



This is the **2011** annual letter you've been waiting for!

2012

However today is January 1st, 2012, a Sunday.

So Happy New Year !

Greetings To Our Family, Friends, Valued Clients and New Neighbors:

Once again David and I have fallen in love with a house. And, as when we met 27 years ago, one of us has fallen harder than the other. And isn't that how love often goes? It's a hard thing to measure, the varying degrees of love. Who loves the house more? Who loves the neighborhood more? Who loves the other one more? Who loves the dog more? And, my personal favorite, who does the dog love more?

In this case I think we'd both agree that I'm the one who loves the house more. I pushed and pulled for this house and now, honestly, I'm just obsessed with it. I'm 56 years old and newly obsessed with a house. Much more so than I was with the last house. But we'll come back to that later.

For now let me offer up my domestic obsession as part of a multi-layered excuse for why your "Christmas letter" is coming to you weeks late. If I were going to make a new recipe and I had all the ingredients in the house and the recipe stuck to the fridge, before I could do anything I'd have to thoroughly clean the kitchen. It's just the kinda guy I am. Or, as they say now (I hear "them" say it constantly), "It's how I roll." I can't start something with chaos, however real or imagined, around me. And so it goes with this letter. Usually David and I are mailing this letter to the masses on or about December 15th each year. But this year the movers arrived **ON** December 15th and they moved a massive amount of chaos from the apartment we were living in for most of the year to the house I am typing in right now. It was a full two day move, the 15th and the 16th, and when it was over we were (remember we're old now) friggin' exhausted. And the level of chaos surrounding us was at an all time high. Cardboard boxes piled high, none of them labelled at all,

these green plastic "Frog Boxes" stacked almost to the ceilings (which are very low here so that wasn't hard to do) and furniture literally piled around us. All of our art was leaning against this or that, or worse stacked or in boxes, and when art is not on the walls it's very obtrusive and hard to maneuver around. And, as is the norm with us, the house was unfinished. Still is. "It's a story as old as time" if Angela Lansbury were describing it. Our basic wall painting was not finished (which makes it hard to place any furniture) and our contractors (granted very nice and patient ones) were underfoot. Most of the furniture is in place now, but still there is "cutting in" painting to finish.

Oh, and it was Christmas. In the midst of our moving it was Christmas. Holiday events were in full throttle! You know how those 2 weeks before Christmas are: office parties, friend's parties, shopping, cooking, making time to watch classic holiday movies together as a family (those movies would be **Love Actually** and **Die Hard** for our family!!), just a busy season in general. I was overwhelmed. David was overwhelmed. Calvin, our 20 year old cat, was overwhelmed and needed attention adjusting to his final home. It was a high stress time. There was simply no way we could do it all. Something had to give. Sadly this year what had to give turned out to be our holiday classic movies (they are still buried deep in our public storage locker in Interbay) and this letter. I could not see straight to write; I could not focus to write. I did not write. Until tonight.

And trust me I felt badly about this. About being late. And my self-imposed guilt only grew as well meaning faithful readers of this letter dropped me a short emails now and then saying things like, "No letter, should I be worried?" or "We don't have our letter, is everything okay?" Or in their Christmas cards, which they managed to get out on time, they'd comment upon our tardiness, which really means MY tardiness since I do this for our family, and in each comment, in each card, in every email, in some phone calls, there, hidden but lurking in the background was the always unspoken yet eternal question: "**Are you dead?**" Which really means "Do you have cancer again?"

Then I'd have more guilt piled on me as I knew I was making others worry about medical stuff that I pretty much try to ignore these days. I feel really badly about that. (Just as I feel badly about coughing frequently in when eating in public, but I'll get to that later.) Anyway let me assure you the letter is not late for any medical reasons. I know everyone means well and I'm not complaining, I'm just sayin' I know what everyone around me thinks now. Once you have cancer you become like Sookie on **True Blood**, you hear what everyone around is thinking. But, as I said, more on that later.

We have things to come back to. See how exciting and informative this letter is already?

So. It's January 1st. A fresh start. Let's move on, shall we?

I made one New Year's resolution yesterday. And already I've kept it. I am very proud of myself. Actually I made two resolutions. The other, which I am keeping as I type, was to **START** this letter on the first day of 2012 and make it a **New Year's Greeting** type of thing this year. When I think of "first day" of anything I am usually thinking "after dawn" not after midnight. But we just got home and I haven't gone to bed yet (David has) and it is January 1st. Surprisingly I seem to be having bit of a 4th wind for the day so I opened up my laptop and set to it. Thus I have now managed to keep both of my New Year's resolutions before the day even starts. Keeping this resolution (to start this) was easy. The other resolution was more difficult to figure out. I've finally learned however that you can pretty much type anything into the google bar and find stuff out. Let's say you can't afford an electrician. You could type in, "How do you wire an electrical outlet?" I was amazed at the number of fairly dull old men in overalls who felt the need to post

videos on this very topic on the internet. Of course our new panini maker that Merritt tempted us into buying at one of her estate sales seems to make all of my outlets "POP" when we try to use it, but I'm gonna google that too. When I find the time. Does that need to go on a Form 17? Wait? Did I just type "Form 17" at 12:40 AM on a holiday? That's work stuff creeping into my life again but I digress.

