

Dear Bbwaddene (sp?!)

I am answering your letter in lieu of Felix K, whose whereabouts are now a matter of a police interest. You may have been led to believe by Global Pen Pals® that Felix and his family were respectable Canadian citizens, but as their (former) upstairs neighbour, I assure you this is not the case. I don't know how things go in Soweto, but people here ought to have licenses to have children (something I've always felt strongly about.) *The apple don't fall far from the tree*, as we say.

Your friends must call you BB. Bbwaddene is a bit of a mouthful any way you spell it, lol. So, BB, let me illustrate my position by telling you about the time I stood at the corner of Broadway and Commercial and watched my future pass before my eyes.

This was back during the winter of 2002. The Royal Bank was gone by then, as was the discount furniture place with its endless Final Offer!!! sales of brown naugahyde couches with chrome armrests, rattan CD racks, and objets d'art like ceramic elephant-foot umbrella stands (you must have real ones, but not a lot of rain, so you use them as what? Ice buckets maybe?), as was Betty Brite's – the cleaners where the disgruntled man, his fingers slick with take-out Thai, always insisted there had been *no belt* with that dress, *no top button* on that suede jacket, but because it was the only dry cleaners within miles (which tells you what kind of neighbourhood this was) I'd continued to take in the occasional, desperate, non-hand-washable item.

In their place was the new SkyTrain site, the construction fence decorated with plywood fish and birds and whatnot painted by neighbourhood children.

I had a soft spot for children, not having had any myself. Optimistic children, their clever little fingers holding brushes dripping with bright acrylics, painting pink birds, blue fish and crooked houses filled with hearts and giant eyes spiky with red lashes. Children whose joyful mural was defaced by malcontents who'd decided progress was a disease curable via graffiti, that carving up the Grandview Cut was like a cancer of the prostate detected in its early stages. *Save the Cut* spray-painted across a purple heart in which sat a yellow cat. *People not*

Profit ruining my favourite cross-eyed salmon. You might have said that people out in New Westminster at the end of the Millennium Line were people too; people who needed to get places. Although no-one did. (I wonder what your buddy Mr. Mandela would have made of all this fuss, BB?)

This was the Christmas season. I might not have noticed if it hadn't been for the Salvation Army Santa in her saggy outfit ringing her bell with the herky-jerky movements of a Haldol user. Oh, and the squeegee people all wore Santa hats. (You may not have squeegee people where you live, as I am not sure you have cars. Just sayin'!)

I was thinking about these hats and how, if these squeegee people had the wherewithal to go and buy Santa hats, why did they not have the wherewithal to go and get jobs, when I noticed the baby. This was not one of those babies whose eyes brimmed with wisdom like a pygmy oracle of Delphi, or a baby of such intense buttery deliciousness that you wanted to spread it on a warm scone and gobble it up. (That, BB, was *not* a cannibalism joke, lol). It was an unexceptional baby, except for the fact that it had no hat on its head.

As a registered nurse – on sabbatical at the time for a nervous condition that does not bear getting into – I know a thing or two about babies. One thing about babies is that they have massive heads relative to the size of their bodies. The reason for this, as I learned from Redbook magazine and not nursing school, is pure survival. That oversized head makes them more appealing to adults and in circumstances when it is all a mother can do to keep from throwing her terrifying child from a 12th floor tenement window, that disproportionate head, with its uncannily large eyes, can save the baby's life. Call it the Bobble-Head-Doll effect. Celebrities are also known to have over-sized heads. Angelina Jolie. Conan O'Brien. Alec Baldwin. They're practically hydrocephalic!

What I did learn in nursing school is that 90% of a baby's body heat can be lost through its head. (Maybe not babies in Soweto. You probably have to dunk their heads in a real elephant foot ice bucket so they don't sweat to death!)

This mother was oblivious. She stood waiting for the light to change, bouncing up and down on her heels in some kind of sporty shoe, her calf muscles pulsing. Unusually for Vancouver, it was cold enough to be snowing. A fat flake landed on the baby's forehead and melted down into its left eye. The child blinked rapidly twice and the drop continued downwards. The mother didn't even notice. I could see steam rising from the baby's scalp.

