

Greetings!

The holiday season is once more upon us—an excuse to catch up with old friends, listen to sappy Christmas music¹, fill the house with greenery², and drink eggnog, Bailey's and Irish coffee³. And, of course, to build a huge fire in the hearth, light up the tree and write my annual letter. There is nothing quite so pleasant—or as comforting—on a wintry night as a hot fire on the hearth and the smell of woodsmoke in the air.

*"Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,
Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
Hides hills and woods, the river and the heaven,
And veils the farm-house at the garden's end.
The sled and traveller stopped, the courier's feet
Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
In a tumultuous privacy of Storm."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Snow Storm*.

It's been a busy year. I feel as though I've been constantly on the go, although I have little to show for it. When you reach my age, you spend as much time on maintenance as on doing or making new things. I've had to fix the furnace, replace the sump pump, repair the water heater, change broken locks, buy a new dehumidifier and microwave, fix the sprinklers.....and other things that have probably slipped my mind. A new garage is still in the planning stages⁴. Mind you, these are all first world problems, so I shouldn't really complain: after all, I have light, heat, and a roof over my head. If only all problems were so easily fixed, I'd order two new knees—and world peace—right away!

Holiday preparations also seem to take longer and longer each year. In part, this may be because I am slowing down a bit, as sore knees and a sore back mean it takes longer to perform even simple tasks⁵. But this year I had a very good reason for getting behind: my tree was of record size. I have been cutting my own Christmas trees (with technical assistance from Bill and Nick) at the Gray family

¹ I have a huge collection of Christmas music, enough to play for several months without repetition. I rarely get through all of it in one season, at least in part because I gravitate to a small number of particular favorites. I love classical—and particularly medieval—Christmas music, including all the albums by the Anonymous 4. I enjoy early American Christmas tunes (many of them British in origin), particularly an album entitled "[Wassail, Wassail](#)." And there are works by the Modern Mandolin Quartet and American Guitar Ensemble that I play each year, too.

Among the more popular Christmas music, I love listening to the Lennon Sisters, Frank Sinatra and Partridge Family, souvenirs of my childhood. The Roches, Leon Redbone, Chieftans, Loreena McKennit, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Liz Story, Nat King Cole, Mel Torme, Judy Collins, and Emmylou Harris also figure high on my holiday rotation. And Kurt of course; last name unknown to me, he was playing piano in the mall one winter and my cousin Val bought me a copy of his album.

When I bought my Escape, it came with a Sirius radio, which I never used. Sirius decided to activate it for me recently, and gave me a Christmas station; I listened to it for only a short while before I realized it was the Justin Bieber Christmas station.....why does Sirius hate me?

² To my father's and brother's dismay, I love to fill my house with green things at the solstice, in the pagan manner. I have wreaths on the doors, cedar roping over windows and doors, poinsettias large and small, a few Christmas cacti, and a huge, honking live spruce. It all looks festive, and the smell of the evergreens is heavenly.

³ I tend to eschew the first, produce gallons of the second, and enjoy the third on Christmas morning at the Stanesa's house, where Eli produces the best Irish coffee I've ever had. It prepares me for Christmas dinner with the family.

⁴ The Charter Township of West Bloomfield and I have differences of opinion as to how and where my garage should be rebuilt. It does need to be rebuilt; it is a cheap structure knocked up in 1925 and has dimensions appropriate for housing a Model T, but less useful for vehicles of a more recent vintage. The concrete is cracked, there is no rat wall (except in my addition), the roof leaks and the walls are full of holes through which the vermin get in. And it is too near to the street, according to modern zoning—a non-conforming structure.

I can probably get a variance to rebuild in the same spot, but I suspect my non-conforming bathroom would not be allowed. And I want to add a studio to the structure: I/d prefer a small studio in a second story, but the township would prefer something at ground level. It all has to be worked out. It would be nice, though, to have a dedicated place to work on my pysanky, instead of having my materials scattered throughout the basement on all available surfaces. And it would be nicer still to have a place to conduct classes.

⁵ This should be balanced by the fact that years of performing these tasks mean that I've got them systematized. Hanging the garland in the house is quicker than ever because I have a computerized print-out of measurements for each door and window, I know how to quickly cut and wire each piece, and I have nails in place on the tops of the frames from which to hang them.

And, of course, steroids. Just a little bit of prednisone helps the pain better than any narcotic I know of. Just saying.....

tree farm in Dryden, Michigan most years⁶ since the mid 80s. My brother Laurie, and the kids, along with the Rollingers, and sometimes the Kettners, have been making a day of getting the trees since the kids were little. Our tradition is to go the Sunday after Thanksgiving, come what weather may. Sometimes it's sunny, sometimes freezing cold; some years there is a sprinkling of snow on the ground, other-deep drifts. We wander about, select our trees, take lots of pictures, cut down the trees, and have cookies and cocoa afterwards.

This was the first year, though, that we had rain, and not just a bit of mist, but serious, driving rain. We wandered the tree farm, through brambles and weeds, over hills and through ruts, without umbrellas held high. We chose our trees rather quickly, cut them down quickly, had them shaken and roped, and got them tied to the cars. The trees were incredibly healthy looking--nice and green and full. Mine had almost not brown needles on it (as may spruces will have along the trunk). And trees always look so much smaller out in the field than they do in the house.