So it's 12:40 AM on January 1st. David and I got home, literally, at 11:58 PM. We could have easily stayed where we were until midnight but we did not. We were having a great time and could have easily stayed to make the New Year official someplace else with other people but no. If we were 36 we surely would have stayed to "mark" the event with people. But at 56 we were walking in the front door at 11:58 PM. I checked. We "rang in the New Year" in our entry, ah, area. (We don't have an entry hall here. Just an area delineated by a rug we had to buy in Turkey years ago or we'd still be there.) (I don't think they let you leave the country without rugs. We have 5 of them. We move them from storage lockers to houses to apartments to storage lockers. I have them cleaned at Fuzzy Wuzzy rug company, or some named place like that behind U-Village, periodically.)

David took the dog out and went to bed immediately. I first figured out how to keep my other new year's resolution - had to google it - for 2012 and then I started this letter. My year is thus off to a good start.

Speaking of good starts David and I were lucky enough to actually get invited somewhere tonight. Actually we were invited to two places which is so RARE for us. We took a pass on the first invite which was a swanky party held at the penthouse of the **Lamplighter** because we knew we'd have to be up late, as in past 11:00 PM, which we just don't do even if it is New Year's Eve, and we'd have talk to many people.

Momentary break away for lyrics from a favorite Joni Mitchell song:

All the people at this party, they've got a lot of style
They've got stamps of many countries, they've got passport smiles
Some are friendly, some are cutting
Some are watching it from the wings
Some are standing in the center
Giving to get something

I can't help myself. All of these lyrics are in my head rolling around constantly. I digress . . .

It's so hard mingling when you're as shy as we are, especially when you're doing it past your bedtime. So we thought we'd just stay home tonight like we usually do. But then Joe and Kim invited us to their house for a small quiet dinner for 10. I asked if it was on Lopez and it was not. I asked if we were expected to stay until midnight and we were not. Only 10 people in Wallingford and we don't have to stay up late? And we already know 4 of the 10? That's something the Neldykes can manage.

It was the perfect New Year's Eve event. Joe runs a great bar - there's gin - and Kim is the consummate host. Kim had many live lobsters and she cooked them in the front yard in a pot of water the size of a Mini-Cooper. An assortment of wonderful seafood, great potatoes, appetizer, all of it lovely. The food and atmosphere were both perfect for bringing in a new, and we hope better, year.

Calvin is so gosh darn sweet. As I am typing this he is crawling up into my lap. Now I am at a laptop typing with a cat just sitting on my legs between my arms on the laptop. And he's nuzzling me. We hope this cat lives forever. Calvin will be a full 20 years old in August of this year. Born in the summer of 1992, Calvin has outlived his sister Claire from the same litter. (Claire died early in my cancer treatment period in 2009 and I always she felt died without the appropriate fanfare due to my health at the time). Calvin has outlived Libby, and Samson, and Inga. He has outlived 3 dogs! And now he has to put up with a puppy in the house. But he's game. He bats at that puppy's face and won't be bothered. Of course the puppy thinks this is fun. David and I have to referee.

So the other New Year's resolution that I have already kept? It is something that has been nagging me, annoying me, floating around in my brain for over a year now. I've never really discussed it with anyone, but I've given it a great deal of thought and read many an article on the topic. And a few minutes ago I did it.

I just went into Facebook and DELETED my profile.

They don't make this easy for you to do (I just found out). I assumed under "account" or "settings" or somewhere in your profile management drag down thingie there would be a way to delete your account that was OBVIOUS to simple folk like me. Not so. I was on the site for quite a bit of time trying to figure this out. Finally, like with an electrical outlet, I typed into my trusty google bar: "How do I delete" and before I could get any further into my full question, the whole question just POPPED up as a choice. Google must have had cancer in the past too.

So I think it's done. Evidently I need to not go near Facebook for 15 days or they will override my deletion request and keep me active. Freaky. But not going there for 15 days won't be an issue. I generally didn't go there for 65 days at a time. Or more. Anyway . . . I seriously doubt I'll be back. And now when people ubiquitously ask, "Are you on Facebook?" I will be able to answer, "I hope not," because there's no way for me to know if they really deleted my info, if I am really gone.

2012:

Letter started. Check.

Facebook out of my life. Check.

Keeping relationships the old fashioned way. Check. (I hope it works tho') (And if not my dog will always love me.) (Perhaps the most.)

More soon. Goodnight.

Several Days Later: January 4th, A Wednesday

Let's dispatch medical part of this story now. Let's address it one more time and then be done with it. Not unlike how a public figure caught up in a scandal will hold a press conference and proclaim, "I am going to address these questions here for the last time. After today I will no longer . . ." Or very famous singer who might arrange a concert tour and say, "This is the last time I will perform these songs, after this tour I will only do new material." You get my drift I'm sure. My experience however is the singer lies and falls back on those songs later when their careers wane.

