tales as effectively as I can within the limitations of my talent, in the most direct and unaffected manner possible. One of Samuel Beckett’s biographers has him

telling a friend that he wrote in French because in French it is easier to write *without style*. Ol' Sam knew that style more often than not reveals the author's presence; it is a form of self-congratulation.

My best story, "Daughter", is also one of my simplest. It has a very straightforward, almost documentary-like feel to it, which adds to its somber mood and cheerless message. That bleak, unadorned approach may be one of the reasons "Daughter" was turned down by 50 magazines in the space of 2 1/2 years. But eventually a place in Britain published "Daughter" (*Crimewave 4*) and perhaps 500 to 1000 people read it.

This is the unvarnished reality of the writer's life. Nothing romantic about it. You write something you truly believe is marvelous and that might even have a touch of genius to it...and your little masterpiece doesn't make the slightest blip on anyone's radar. Gone without a trace.

You pray for riches, popular and critical acclaim...but when you tote up your year end income, you glumly realize that a janitor at a seniors' complex in Minsk earns more than you do.

Admittedly, there are moments when all the pain and toil pay off. A magazine or anthology containing one of my tales is delivered to my door by Canada Post. Even more than that, it is the occasional letter or e-mail I receive from Readers that mean the most to me. Meeting folks after public readings—what a thrill it is to have face-to-face feedback, people approaching tentatively, offering their thoughts and views. And then, more often than not, telling me a story of their own...

I can recall reading “Invisible Boy”, at my old high school. The tale is about a forgotten child, trying to adjust to a new stepfather. There are fantastic elements, but the setting and basic scenario place it firmly within Earth Prime. After I finished my reading that afternoon, a student came up to me and whispered, “I really relate to that story”. I could see the depth of emotion etched on her face and thought to myself, *yes, I believe you do.*

Scenes like that can’t be fairly weighed against twenty years of obscurity and disappointment. But at least these brief encounters confirm that my efforts have not been *entirely* in vain. There is, after all, someone out there. A kindred spirit, lost soul and fellow dreamer...

I suppose in many ways, I’m very fortunate. I’ve been a full-time writer for the past thirteen years, the happiest, most productive time of my life. I have a small, book-crammed office on the second floor all to myself and each waking moment finds me immersed in study and contemplation, working obsessively at mastering the English language.

Well...not quite.

No man is an I-land, especially a married guy with two young sons.

Having kids complicated matters (whoops, now *there’s* a paradigm shift)—I discovered a capacity to love I couldn’t have imagined but also found new fears presenting themselves for inspection. Anxiety and an obsessive need to protect my family from the evils of the world has inspired much of my fiction in the past nine or ten years.

That isn't all that's changed. I'm more demanding of myself, pushing harder, determined to become the best writer I can be. My new literary idols—DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Robert Stone, Paul Auster—are authors of the highest calibre, true artists in every sense of the word. They've raised the bar...and it's up to me to meet the challenge. And I'm trying, I really am.

I see it in my editing, which has become *painstaking*, a word-by-word, syllable-by-syllable dissection of a work, an interminable ordeal that taxes patience and sanity. By the time I'm through with my revisions, I can barely stand to look at the finished tale. What was begun with such joy and promise ends up a ceaseless, back-breaking *chore*.

Even after two decades, I still consider myself an apprentice. A slow learner and inveterate grinder. Writing with pleasure (sometimes) but usually with grim resolve, teeth gritted, determined to see each warped narrative through to its conclusion if it kills me. The two novellas in my last book, *Righteous Blood* (PS Publishing; England), wore me down to the point where the words were blurring on my monitor and the sentences no longer made sense. Mentally done in, it took a 10-day camping trip through Montana with my father-in-law to restore me (thanks, Ken).

One lesson I've learned: the best stories and most memorable characters write themselves and brook no interference from the author. Often a piece I'm working on resists seamlessly incorporating one of my ideas or a character will refuse to utter a line without giving it a false, self-conscious reading (an old actor's trick). The ripples of such acts of defiance spread through the entire narrative. I have to rethink, rewrite everything. Just when I'm getting a handle on it, some weird computer glitch loses a week's worth of

work. Or a new plot twist comes out of absolute nowhere, requiring a crash course in molecular biology and/or Haitian voodoo rites--

Well, at least it ain't digging ditches. And while that's true to some extent, may I humbly point out that even ditch-diggers usually get weekends and holidays off?

My muse is quite insistent about it: I have to sit in my office X number of hours *every day of my life*. If I'm not currently at work on a project, I must at least brainstorm ideas or find new markets to submit to, catch up on correspondence. I have to do *something*...or else I don't sleep.

Oh, I'll go to bed, turn out the light and lie there with eyes closed, my breathing steady and regular—but my mind won't shut down, the cross-chatter and story ideas and character voices won't stop. So I have to get out of bed and slip across the hall, into my office. Sit at the desk, jot down notes, play some Debussy or one of my ambient CDs and wait for the babble to subside. Appease my muse with a ritual display of penitence. Then and only then will I be able to get back into bed with at least a reasonable expectation of a decent night's sleep.

There must always be a new story or play or novella on the go, even if I'm never really sure exactly *where* it's going. Writing by instinct, putting pen to paper and waiting to find out where my imagination will take me this time. I admit to a predilection for space, outer and inner, the distances between us, measureless depths that sometimes devour us whole. It's not science fiction, it's not horror, it's not mainstream...and yet it's all of that and more.

Day after day of putting one word ahead of another. Seeking shame, as the Robinson poem would put it. The shame of anonymity, irritable bowels and a bank account permanently stuck in overdraft.

All for the sake of another bloody *story*, another bit of lore to add to the world's already vast supply. Something that occurs to me while I'm standing in line at an ATM or reading a day-old newspaper...

...or as I'm stationed at my desk, the door closed, a Steve Tibbetts or Brian Eno CD playing. Waiting, pen poised, for a *whisper*, a line of dialogue, a title, a few words that will provoke a flood of images, the pen racing to keep up, the pain and shame gone, forgotten, the dream taking hold, the dreamer willingly led.

*"My life could have been otherwise but wasn't."*

-Jim Harrison, *Off To The Side*

End

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