It wasn't until Sonny and Grant had helped me get the tree set up in the stand in the house (after I'd trimmed about two feet of spikes from the top) that I realized how wide it was. When I cut the netting holding the branches up against the trunk, it burst out like the Griswold family tree. Suddenly, the entire front room seemed to be filled with tree. I trimmed a bit, and then wired it to the wall⁷, and proceeded to decorate it. It seemed a black hole for decorations of all sorts: lights, birds, glass ornaments, snowflakes, tinsel. I had to shove the tree up against the wall (and wire a few branches up against the wall) in order to have room to pass between it and the stairs. And it stretched all the way from the bay window to the door; usually I have several feet left, enough to replace my huge African vase that normally stands there. Not this year. The vase remains in the playroom (enclosed porch), keeping the hibiscus, orchid cactuses and penguin collection company.

Comparing notes with family, it seems all the trees are particularly wide this year; Laurie calls her tree the pregnant spruce. My guess is that the long rainy summer produced unusually excessive growth of the branches. Either way, my tree has 1000 more little white lights than last year (4500 vs. 3500), and much more tinsel (2 boxes of 2000 strands). I didn't count the other ornaments, but the only thing left at the end was half a storage box of plain glass ornaments--and, if I'd had better access to the tree, I'm sure they would have fit. I normally have lots of ornaments left, and so rotate them a bit from year to year, but not this time!

I did get my shopping done quickly this year; I hate malls and crowds, so most of my gifts were bought either on line or at Costco. My Christmas cards went out before Christmas, which is not a common occurrence; those of my friends living in the US of A should get theirs before the 25th, those whose cards require international postage probably won't, but they are on their way. The home-made Bailey's was mixed prior to Thanksgiving this year, and most has been delivered. Snowflake pysanky were finished at the last possible moment, but all my young friends should get one this year. The party was a smashing success, with lots of old and new friends attending, and enough food left over that the midnight nurses got some, too. Once the party is over, life becomes easier and more enjoyable, with presents to wrap, garlic to roast, and my Christmas movies⁸ to watch.....



My family has remained happy and relatively healthy this year. My Mom and Dad don't get around as much as they used to, as they no longer drive after dark, in inclement weather, long distances or to unfamiliar places. They still attend church and family events (although they are now often chauffeured), putter around the house and garden, go to their doctors' appointments and drive to nearby shops. My Dad's lung cancer⁹ is stable, no better or worse, which is very good news; he is currently not receiving any treatment for it, merely being monitored. My dad had his pacemaker replaced successfully in November when its battery ran out. My mom has had back pain for years, but now has become fairly immobilized by a bad knee. After years of injections and medications, she will be getting her knee replaced in the new year; with luck she'll be back in her garden by spring, and racing up and down the basement stairs. Her back still troubles her, but physical therapy has helped a lot.

⁶ I cut down my first live Christmas tree my first year in my own house, 1983. On the recommendation of cousins Vera and Val, I drove up Rochester Road to Casey Road, somewhere north of the Oakland county line, turned right, and stopped at the house with tall trees and a man dressed as Santa. It was a gorgeous spruce, and I returned the following year, but those trees soon got too big and that particular family got out of the Christmas tree business.

Serendipitously, their neighbors on the left branch for Casey Road began selling trees, and I have bought there since, except for a few years they didn't sell: once or twice the summer had been too dry and they didn't want to sell bad trees, and then another year or two they didn't have any small trees to sell.

Luckily for me, the next generation has taken over and is actively planting new trees, and spruces in particular, so I should have a good source of trees for as long as I wish to keep cutting them down and putting them up.

⁷ The trunk was a bit crooked, something that didn't become obvious until we put the tree into the stand. There was a bit of curve to it about a foot off the ground so that, when it was seated properly and stably in the stand, the rest of the tree listed at about a 20 degree angle. The tree seemed to have a very slight desire to tip, so I tied it with wire to the wall. Once you've had a fully decorated tree fall over, as I did several years ago, you don't take chances.

⁸ I have a large collection, many of which my family refuse to watch with me: "Homecoming," "Christmas Vacation," "Scrooged," "Christmas Story," and "An American Christmas Carol (with Henry Winkler)" are now private pleasures. Others, particularly "It's a Wonderful Life" and our collection of cartoons from the 30s and 40s, are a communal activity.

⁹ A bronchoalveolar carcinoma (BAC), for the medical types. It is a relatively slow-growing type of lung cancer, and not related to smoking. In its early stage, it is curable. More advanced ones can be managed as chronic diseases.

My brother **Bill** turned 50 this year, and celebrated it with his many friends and most of his family at a surprise birthday party thrown for him by his lovely and loving wife, Laurie. He was able to visit with friends he hadn't seen in ages, and now has a lifetime supply of denture and hemorrhoid creme and other thoughtful "over the hill" gifts given him by the attendees. My contribution was a set of photo-montage posters documenting the many aspects of his life—sportsman, hunter, son, brother, father, etc.—culled from fifty years' worth of photos.

Bill is still at Ford¹⁰, and continues to spend his free time stalking and killing small animals and waterfowl. He also stalks larger game, but it seems to have eluded him, for the most part, this year. He did not achieve his goal of being on the Michigan Out of Doors "Big Buck Night" program, despite hunting in bow, firearm and muzzleloader seasons.

My sister-in-law, **Laurie** is back to working at GM, although as a contract employee this time around. It keeps her busy, and she enjoys the work, even if it has nothing to do with chemical engineering. Laurie not only organized Bill's 50th in January, but also threw a great graduation party for Kalyna in June, which was attended by their many friends and family, some of whom I hadn't seen in decades.

Bill, Laurie and the kids did not travel very this year. Their winterer break was spent in Florida, visiting Grandma and Tony, and doing the tourist thing (theme parks and beaches). Summer break was spent in Michigan, a few days each in Harrison and Up North.