And the politicians are drummed out of office and disappear forever. Remember - that happened just this last year with the Twitter'd penis photos. I love people. People are so smart.

I happen to be on a 6 month cycle with all of my doctors. There are really only 3 doctors left. And, since I'm so late with this letter, I happened to have just ENEDED one of my 6 month cycles. Today, as a matter-of-fact. Today I saw my Oncologist, Dr. Kaplan. But first, on December 13th, I saw my Ear Nose and Throat doc, Dr Burgoyne. Then on December 27th, still in the midst of moving chaos and officially late with this letter, I was on the operating table in the OR at Swedish with my surgeon Dr Aye. And then today Dr Kaplan. Three doctors in a 2 or so week span. Now we enter a new 6 month period of nothing. I hope. **Here's where I'm at today:**

Dr Burgoyne, who found the tumor in the first place, sticks a long tube up my nose and then forces it down my throat. The tube is a scope and he can see things. He looks for new growth of baby tumors, signs the old tumor has returned, etc. **He sees nothing.** Every checkup up I have had since treatment ended, he sees nothing. I need to have him keep checking every quarter or so but I am not clear on for how long. 5 more years? 2 more years? The rest of my life?

Dr Aye sees me in the Operating Room at Swedish. This is for the esophagus dilatation. That is a fancy way of saying "stretching my esophagus out" or "throat stretching." We do this on an "as needed" basis and I'm the one who gets to decide when it is needed. I don't go see Dr Aye in his office anymore - there's simply no point in that. I only see him very briefly in the OR just before the anesthesiologist puts me under. This OR business is a very long day. I have to get there hours before my time on the table. They run all of these tests on me, draw blood, ask me the same questions 4 different times by 4 different people, set up IV lines in me, do an EKG on my heart, etc. Then I have to wait and wait. Then I meet my anesthesiologist. Then Dr Aye comes and we visit. And then Dr Aye leaves and I wait and then I'm rolled in the OR and put under. Poor David has to take me and wait for me and collect me and take me home each time we do this. This last time the patient Dr Aye was working on before me was, and this is what everyone there said that day, "difficult." This caused us to have an over 2 hour delay. So an already long day got longer. So it goes. As one of the nurses said that day, "You're in a hospital. Everything is on time. This is the schedule." I kept telling David to leave and walk the dog and have lunch and come back later. Oh - lunch . . . did I mention that I cannot eat or drink anything the day this happens? No coffee in the morning. No muffin. It kills me. IT KILLS ME. I always try for the 7:00 AM appointments on the no food procedure days so I can get to Vivace on Broadway sooner. (Swedish, then the post office box for the mail, then Vivace - all 3 in a row on Broadway - I have a routine.) I can eat immediately after they stretch me, that's not an issue. **Dr Aye successfully gets a tube down my throat** this time that is larger in diameter by 2 mm (or inches or yards or something) than the last time we did this procedure. I guess larger, thicker, rounder, wider is better. For me better would mean doing this less frequently.

Dr Kaplan - back to today's appointment - draws blood and does a physical exam at this end of the 6 month cycle. The other end of this 6 month cycle will be a full day in the cancer ward having a full body scan. Again it's a no food day. It's a full on PET CT SCAN from my head to my knees. You move in and out of the awful and loud tube for a long time. The last time we did this was June 7th - 6 months ago. "My films" were perfect. He was very happy. I was thus very happy. 6 months ago Dr Kaplan saw not one trace of cancer or anything that he wouldn't see on a film of a person who never had cancer in the first place. **It was the perfect scan** and since it was he moved me to once a year scans instead of once every 6 months. He still likes to see me in the flesh every 6 months tho' so I went today. Today we set up the next scan. The next scan is on June 15th. I see him

for my next round of results on June 20th. It's set up. Done. Done for now. Dr Kaplan said if the next scan is as good as the last one was then I'm likely done and he won't need to see me anymore. I may not be okay with that however. I'm thinking about it. It's not that I'm a treatment junkie or one of those nuts who clings to medical shit. That is so not me. However once you've had (well, I mean me, speaking for me) . . . Now that I've had cancer and have seen both kinds of scan results, films with tumors on them and films that have no hotspots on them, well . . . I just don't know that I don't want to keep being reassured that cancer is not growing in my body somewhere. I gotta sit with this for 6 months and see how I feel then I guess. But, for now, no cancer. For now still NED. **Still No Evidence of Disease.**

And that's good news, yes? **However there is still plenty of evidence of TREATMENT.** I am still, and let me just say it here once and I'm sorry for swearing in a holiday letter, I am still fucked-up from the radiation that made the cancer go away. And I've come to accept that. I no longer think I'm going to get any better than I am today. I no longer think that I'm going to improve. Believe me I hope for improvement all the time. **ALL THE TIME.** I think about it hundreds of times in each of my days as the aftermath of the radiation ruins things for me. So I think about it. But I don't really believe things are going to change from what they are now. I think the voice I have is the voice I'm going to have. I don't think it's going to get stronger or return to normal. I don't ever see me on stage projecting my voice to the back of the room. It's hard enough to conduct an office meeting and be heard by everyone in the room. Repeating myself so others can hear what I said is a normal way of life for me now. I think the way I breathe now is the way I'm going to breathe in the future. I don't think it's likely to change much. I think the way I have to be careful when I eat, the way I have to negotiate every bite and every glass of water is just how it is going to be. I don't imagine I'll ever be able to pick up a bottle of water and drink it like you can. This just is not likely. The past year has been about learning to accept all of that. The only improvement I can imagine, when I wistfully allow myself to sit and think about such things, is slow and minor and takes years and years and years to notice. This is it. I think I'm done. Stop waiting. Back to living.