I am telling you, BB, I was this close to snatching that baby from its 'jogging' stroller. I was already planning a life for it safe from the harm wrought by adults tuned into their own overweening needs. Not knowing whether it was a girl or boy, I settled on the name Lee, which is a nice unisex name and a heck of a lot easier to say (and spell) than the ones newcomers have been bringing here lately. (Some of those Sri Lankan terrorists could give your John Henry a run for its money!) Lee would be a quiet child, not prone to extreme displays of emotion, a comfort in his or her mother's later years when inconsiderate neighbours stomped in and out at all hours tending to their hydroponic cash crop downstairs and especially during the late-night police raids.

Just as I was imagining the trip Lee and "Ma" would take to visit the hedge mazes of England, the mother pulled a pink fleece cap with piggy ears and snout on it over the baby's head. That is how quickly dreams can be dashed, BB.

Good luck with finding a new pen pal. Please do not write back as I will be extremely busy responding to Felix K's many other pen pals.

Sincerely, a Canadian friend^{1,2}

ps. I am returning the picture of yourself in your 'birthday suit.' That is a very nice shirt and tie, but I'm certain it's not what Felix K meant by his request. Lolcat!

Notes:

1. This letter is a work of fiction. At least, we sincerely hope it is. We like to visit Canada from time to time, and hope never to meet a Canadian friend like this one.

2. Zsuzi Gartner is a Canadian author and journalist. She was born in Winnipeg, Canada, but moved to Calgary in early childhood. She currently lives in Vancouver. She has published two short story collections, *All the Anxious Girls on Earth* (1999), and *Better Living Through Plastic Explosives* (2011), which was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. She has worked as the writer-in-residence at the University of British Columbia, as well as a books editor for *The Georgia Straight*, a Vancouver newspaper.

place of Felix K — whose whereabouts are currently a matter for
of our local police.

You may have been led to believe — by the Global Penpal
Project — that the K — s were a good Christian family, but as
their ^{former} downstairs neighbour I can assure you this is not the
case. [↑] "An evil man seeketh only rebellion; therefore a cruel messenger shall be sent
against him." Proverbs 17:12

People ought to have ^{licenses} ~~licenses~~ (sp?) to have children — this is something
I've always felt strongly about (and I'm sure this would go a long
way towards solving various problems in Soweto where you live!)

I'm remembering for you the time I stood at the corner of Broadway
and Commercial and watched my future pass before my eyes. This was
a long while back, sometime during the winter of 2002. The Royal Bank was
gone by then, as was the discount furniture place with its endless
Final offer!! Sales of rattan CD racks and ceramic elephant-foot
umbrella stands (you must have real elephants — lucky you!), as was
Betty Brite's — the cleaners where the disgruntled man, his fingers
slick with take-out Thai, always insisted there had been no belt with
that dress, no top button on that suede jacket, but because it was the
only dry cleaners within miles (which tells you just the kind of
neighbourhood this was) I had continued to take in the occasional, desperate,
non-hand washable item (no longer an issue as I've been diagnosed as allergic to dry-cleaning
chemicals, anyway).

This was the Xmas season, although I might not have noticed
if it hadn't been for the desultory Salvation Army Santa in his raggy
outfit, it ringing his bell with no jerky-jerky movements of a Haldol user.
And all the squeegee people wore Santa hats. I was thinking about those
hats and how if the squeegee had the wherewithal (sp?) to squander money
on these seasonal items — when I noticed the baby.

The baby was unexceptional in every way — a most forgettable
baby, except for the fact that it had no hat on its head. As a
registered nurse — on sabbatical at the time for a nervous condition
that doesn't bear getting into — I knew a thing or two about babies. And
one big important thing about babies is that they have massive heads in
relation to the size of their bodies. The oversized head makes them look
more appealing to the adult human and in circumstances when it's all a mother
can do to keep from throwing her terrifying child from a 12th-floor window,
the uncannily large head + cartoon eyes can save a child's life.