Kalyna graduated in June from Avondale High School, 11th in her class (with a 4.2 GPA). Her graduation ceremonies were held on the rainiest day of the year at Meadowbrook, an outdoor music venue. We all attended, well-dressed but huddled under blankets and



sporting umbrellas. I brought my camera, but gave up on taking photos of graduation itself, as we were too far from the stage to make it worthwhile. Fuzz and I cheered the graduates on; we began by cheering for all the Marys, Marias and Maries, and everyone that Maria knew or recognized, but ended up cheering each and every one. It kept us warm, albeit hoarse. Afterwards we tracked down our own graduate, and I photographed her, in the mud, with various friends and relatives, including her proud Papa.

All year long everyone had been asking Kalyna where she planned to study after high school. And all year long Kalyna honestly replied that she wasn't sure yet. She was leaning to attending Easter Michigan University—it had a cute campus, and many of her friends from school were going there. At the last possible moment, however, she decided to attend the University of Michigan¹¹. Despite this, she managed to get a great roommate, although her dorm is located somewhere near Lansing. Kalyna also missed out on getting student football tickets, but that was due to procrastination and missing deadlines.

Kalyna is enjoying college life, despite the long commutes she has to main campus for her classes. Not only has she become active in squirrel club¹², she's run a 5K race, vastly improved her command of the French language, and discovered a deep love of anthropology (much to her father's dismay—he was hoping she would find herself a more "practical" major). Kalyna comes home often—Ann Arbor is only about 55 miles away—for family and high school activities. Her winter holiday break has been spent catching up with her many friends, and helping Nick and fuzz create their extravagant annual gingerbread house. We're always happy to see her, and to give her a ride to and from school, as needed.

¹⁰ Or, rather, at Ford's, as we say here in Michigan. I am not quite sure what exactly it is that he does, but he now does it one day a week from home, telecommuting. The other four days are still spent, AFAIK, in the Glass House.

¹¹ My brother, despite attending and graduating from Wayne State University, has always been a huge fan of UM's football team. Kalyna grew up watching the Wolverines every fall Saturday on the TV, listening to the fight song on the stereo and in the car, and wearing maize and blue clothing. I'm not entirely surprised that, in the end, she chose U of M. It was her destiny.

¹² A real thing. Club members are taught to feed and otherwise safely interact with the semi-tame campus squirrels. According to its website, "The Squirrel Club was founded by Jason Colman and Justin Hyatt in 2002 after a late-night dorm conversation about squirrels. Although only five students attended the first meeting in October of that year, by the following spring the club had over 100 members. By 2004, the Squirrel Club was one of the largest student organizations at Michigan with over 400 members—and our ranks continue to grow."

Its mission? They are "dedicated to the feeding and welfare of the squirrels on campus, and....publicize this goal through awesome t-shirts."

Meetings of the club are "held every Sunday, barring inclement weather, on the U-M campus. Members meet at 4 p.m. on the steps of Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library, take a handful or two of peanuts, and usually spend the next half hour feeding squirrels on the Diag." What do they do at these meetings? "We feed peanuts to the squirrels and have a good time. No stress, no dues, just the pure joy of having a squirrel take a peanut out of your hand. Maybe two or three if he's hungry."

A worthy pursuit, I am sure.

Nick is now a junior in high school, where he played JV baseball this year. He is apparently majoring in congeniality and school spirit. Nick is involved in “leadership,” which, at his high school, is a class and an activity which requires many early mornings and long days. I am not sure exactly what they do—I think they plan and organize all sorts of school activities—but it keeps him busy. Nick seems to be less interested in the academic aspects of high school, unlike his two sisters, who made me feel like a slacker in comparison.

Nick finally hit his adolescent growth spurt this year, and is now taller than me and towers over his mother and grandparents. He hunted with his dad this fall and, like his dad, failed to get a deer, but has dispatched several fowl to a better place (his freezer). Nick has discovered a new passion—the Salvation Army. No, he hasn’t become a Soldier of the Lord, trying to save souls. He is more interested in saving money at the SA Thrift stores and finding interesting clothing, like the “festive” sweatshirt he’s wearing in the photo on the right. It’s a good thing he’s learned to economize, and he’s not concerned with designer wear, since he’ll need a new winter jacket to replace the one he “lost” at school.

Fuzz (aka Maria) has finally left middle school behind and become a freshman at Avondale High School, to her giddy delight. She is enjoying high school life, taking “leadership” class, and singing in choir, where she was voted the most helpful vocalist. Like Kalyna and Nick before, her, she is involved in leadership, whatever that may be. She is also a student athlete, playing softball, volleyball and soccer this past year. Fuzz attended her first Homecoming this year as a high schooler, and wore a lovely blue sequined dress to the dance. It was all awesome, according to her. The only way it could have been better is if Nick Jonas had been her date.



Fuzz has taken up quilting after attending a Lourie family quilting retreat in this past autumn in Grayling. She’s created a few squares, and will eventually have a full-sized quilt of her own. Fuzz and I travelled to Flint, Michigan, to see an exhibit of Amish quilts and the Flint Institute of Arts. When we arrived, we were surprised by the huge crowd at the museum. It was the closing weekend of the exhibit, true, but still... Once we entered the museum all became clear: there was a Christmas crafts fair in progress. Hundreds of vendors were selling all sorts of quirky, silly and artsy holiday craft items. We made our way through the crowd, and had the quilts pretty much to ourselves. The quilts were gorgeous, well worth the trip. We learned about Amish quilting traditions, and compared and discussed their use of color, the different types of squares, and the variety of quilting stitches and designs¹³.