Not that I sit around allowing myself to think about such things. I've moved on. Or I am trying to. Here's the deal, I'm not dead and I'm left with what I'm left with. On NPR I was listening to an interview with a woman who was tortured and raped and beaten in Burma. The woman conducting the interview for NPR kept asking the Burmese woman about what was done to her, how bad it was, how she lived through it, etc. The Burmese woman kept deflecting these questions and kept trying to make the interview about larger issues in Burma. The NPR woman kept trying. Finally the Burmese woman said (this was months ago, I'm getting the gist of it here from memory), "Look I don't want to talk about the things that were done to me because I'm still here. I'm not dead. The outcome was so much worse for many other women in Burma. For me to talk about what happened to me would be wrong, it would be whining, it would negate their stories."

She may not have said "whining," or said it all just like that, but I did play it back in my mind many times afterwards and I think I'm pretty darn close to what she said. Her meaning was clear no matter what my memory and dictation skills are. The outcome could have been so much worse, and it was for others, so I have no right to complain. This aligns perfectly with my stoic, "pick yourself up by your boot straps and move on" line of thinking. This is why the interview resonated with me.

That being said, let me whine a little, mostly for your benefit, so you will understand what's happening if you're near me. I really mean to explain, not whine, so the concern can stop.

The very worst thing that I am left with is a diminished lung capacity. My lungs have been damaged and it seems as if no repairs are in sight. Perhaps over time, but I didn't get that hope from my pulmonologist when I saw him. He was a great guy (and a snappy dresser, David was impressed) but I only went to see him once as, after 3 full years of this, I think I have a good handle worth doing verses what's going to be a wild goose chase. I don't mean to be a cocky medical-know-it-all, but still I have to believe it's worth doing.

Swallow therapists? There's wild goose. Speech therapists? Loose goose. Hyperbaric Chambers? There's a flock of wild-assed geese. Pulmonology in my situation, likely more time spent chasing geese. I think after 3 years of medical appointments I can tell the valuable ones from the Hyperbaric Chamber ones.

How do your lungs get screwed up when you have esophageal cancer? Wait. No, I think I had laryngeal cancer. See? It happened to me and even I get confused. My tumor was in my larynx area. But the radiation wreaked havoc on my esophagus. And then, due to the problems drinking and swallowing for the next two years, particles of food and water must have gotten into my lungs - they call that aspirating - and those fluids and food particles break down the lining of your lungs. And then you have diminished breathing abilities. Which means, for me, that I get out of breath very easily and very quickly. And that just makes me feel old. (All of this? Layman's terms. I'm just "Cliff Noting" what doctors take hours to explain to me. This is how I understand it all now.)

Some people might think the eating and drinking problems are the very worst thing about all of this. Not so for me. I am finding those problems manageable. But to not be able to run with my dog more than half a block without being totally winded, **that** bugs me. To not be able to lift things and move things and work - say at remodeling a new house - as I used to be able to, **that** I notice and feel badly about. To be walking to dinner on Capitol Hill from our old apartment to dinner at **La Bete**, which is even down hill from Broadway, with others and to find myself panting and out of breath half way there, to the point that conversation is not possible because I have to focus on breathing, **that** pisses me off. That is how the lung problem manifests itself. Day-to-day, going to work and sitting in chairs and working on computers and seeing houses and all of that - no problems at all.

But I do worry about this. Now I sit in an eames chair in front of an 8 foot glass door in our new kitchen and stare out at a huge side yard that could be an amazing garden. I watch the birds and I wonder if I have it in me to get a load of mulch, dump it, make loads of it in my wheelbarrow, distribute it around the yard, and do that again and again and again before lunch on some random Saturday this spring. Did we purchase a garden whose promise I can't make happen? This is how it really hits me.

Other things I can't do well because of the breathing problem:

Breath quietly. My breathing can often be heard across the room. My breathing is not silent. I have to work to make it so. Going to the movies is an area of concern for me.

Read aloud. Put an article in my hand and ask me to read it out loud. I can barely do this. I can do it, but my need to breathe really messes up the flow of what I'm reading. There are pauses and gaps that you wouldn't want if someone were reading to a group. And trying to do this properly just makes what's left of my voice weak and then it starts to trail off.

Sing. In the shower. In the car. Alone. (Even before cancer I would never sing unless I was alone, I know I can't sing for shit.) I know the lyrics to everything so I want to sing. This is maddening. Case in point:

A few days after the move I was driving the nice car late at night coming home to our new house from a dinner downtown.