Fuzz has also become more gastronomically aware, although her taste still runs to Bagel Bites¹⁴. She learned to make Baba’s pancakes, and whips up batches of them for herself and her siblings on a regular basis. Although she didn’t take part in our annual Christmas cookie decorating session (exhaustion and headache), she did visit Baba and helped her bake her Christmas cookies. Fuzz helped roll out the dough and cut the cookies, which her incapacitated Baba then assembled for baking.

Belle has recovered from several surgeries to repair her knees, and is happily running and chasing squirrels. She even catches one occasionally. Most of the squirrels have learned to stay on the other side of the invisible fence (and delight in tormenting her this way), every once in a while one will get careless. Belle has had to deal with missing her sister and favorite human, but Kalyna’s frequent trips home and hugs have helped her cope. At age 7, Belle is now a middle-aged lady, and not quite as frisky as she used to be, but she still enjoys a nice ride in the car, and hates being left at home¹⁵.

As I get older, I find myself attending funerals for more and more people that I know, some of them my age. Mortality is no longer just a concept, but demonstrated on a regular basis. This year I said my goodbyes to two of my Ukrainian school teachers, Pani Chalawa (grammar) and Pani Kytasta (literature). Quite unexpectedly, Jeff Allen, my neighbor, passed away. He had recently retired early from GM, and was heartily enjoying his retirement. Jeff and Sonny, his dad, were always helping fellow their neighbors, clearing snow and fixing things, and they were instrumental in getting my Christmas tree up the past few years. He will be missed by all of us.

¹³ Oddly, I know a bit about quilting, although I neither quilt nor own one. I have many friends who are expert quilters and Lorri Oikarinen, in the UP, is a quilting historian and collector as well. I’ve learned much from her over the years.

¹⁴ Fuzz has never been an adventurous eater, or even much of a fan of vegetables. As a child she refused to drink any sort of milk except the chocolate variety. She is slightly less picky now, but her mother still buys Bagel Bites (little mini-pizzas) by the case to keep her fed.

¹⁵ Belle came with us to Harrison, and had to return home with me while her family went on to their cottage Up North. She sat with Baba in the back of the Escape, who petted and reassured her the whole way home. Baba also poured small amounts of water into the palm of her hand so that Belle could drink. This dog is not spoiled....

I've been doing fairly well this year, despite old age and bad knees¹⁶. I'm still at Huron Valley Sinai Hospital (my 25th year there), house doctoring away. I've traveled a bit this year; no new places, but I did get to revisit some favorite old ones.

NICARAGUA: In late January I jetted off to Managua. Christobel had called me up a couple of months earlier to let me know that she and her family (Max, Tom and Rene) would be visiting Central America in the new year, and spending a week in Nicaragua. She invited me to join them, and I immediately agreed. We all stayed with our friend Jeff in his compound in Managua.

I had first met both Jeff and Christobel back in 1987. Christobel was the sister-in-law of a good friend; Lavinia felt that the two of us were kindred spirits, and introduced us when I was in London with her that summer. Christobel was a medical student at the London Hospital at the time, and we hit it off, getting to be good friends while staying with her mother in Mallorca. Christobel had decided to take a six month break from her studies and travel around Central America, and invited me to join her during her trip. I met up with her in Costa Rica, and we traveled to the Atlantic (Caribbean) Coast by train, then up the coast in a small cargo boat to the rainiest spot in the hemisphere: Tortuguero National Park. We explored the jungle and shore, saw monkeys and snakes¹⁷, and I shivered with fever while Christobel attended a local disco. It was a good time.

Chris convinced me to travel with her to Nicaragua, which was then embroiled in the Contra war. Reagan had mined the harbors (illegally), and embargoed the country. There was sporadic fighting along the Honduran border, where the Contras would shoot at anything which couldn't shoot back. There was no beer, but there was lots of pasta (foreign aid from Italy) and rum, and living there was quite cheap. Chris had settled in Managua, renting a room from an Aussie she had met named Jeff.

We had a wonderful time. I arrived during the celebration of La Purisima¹⁸, a festival which the Nicaraguans celebrate by shooting off fireworks and firecrackers¹⁹. As I had never traveled in a war zone before, I was worried that this might be gunfire, but Chris assured me it was just cars backfiring. We were both wrong, but perfectly safe.

Christobel, Jeff and I saw the sights of Sandanista Nicaragua: the huge cut-out of Sandino in Managua, and the Hollywood-style letters on the hill. We spent a day and night in Leon, the liberal university town to the north, with its ancient cathedral, run-down fair and carnival rides, and shabby discos. We visited a clinic Jeff had built, and attended a local wedding. We frolicked on a beach, splashing in the waves of an unfinished resort. Chris and I went Masaya to visit the volcano, where we wrote our names in stones²⁰. We shopped at the Huembes market, where I bought crocodile purses²¹ and belts for gifts, some wooden Sandanista political buttons for souvenirs, a Santa Claus piñata just because. We spent several evenings at Nicaraguan bars and discos, where the rum flowed like water, there were limes a-plenty but little Coca Cola²² and no beer.

I've seen lots of Jeff and Christobel in the years since. I've visited her in England and Australia, and she's been to Detroit and Union Lake to see me. We toured Egypt, Turkey, Ghana and India together. I've been back to Nicaragua several times, and Jeff's been to Michigan. However, the three of us hadn't been together since 1987. I dug out my old photo albums, and found the negatives for the photos I took back then, scanned them and had new prints made. We enjoyed looking at them and remembering old times, but regretted the changes time had wrought on ourselves.

¹⁶ I injured the right one many years ago on a mountain in Nicaragua. The left one got twisted badly while I was watering my flowers. They're generally OK, but bad weather bothers them, and they get easily re-injured now.

¹⁷ Christobel claims there were snakes, and lots of them. I didn't actually see any myself.

¹⁸ La Purísima is a celebration to the "purest conception of Virgin Mary", taking place on December 8th, according to the catholic calendar. It is celebrated in all parts of Nicaragua beginning at the end of November and during almost all of December. A hallmark of La Purísima is the richly decorated altar found throughout the country, both large ones in public displays, and small ones placed in a corner of a family house. These displays include a statue of the Virgin Mary's image.

Traditional family celebrations start with prayers to the virgin in front of the altar, but these are alternated with traditional songs. Assistants accompany with whistles, tambourines and other instruments. While this takes place inside the house, outside family members fire rockets and the so called 'caraga cerrada', (firecrackers). While the singing and prayers take place, the host distributes fruit, traditional sweets, caramels, traditional drinks, sugar-cane and other gifts to the guests.

¹⁹ Fireworks and firecrackers are used to celebrate just about anything in Nicaragua. At Christmas and Easter all Nicaraguans also feel compelled to go to the beach (lake or sea), as I would learn on future trips.

²⁰ The volcano was fairly quiet at the time, and visitors were allowed to climb down to a flat area near its rim. There were many rocks laying about, a many individual and groups had spelled out their names. Christobel spent a long time writing out her name in small letters. I wrote mine in huge letters much more efficiently--by removing the top part of the "C" in the "CUBA" a patriotic group of Cubans had left.

²¹ My mother still has the crocodile purse I bought her, and brings it out on special occasions. And I still have the rectangular wooden "badges" with their safety pin backs and paintings of Sandino.

²² This was a result of the embargo, I am told. There were small quantities of Coke available, but you could only buy one bottle at the bar for each bottle of rum. The limes were plentiful and free. This made it difficult to drink the national drink, a "Nica Libre" (rum and coke with lime).

Nicaragua has changed a lot since my first visit, but the roads haven't improved that much. Jeff lent us a 4WD vehicle, and we took a short trip north. We stayed in Selva Negra (Black Forest), a German²³ resort on a coffee plantation in the mountains. We had a small house named "Gretel," which was away from most of the other cottages; it was at the end of a long path from the main lodge, bordered with flowers, and with a nice view of trees, birds and agoutis. In the morning I went on bird walks along mountain paths, and among the cabins and coffee plants²⁴. In the afternoons we explored the area. We spent an afternoon in Matagalpa, replacing the battery in our vehicle, and then wandered the streets looking for a particular trendy restaurant (which was closed that day, of course). We saw the Matagalpan sights, visiting the cathedral with its vivid statues²⁵ and hanging out in the park.

We searched for and eventually found the Castillo de Cacao (Castle of Chocolate), an organic chocolate factory on a hill that Christobel had read about in her guide book. For a castle, it was not very visible from the road. The Dutch owner was away, but the women

²³ The German connection is not recent or ex-pat, as might be true in other parts of Nicaragua. The coffee farm was started in the late 1800s by German immigrants who came to the Matagalpa area at the invitation of the Nicaraguan government, which was trying to develop a coffee industry.

At Selva Negra, the architecture is Bavarian, and the menu in the restaurant tends to German specialities, including schnitzel, spatzele and beer. It began as just a simple mountain resort, with a lodge on a small lake and a few cabins, but has expanded greatly in recent years. The wedding of one of the owner's children led to the building of a large banquet hall and small church. A play area was added, many walking trails through the mountains groomed, and there is now a souvenir shop on the grounds.

The resort was nice and quiet when we were there, and tends to be during the week. On weekends, though, it can get quite loud and busy—it's a popular spot for weekend get-aways and weddings.

²⁴ Selva Negra actually has guide-led bird walks in the mornings now. I went alone the first day—bird walks start quite early—and saw lots of bird and monkeys. The next day everyone came with me, and, of course, there were few birds. Max really wanted to see monkeys, though, so the guide dragged us through the jungle on various trails until we did. Max was a happy girl that day.

²⁵ Catholic churches in Latin America tend to have lots of statues, and often garish, vividly colored and gruesome ones. They are often well dressed, with beautiful clothing. I recall seeing a Madonna statue in a cathedral in Bolivia that had a larger wardrobe than most Barbie dolls, with special outfits for major holidays.

The cathedral in Matagalpa was not as gaudily decorated as some, but it did have a recumbent Jesus swathed in lace with outstretched bright red bloody limbs. You can see him in the photo on the right.

Many years ago I visited a small Nicaraguan village with one of Jeff's friends. In that church there were a good number of statues, colorful and well dressed, but the one I remember best was the Jesus....in a tutu. I have no idea why he was dressed in a tutu, but he was. Modesty, perhaps. That is one photo I really wish had turned out.



chocolatiers gave us a tour of the premises, demonstrating the chocolate-making process to us in detail²⁶. There was a shop full of chocolate, and I bought many blocks of it for gifts. This was not soft milk chocolate, but serious, dense and hard chocolate, requiring strong teeth. I particularly liked the variety with cacao or coffee “nibs.”

²⁶ We began with raw, locally grown cocoa and ended up with chocolate bars and specialities. Every step was demonstrated, from the roasting, peeling and milling of cocoa beans, to the actual chocolate making—adding flavors, forming the chocolate into different shapes, and packaging it.