[Sidenote: By nice car I mean David's car which I just started to drive this year, 2011 even tho' we've owned it since early 2009. I think I just never wanted to drive it as all I remember was buying it after chemo one day and being dog tired. David picked me up at Swedish and took me to the dealership and we signed a bunch of stuff and traded in my car for this car. I like to joke that David waited till I was weak and couldn't put up a fight and conned me into trading in my car for this car. We did trade in my car. This car is his car. But none of that is true. It just makes for a great cocktail party tale. I like this car and traded mine for it willingly. But when we got it I was just to weak to learn to drive it. Mostly I was just afraid to drive it as it's so nice.]

Anyway . . . the nice car has satellite radio which I finally figured out how to use. So I'm on a good station and on comes **Fortunate Son**. One of my favorite songs. Creedence Clearwater. I cranked up the sound as I can only do when David is not around. (He's an old fart about music volume levels - he just hates it when he walks into the house and I have Katy Perry's **Teenage Dream** up so loud it can be heard at Boeing Field. He gets all agitated when this happens. It happens a lot.) So on comes the opening guitar in **Fortunate Son** and I'm ready with all my lyrics to belt it out and . . . and . . . and . . . NOTHING happens. Try to imagine this. You are alone in your car, you want to sing, and NOTHING come out. Nothing happens.

That night **Fortunate Son** was followed by **Lazy Day** (Spanky And Our Gang), then **Young Girl** (Gary Puckett and the Union Gap), then **I know I'll Never Find Another You** (The Seekers), then **Friday On My Mind** (The Easybeats), and finally, as I was arriving home, **(You're my) Soul and my Heart's Inspiration.**, (The Righteous Brothers). All in a row. It was such a great line up of songs from my past that I wrote it down when I walked in the door that night.

I love to sing, especially lyrics like, "I'm gonna have fun in the city, be with my girl she's so pretty" (what a rhyme). But no. No, nada, nothing. No sound. Karaoke seems to be out of the question now. (It always was really - no amount of gin cold get ever get me to karaoke, to do it, tho' I love to go places and watch it. Really, I do love to watch others do it. Thus the appeal of **American Idol**. I admire their bravery.) Anyway . . . thankfully I can still lipsync. And do my dance routines. But David eventually comes home and makes me turn the music down.

I now weigh 170 pounds. I was down to 135 pounds a year ago, maybe 16 months ago. Even with eating difficulties my body seems to want to put weight on and keep it. I no longer watch what I eat. I eat ANYTHING I WANT TO without any guilt or thought about is this good for me, is this bad for me, blah blah blah. When you can't eat anything for 2 years you're just grateful to be eating at all. Oddly I don't want to eat some stuff I used to crave. And, also oddly, some things I used to crave and want to eat, things you know are bad for you, I can't easily eat so I've given up on.

Thankfully most things I no longer want to eat are sugar based. Jams, jellies, honey, candy, chocolate . . . I think the he main example of this would be ice cream. I haven't had it in about 3 years. Once in awhile I try but it just isn't worth the trouble. I remember chocolate malts at Tyler's in Palm Springs. I used to have to FIGHT to not have one every day I was in town. Now I wonder if I'll ever have one again. I think I'll try once next trip just to see if it's possible.

I can pretty much eat any food item I want to. Some require thought, but so far food is all doable. It's the drinking of fluids that could kill me it seems. Let's start with water. Ice water. Everyone knows my obsession with ice and making water as cold as possible and my love of water. Well. Now I can barely drink water. I have never been waterboarded but from what I've read it feels like I feel when I have a glass of water. Thin liquids are the hardest thing for my esophagus to control. Water being the thinnest of all. You'd think that fat free milk would be like water but, even tho' you'd never know it, it's a bit thicker. Thus 1% milk is easier to drink than fat free milk which is easier than water. Going up that ladder you'd think melted ice cream would be thicker but no. Something about ice cream (and yogurt sometimes) just makes me gag.

You know what? I gotta stop talking about this. I am boring even myself. I am so sick of this.

One last thing on this topic and I'm moving on. One of the worst things about all of my many problems is knowing that as I sit in a coffeehouse or restaurant or on a plane or anywhere in public where I'm trying to consume any food or drink the people around me who hear me cough or gag think I'm sick. As in have the flu. As in have a cold. As in am contagious. I'm trying to drink, they hear the coughing and difficulties and they surely assume I should be home in bed not infecting the them, their children, and the world at large. What they don't know is what I have they can't catch. But I see the looks, I see the stares and, like Sookie, I know.

On two occasions I have been asked to leave a restaurant by employees of the restaurant. On a third occasion a patron in a pho' shop on Broadway said in a menacing voice, "Hey Buddy what's wrong with you? You shouldn't be here." He was a large biker type guy, dressed the part, a cross between ZZ Top and a buffed-up prison inmate and I wanted to assure him that I wasn't contagious so I started to say so and explain and he cut me off with this, "Yeah well you're grossing my girl out" (he was having pho' with his girlfriend). I just got up and left. I didn't even pay my bill (the Tran Brothers can afford it).

Things are better now. The throat stretchings definitely help. Eating food WHILE having water makes the water go to the right place (stomach as opposed to lungs) so that's better. It's not as bad in public anymore. I do take care to sit off and away where others aren't close to me when possible. And now, when I sit down on a plane, the first thing before they bring me a drink, is tell whoever is next to me that I don't have the flu, I briefly explain the radiation deal and why I'm likely to cough or gag later. I want to make sure they know I'm not patient zero.

The trend is better. To me the trend seems to be getting better all the time. I have had 20 esophagus stretchings so far. 20. But only 5 of them were in 2011. I started having them in late 2009. I had 2 of them in 2009. I had 13 of them in 2010. (There was a period in 2010 when I was having them weekly for a month.) Now I have them every 3 to 4 months and, as I said, only 5 times in all of 2011. So the TREND is in a direction I like. I would love to get through all of 2012 only having 4 of them. 4 would feel like a huge victory to me. And if I could get them down to 3 in all of next year, ooops, I mean this year, I'd be so thrilled, happy and grateful.

Goodnight. More later, but other topics. And never medical like that again. I want to move on.

More Days Have Passed: January 7th, Saturday Now

Time is flying by. It's the 7th day of the New Year and David is worried that you don't have a new calendar yet. Or was he annoyed that he didn't have a new calendar yet? Last night we found a new

Mexican restaurant in Wallingford. It's in the same spot that has been "a Mexican restaurant" for the 30 plus years I've lived in Seattle. It used to be **Guadalajara** for those of you who have been here for 30 or more years. Then it was a series of random Mexican named places. And now it's, I think, Azul or something like that. I didn't pay much attention going in but I should have as it was way better than the run of the mill Mexican place we get around here. We will be going back.

We will be going back whenever we see a movie at the Guild 45th which is why we were in Wallingford last night, to see a movie. Why else would we be there? It's so far from home now! We went to see **Young Adult** with Gary Sarozek. We killed several birds with one stone last night. We came home, dropped off the dog, changed to the nice car, hightailed it to see Bruce and Donna's swanky newly remodeled white condo on Capitol Hill (directly across the street from La Bete, they will have an easier time WALKING there), had champagne with them, approved of all of the white design choices, then ran off to pick Gary up and then hightailed it to Wallingford. We were all worried about timing and parking and eating before the 7:30 showtime and as we were worrying we noticed a huge open legal parking space on 45th directly across the street from the main door of the Guild 45th. Talk about Doris Day Parking!!!! We ended up having plenty of time to get tickets, walk in the rain to the Mexican place that's been there for 30 some years but hasn't really, and then walk back to see the previews and the movie. I love it when things go smoothly. We all approved of the movie - even tho' nothing exploded, I approved due to the dialogue. There was dog abuse in the movie tho' that both David and I keyed into and were disturbed by.

It's Saturday. I want to be building bookshelves and unpacking books and making an "art run" to our storage locker but I won't be. I will be doing this. Writing. The dog will not be happy.

January

We start the year off on Capitol Hill in a very small but very cool, very nice apartment in a building called Joule. We start the year off as, oh god can it be true, RENTERS! Think back. Against all odds we managed to sell finish the remodel, stage, market and sell the amazing huge home we had in Matthew's Beach a few months prior to the start of the year. We rented an apartment, rented a storage locker and got our asses and crap out of that house. The house sold. We went to Puerto Vallarta for the nicest 10 days I can ever remember having (seriously, people don't believe me when I say this but seriously for me this was the trip to beat). We returned home in time spend New Year's Eve day at the Seattle Art Museum having lunch and seeing the Picasso exhibit with Michael Stewart and to attend Gregg and Elisa's wedding later that evening, on New Year's Eve. And then, just like that, it's January and you are a renter on Capitol Hill.

David was disturbed by this. He has a fancy car with a license plate that reads: **YRENTBY**. He kept saying how can I drive a car that says, "**Why rent? Buy!**" when I am a renter? What will I say to my clients who ask? I point out that he owns (or has mortgages on) half of 3 rental properties in Seattle that he shares with Kevin Gaspari, his business partner, he has a mortgage on a house in Palm Springs that he's owned for over 10 years now, and he has a mortgage on a vacant lot of sand in Palm Springs. So he's not exactly "just a renter" (and, as they used to say with great mirth on Seinfeld, "Not that there's anything wrong with that" of course). Still David goes on about it and starts looking at every single condo listing that comes on the market. Oh yes. So starts **The Great 2011 Michael & David Condo Search**. David was hell bent on owning a condo in downtown Seattle.