The cocoa-fruit is large, about the size of a football, and grows directly from the trunk of the cocoa tree. Its origins are in the Americas, but most cocoa is now grown in West Africa. The cocoa-bean is bitter. This is why, up to the 18th Century some native tribes ate only the sweetish flesh of the cocoa fruit. They regarded the precious bean as waste or used it, as was the case among the Aztecs, as a form of currency.

The cocoa tree can flourish only in the hottest regions of the world, but the young plants in particular need ample shade. “Cocoa mothers” is the term given in the jargon of the trade to the many varieties of shade-providing trees: tropical forest, leguminous plants, banana trees, coconut palms, lemon trees, baobab trees, etc.

Harvesting: The main fruit seasons are in May and in October/November, and it is usually at these times that the crop is harvested. They are picked by hand, to prevent damaging the adjacent buds and flowers of the next crop. The pods are taken to a processing house. Here they are split open and the cacao beans are removed. Pods can contain upwards of 50 cocoa beans each. Fresh cocoa beans are not brown at all, they do not taste at all like the sweet chocolate they will eventually produce.

Fermentation: Now the beans undergo the fermentation processing. They are either placed in large, shallow, heated trays or covered with large banana leaves. If the climate is right, they may be simply heated by the sun. Workers come along periodically and stir them up so that all of the beans come out equally fermented. During fermentation is when the beans turn brown. This process may take five or eight days.

Drying: After fermentation, the cocoa seeds must be dried before they can be scooped into sacks and shipped to chocolate manufacturers. Farmers simply spread the fermented seeds on trays and leave them in the sun to dry. The drying process usually takes about a week and results in seeds that are about half of their original weight.

Roasting: The first thing that chocolate manufacturers do with cocoa beans is roast them. This develops the colour and flavour of the beans into what our modern palates expect from fine chocolate. The outer shell of the beans is removed, and the inner cocoa bean meat is broken into small pieces called “cocoa nibs.”



Grinding is the process by which cocoa nibs are ground into “cocoa liquor”, which is also known as unsweetened chocolate or cocoa mass. The grinding process generates heat and the dry granular consistency of the cocoa nib is then turned into a liquid as the high amount of fat contained in the nib melts.

Mixing: The cocoa liquor is mixed with cocoa butter and sugar. In the case of milk chocolate, fresh, sweetened condensed or roller-dry low-heat powdered whole milk is added, depending on the individual manufacturer’s formula and manufacturing methods.

Blending: After the mixing process, the blend is further refined to bring the particle size of the added milk and sugar down to the desired fineness. The Cocoa powder or ‘mass’ is blended back with the butter and liquor in varying quantities to make different types of chocolate or couverture.

Molding: After blending is complete, molding is the final procedure for chocolate processing. This step allows cocoa liquor to cool and harden into different shapes depending on the mold. Finally the chocolate is packaged and distributed around the world.

Packaging: In the case of the Castillo de Cacao, the chocolates were wrapped with a silvery mylar-type sheet, and the individual chocolate drops placed into plastic bags. Both were then heat sealed.

Some friends of Jeff's had recommended the Finca Esperanza Verde²⁷ to us, an ecologically and politically correct coffee plantation that served lovely lunches. It was located in the San Ramón area between Matagalpa and Jinotega. We followed direction and eventually located it, at 4000 ft above sea level and at the end of a very rough road. There was a sustainable coffee conference going on at the main building, but we were welcomed and given lunch at an adjacent outside pavilion. Tom and Max wandered off to explore and to visit the mariposario (butterfly house), while we relaxed on hammocks with cool drinks. The lunch was nice, and the day was a bit wet and overcast. On our drive back down the mountain, I spotted a particularly colorful bird off to the side of the road. I pointed it out to Tom and Max, and Rene had a look, too, and next thing we knew we were stuck in a bog. No problem—we all jumped out into knee deep muck and pushed the vehicle out.

We returned to Managua and relaxed by Jeff's pool, taking short day trips out of town and exploring Managua. We revisited Masaya, where there is now a very nice museum/interpretive center. Access to the volcano is much more limited nowadays²⁸, as it has become more active. The fumes from the volcano make it difficult to spend any great amount of time around it (especially for asthmatics), and the gases limit visibility. Chris and I did ascertain, though, that our names are no longer visible on the plateau.

Chris, Tom and I spent an afternoon in Granada, the old conservative capital of Nicaragua. It has been quite restored and started up in recent years. It has a large expat population, lovely cafes and shops, beautiful old churches and museums, and a wonderful old town square. On the outskirts of town is Lago Cocibolca²⁹, within which lie the Isletas, a group of approximately 365 small volcanic islands scattered around the Asese peninsula³⁰. At Puerto Asese we had lunch at the outdoor cafe and then hired a boat for a cruise around the islands.

All of us had cruised the islands before; it is a pleasant way to spend an afternoon in Nicaragua. This time, though, we had a mission: to find Jeff's island. Our friend and host had recently purchased a small island, and we meant to have a look at it. We set out in our small boat, and slowly made our way between islands, large and small, covered with florid tropical vegetation: coconut palms, mangoes, ficus trees. There were birds everywhere: in the air, in the water, and in the trees³¹. And there were other boats in the channels, some visitors, but mostly local fishermen.



²⁷ Literally *Green Hope Estate/Farm*. Per its web site, FEV is a unique experiment in ecotourism and local empowerment. Part organic coffee farm and part tourist lodge, FEV is carved out of the mountain 4,000 feet up, providing spectacular views of the Dariense mountain range and the green valley far below. FEV provides local Nicaraguans with profitable and sustainable ways to share their culture with visiting tourists, and has received international recognition as a model of poverty alleviation through sustainable tourism. It's also supposed to be a good place for birds. I hope to go back there when I take Beth to Nicaragua and go on a few nice bird walks to look for toucans, tanagers dan warblers.

²⁸ A few years back the volcano spit out a large rock, which flew into the parking area and crushed a VW. Since then visitors have been advised to limit their time at the volcano, and to park with their cars facing away from the volcano (for quick egress, I can only suppose).

²⁹ Also known as Lake Nicaragua. It is a huge freshwater lake, and connects to the Caribbean via the San Juan River. The lake contains sharks which were once thought to be an endemic fresh-water species, but which, on further study, have been shown to be ordinary bull sharks. The sharks jump the rapids of the San Juan river, and thus transit from the Atlantic to Colcibolca and back.

³⁰ The islets of Granada are located just southeast of the city of Granada. They are of volcanic origin, and were formed when the Mombacho volcano blew most of its cone into the lake over 20,000 years ago, thereby creating the archipelago. Most of islets are covered with unusual vegetation and are rich with bird life.

Many of the islets are occupied; others are too small to build on. Some are privately owned and hold homes or vacation houses, while hotels, shops and restaurants have been established on others. The fort of San Pablo is located here, too, and was built in order to protect the city of Granada from pirates in the 18th century.

The islands have been settled for many generations, for most of that time by local people. During Somoza's dictatorship, members of his National Guard forced many of locals to either sell their islands or risk being forcibly removed, and the transition to second homes and resorts began. After the Sandinista revolution, many of islands were returned to what should be considered their rightful owners. Unfortunately, in 1990, when the Sandinistas lost the election, proper land titles had yet to be provided to the residents, and the islands were returned to family members of the original National Guard who had "confiscated" the islands by the anti-Sandinista court system.

Sadly, many of these islands have been sold to wealthy Nicaraguans and foreigners, thus ending a way of life for a small group of poor Nicaraguans that had lived there for many generations.

³¹ Among my favorite Nicaraguan birds are the large and flashy Nicaraguan orioles, the Montezuma oropendolas. They have bright yellow tails, and build complexes of large, pendulous nests in the tall trees.

The islands varied tremendously: some had small shacks with indigenous residents (and curious children), others had small palaces. One island had a restaurant/bar, another housed the old Fort. Yet another was a monkey reserve. The latter's owner had populated it with "rescued" spider monkeys, many of whom had become used to people, and would beg.....or steal.....picnic lunches from anyone who ventured near enough.



Our boatman took us, eventually, to Jeff's island; we cruised around it a couple of times, to get a good look. It is a smaller island, but with enough room for several trees and a huge boulder. There is a small structure on it, octagonal and unfinished, and a small dock. We didn't stop, but it looks as though it will be a nice place for a picnic and a swim someday.

Back in Granada, we found a shady spot in the main square, near the fountain, to relax and rehydrate. At one end of the square a ceremony was going on in front of the fire department, and seemed to involve the donation of fire trucks from the City of Virginia Beach to the Bomberos de Granada. At the other we sipped on "cacao"³² while I haggled with young make vendors over the price of small ceramic birds³³.

Towards the end, after Chris and entourage had jetted off to Honduras, I spent a couple of days with Mina and her family (Alison, Alexandra and Rene) in the south, in one of Jeff's houses (Miralagos) near Granada. Rene rustled up a tasty barbecue, we went down to Lago Apoyo (where we disturbed the illegal laundresses), and spent hours relaxing in the pool.

In March I was off to **India**. My friend Sara was retiring this year, and I wanted one last chance to work with her at the LCECU. I stayed with Jiji and Prasad, but we didn't take any family trips this time because my time was so short and Avinash was studying for his AISSE exams. I did finally get to visit the Golden Temple of Vellore, and I can attest that it is quite gold! Linn Gann visited me in Vellore, and I had a chance to see Prasad's parents in Madras/Chennai. Most of my time was spent at the LCECU working hard on developing new protocols and updating a few older ones. We had significantly decreased our referral rate from the Labour Ward by the judicious use of oxytocin, and worked on decreasing it even further by allowing more induction of labor. Jiji, Sara and I also worked on getting a vacuum apparatus for the LCECU, as it is easier to use and less traumatic than forceps.

In May I traveled to the **UP (Upper Peninsula)**, where I spent a week at Rick and Lorri's log house in the woods. It was a busy week, but I managed to catch up with all my friends, young and old, throughout the Keweenaw. Kara and Lieschen were back in town, and Maddy and Henry were still around. I had a chance to attend the Copper Harbor birding festival, hang out with old birding friends (including the elusive Louis), meet new ones, and see a lot of warblers. Jane had made the final move to Lake Medora, and I had a chance to meet her family at their gorgeous lakefront house. The monks were baking, and had plenty of brownies for sale. Life was good. I left for home just as the black flies were beginning to become numerous.

In June I drove my parents to **Little Falls** in upstate New York, where we stayed with her old friend Alexandra Krywka; they had grown up together in their village in Ukraine and then in the DP camps in Germany. The two of them spent the time catching up on old memories and looking at old photos. And talking. A lot. We also visited my dad's mother's grave at a nearby orthodox monastery in Herkimer and had a blessing read over it. I got to know Helen Krywka and her husband, Tom, better, learned all about Cooperstown and the Erie Canal, and caught up with "little" Nickie.