In January we tested the tiny apartment living by having small dinners, like one person at a time dinners, or one couple, the place was so tight. Rebecca came once, Julie came once, we had Mark

and Dirk over once. We were testing "small condo entertaining" to see how it worked. Later that month Matt and Maggie took us out to dinner (and brought bottles of wine) which was nice as we were getting cabin fever already. We had dinner with Cassie and Jeremy at 2200 Westlake, also checking out the condo lifestyle. The annual MLK JR birthday weekend in Palm Springs happened again . . . Mark and Mario and Robert from Seattle were all there plus Roy and Jim who get to live there year round. We never miss it. David and I have been going to Palm Springs on this weekend in January since BEFORE we bought the house there. (We're going again next weekend as MLK JR day is coming up. Now Robert has become "Jason and Robert" and they are going with us.)

February

David's search for a condo is in full swing. I am spending a fair amount of my time meeting him downtown for a quick bite and to "just see it" here and there. Meanwhile I have a search of my own going on. I think it's time to find the perfect Weimaraner puppy to give a home to. Remember Inga died in October the year prior and we are a dogless family now. So I'm on the internet googling "Weimaraner" and surfing breeder sites. Matt and Maggie have a beautiful Weimaraner named Stella. Maggie points me to her breeders site. I'm researching dogs. David's researching condos. Everyone has something to do.

The 12th of February is our 26th anniversary. We spend it in Vancouver, BC. And of course we have dinner at Le Crocodile. We've been having dinner there for 26 years now.

I see Owen and get another tattoo. I think this is the last time I did this . . . it's been so long since I've gotten a tattoo this must be the last time. I find a breeder of Weimaraners. Long long long email exchanges ensue. I send a deposit to someplace in Eastern Oregon and hope.

We go to Dallas and then to Austin. It was a short trip, 2 days in Dallas and 3 days in Austin. It was huge fun however. In Dallas I get a tour of David's past, his married to Glennis past, who they knew, where they hung out. We spend time with Gary Weaver and Bob Hall. Bob Hall is about to launch his candidacy for President and there is much talk of that and general visiting and eating and drinking.

[Okay, I googled it for you as you might not believe me when I tell you one of David's best old friends is running for President: <http://keepamericaatwork.com/>]

We move on to Austin (by car, I like to work in a road trip whenever I can) where we connect with two fabulous women we know through Cherese and Rebecca. Their names are Donna and Lorelei and they love food so we love them. The overused term "foodies" gets thrown around a lot this weekend as we get a proper tour of Austin. David and I stay at the **W** there, we explore, we visit with the girls. A great trip.

More small dinners in our tiny loft apartment: Robin and Fred, Steve and Shane, Michael Stewart, Cherese and Rebecca. We go to La Bete with David's client Tony Miles. We have tuna casserole many other nights alone at home with Calvin and Tivo (Tivo is one of our best friends). February passes.

March

At 5:00 PM on Saturday March 5th David and I are parked downtown next to the outdoor art park on Elliott (what's that called again?) waiting for our puppy to be delivered to us. A man who lives on

Bainbridge bought a puppy. David and I bought a puppy. And a woman in Seattle named Brianne bought a puppy. The man from the island had family near the breeders so he drove over, visited family, collected 3 puppies, and drove them back to Seattle.

At 6:00 PM we are home in our tiny apartment taking turns holding a puppy. We named her Opal. David picked the name from a short list we had going. Now we have a puppy. This is a game changer. This changes everything, but certainly it changes the rest of the spring dramatically.

We have a large wall calendar that we keep and we make all of our plans on this calendar. ONE calendar - this way we can't double book a night. If the night is already taken when you're on the phone with someone then you can't pick that night. He who screws this up and forgets to put their event on the master social calendar, well HE is the one who has to call whoever he make a plan with and say, "Oooooops. Sorry. I double booked that night." I save these calendars (because, we all know it, I'm a nut bordering on being a hoarder nut). I bring this up because I look at the months of the past year's calendar to refresh my memory about what we did. Looking at the whole of March now all I see is the huge note in red sharpie pen that says, "5:00 PM get Opal" followed by a note that says "1st full day with Opal." The rest of the month is mostly blank.

Kim and Joe did have us over to dinner later in the month. We took Opal with us. Their 3 boys had a great time with that puppy. We went to see the play **Vanities** with Greg and Larry. This was a blast from my distant long ago theatre past. Just hearing the name of that show reminds me of so many things from like 1975 that I just had to go. We also got tickets to see **Billy Elliott** from Gregg Green who works for the Mariners. Something to do with baseball, or something like that. He explains it to me each time we see each other but it doesn't seem to stick.

So . . . the travelin' road show of the Broadway hit **Billy Elliott**. I never wanted to see this. I never told anyone as I don't want to look like an old meanie heartless non gay grouch, but I just don't care., I never wanted to see this. I saw the movie. It starred a child. I don't find things that star a child compelling. I know, I know, I'm terrible and heartless and blah blah blah. But unless that child is in peril with things blowing up all around it and Bruce Willis is trying to save that child, can I please skip the child movies? Please? And let's not make them into Broadway plays. And if we do, and even if we get Elton John to write the score, please don't ask me to go see it. I just don't care. I know, I know - I'm a bad gay. I don't care about the sweet boy who wants to be a ballet dancer (thus gay) and I don't care about his mean butch dad coming around (I tell ya it just tugs at your heartstrings) and I don't care that the king of all gays, Sir Elton John, wrote the score. I just don't care. But I have never told anyone that, let alone the gays, until now.