In July we had our annual family trip to **Harrison**, where we spent several days at the hunting "lodge." The kids and I did all of our favorite things: set off fireworks, barbecued, ate ice cream, shopped at the flea market and hit many garage sales. This year we even made it to the Harrison 4th of July parade and fireworks; next year we may just stick a boom-box in the trunk of the car and join in the parade. (Yes, someone did that; the standards for participants aren't very high.)

³² Cacao drink, also known as "Pinolillo," is a Nicaraguan specialty. I was introduced to it in this square by Mina back in 2004. It seems to be chocolate version of horchata, and is made of ground toasted corn and a bit of cacao and cinnamon. It can be mixed with water or milk, although milk seems to be preferred, and served sweetened or unsweetened. I've only ever had the sweetened version. The drink usually has a rough, gritty texture. I am told that it is traditionally served out of a gourd made of the shell of the jicaro fruit. In the old days the cacao was usually mixed up at home, or the mix sold in markets. It is now available in many brands, properly packaged.

³³ The birds are a local speciality.

In late July I was off to **Ukraine** and UCARE summer camp. This year our camp was in Kosiv, the Hutsul crafts capital in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. The base we stayed at was great, with hot and cold running water and a pleasant staff. The weather didn't cooperate—much rain and even hail storms—but we persevered. My goddaughter, Daryna, took part, roomed with me, and became an invaluable staff member. We hosted 60 orphans from various parts of Ukraine, and I taught them all how to write pysanky. Vitalik brought clay and two potters' wheels, and taught everyone how to throw pots. There were also classes in floral design, painting, and hairdressing. The theme of camp was "Eko-Veselka" (Ecological Rainbow), and we spent time cleaning up the environment, both along the river and in the national park. It was a busy two weeks, and included a day spent with a dance troupe from Chicago, and visits to St. Nicholas and to the Pysanka Museum (where my friend Oleh Kirashchuk was kind enough to guide us around). In my free hours, I visited Oleh and his family in Kolomyia, and took our senior staff on a visit to Richka, where we "rested" in the mountains with my Hutsul friends.

After camp I visited friends and family in Lviv and Kyiv. My cousin Myrosia, now a published writer, traveled with me throughout **Volyn**, as we visited Lutsk and photographed crosses throughout the Volynian countryside. We wandered through Chervonohrad, visited family in Sokal, and spent time with my aunt Zoya in Knyazhe. I wandered around shops, monuments, churches and museums of **Lviv**, my favorite city, and visited with Vira Manko, one of my favorite people. A high point was a Sunday afternoon picnic at Otets Sebastian's "fazenda" just outside Lviv: food, drink and delightful conversation in the orchard under the open sky. Andriy organized the cooking, Vira and I photographed Sebastian's pysanka collection, and then we all relaxed outdoors. The simplest pleasures are often the best.

I spent time in **Kyiv** with Zhenya, my godson; we visited Pyrohiv (open air museum), the Lavra (caves monastery), and every shoe store in central Kyiv. I took a day trip to **Poltava** with Ruslan, where we got guided tours of the town from Petro, Olenka and Vladyslav, and tasted their world-famous halushky. We had a lively dinner out in the concrete Kyiv suburbs at my cousin Tamara's flat. And we had our annual Petrusha family reunion in **Zolotonosha**, where we feasted on varenyky and other delicacies, and drank way too much. We drove out to Bohoslavka to visit my Aunt Lida's grave; she is sorely missed.

In the fall, I went to visit Kalyna in Ann Arbor, and managed to trip over a bit of uneven pavement and damage my knees. This prevented me from taking any long autumnal trips, but I had recovered enough by mid-October to take my parents on a short Michigan fall color tour. We drove up to **Traverse City**, and visited all the easily accessible overlooks and scenic views: the High Rollaways, Sleeping Bear Dunes, and various lighthouses. We picnicked in downtown TC, where my parents fed the ducks, and had dinner with my friends Gary and Mary Anne. We sampled the wares at Grand Traverse winery, picked up souvenirs for the grandkids, and bought smoked fish at Fishtown. I drove along all sort of two tracks to get a better look at the fall colors, to my father's consternation, and we bought and ate heirloom apples. It was a lovely time.

In November I spent almost a week traipsing around **Wisconsin**. I survived a blizzard, avoided hitting any roadside deer, and revisited places from my childhood. Wisconsin Dells was a disappointment. I stayed with Lyn and Don in Marshfield, where I viewed the taxidermied birds in the library, visited Jurastic Park, talked a lot and drank gallons of hot tea. I stayed with Ruth and Dan on my grandparent's old farm in Neillsville. There I heard stories about the past from their neighbors, the Bradlows, as we looked through several decades' worth of digitized photos. In the morning Dan and I wandered around the farm, through the barn and other outbuildings, and I noticed that though much had changed since 1973, so much more had remained the same. Lastly, I holed up with Trish and David in their ecologically sound house in the woods near Gays Mills. It had been updated since my last visit, and was now warm, with electricity and WiFi. We sampled wines and Wisconsin cheeses, reminisced about the DR and old friends. The tree of us attended a hippie birthday party, where I drank homemade wines (strawberry and corn), ate chili with cornbread, and learned to dance the Virginia reel.

And now the year is almost over. My tree is up, the presents bought (but not yet wrapped). I have only to send off my cards and this letter, and my holiday major tasks are done. I hope 2011 was good to you, and I wish you only the best in 2012. Have a wonderful holiday season, and do keep in touch!

Luba

P.S. An expanded version of this letter will go out by e-mail to all my contacts. If you want a copy, but aren't sure I have your current address, e-mail me at lubapetrusha@gmail.com.