I think it would have been really awesome if in act two during Billy's the big show stopping number, **Electricity**, if he could have leaned back in a chair and had water come crashing down on him from above. It was at the end of his audition. He was on stage with his dad. They had just been sitting in two chairs. His dad was on stage and was now only using one of the two chairs there. Surely Billy could have used the other chair. It would have been so **FLASHDANCE**. And he was auditioning for the Royal School of Ballet. The irony. Auditioning. Flashdance. 1983.

April

Let's see. Let's see. April. Well, first of all I'm still sleeping alone on the couch downstairs by the front door. It's a very small apartment. The couch is less than 4 feet from the front door. David is sleeping upstairs in the loft bedroom. We are still renting. And we are very thankful to really

have a FRONT DOOR that goes immediately TO THE STREET. For we are training a puppy. See, I'm not sleeping alone. I am sleeping on the couch with a puppy curled up next to my chest. (Thank god we have a such a great couch for sleeping on. During the chemo time I used to break up the monotony of my sick days by sleeping on this couch after my appointments. It's a very firm nice couch to take a nap on. Or raise a puppy on.) My job, willing took on, was to sleep by the front door and take Opal outside every few hours during the night to pee. I was potty training the puppy.

And can I say there were no nighttime mistakes. The moment she'd start to stir I would fly off that couch, throw on a robe and slippers, or on better nights jeans and "dog shoes" (they are like gardening shoes without the garden) and just like that, at 3:00 AM and 4:30 AM and any other time she stirred, I'd be on the street. There were mistakes (minor in the waking hours but only a few when we got distracted) now and then but isn't that was a pet deposit is for? We'd start to get worked up and then we'd remember, we're renters!

Oh . . . puppy training. Crates. Yeah, we have crates. We had a crate in the apartment, a crate in my car (the now trashed car). We use crates. But never at night. Opal has slept next to me, on the couch or in bed, every day of her life so far. Unless I'm away from her. Then she has either David or her favorite Tim Allen. She's 100% house trained now . . . that happened before we left the couch. Only when I was sure she got it did we leave the couch.

In the middle of the month I finally got to go to Palm Springs again. Mini trips to Palms Springs this year were greatly reduced. Greatly. I went solo in April to check on things. Going to Palm Springs solo meant that David got to raise our puppy solo for a few days.

April . . . Rob Thesman came to town and he and David toured rental apartments in the downtown area. Rob is drifting to Lopez Island by way of downtown Seattle. We all had dinner at ART. We went on a gallery walk arranged by Tim Allen. We went to a cooking school night in the Market with Jennifer and Mike. We watched the HBO **Mildred Pierce** weekly in our tiny apartment with Gary and Matt. Then it was . . .

May

Now that we have a dog a great deal of time is given over to dog things. Heather and Dena from the office create play dates in Dena's backyard. There are almost daily trips to Volunteer Park. There are frequent trips to Magnuson Park (out where we used to live), there's a play date with her much older half sister (same father) Stella. **And there is Coco.** We own Opal. But remember I said a woman in Seattle also bought a puppy? They are SISTERS. Coco and Opal. Brianne owns Coco. There were frequent hookups all summer long. (Can I call May summer here?) Opal is a BLUE Weimaraner. Coco is the TAUPE colored Weimaraner (as our last dog Inga was). The sisters are the same size, the same age, the same the same the same but different colors. It was huge fun to watch them play and grow.

There were 3 things that happened in May. Yes there were dinners in and out with friends, two plays, a movie, that regular stuff. But 3 things of note happened. One, Lisa, my only contact with my college years, flew from Ypsilanti to LA to visit her son. She then drove to Palm Spring. I flew to Palm Springs. Presto - college reunion, 2 friends poolside for a weekend just talking. Two, at the end of the month David and I made our other "regular" trip to Palm Springs for the Memorial Day weekend. We go every year. We haven't missed a Memorial Day in Palm Springs in over 10 years now. As always Chereese and Rebecca were our guests this holiday weekend. The girls save up their desert time for this one weekend each year. The four of us are going again this coming May.

And the third thing . . . the third thing that happened in May was huge. But only mentally as it turned out. For about 5 years now, back in our northern Matthew's Beach days, I have been telling David that all I really want is a small house in Georgetown on Flora Avenue South with a large level lot and a sidewalk out front and an alley out back. David's been going on and on about condos; I've been going on and on about this dream lot of mine. Well in May a house came on the market in Georgetown on Flora that likely met my specific requirements. So David, who checks the listing hourly, come into my office at Eastlake one afternoon with a printout. I say well let's go get our afternoon cookie and check it out. And we do. And it is spot on perfect. And the yard is exactly what I was looking for. We get Kevin and Rachel to meet us there, and over dinner at Jules Mae we discuss if we can do the crazy thing we think we want to do. Kevin, a JAS architect, does some minor research and sez YES. And somehow I get David to agree to make an offer on it. So we do. But there are eleven [11] other offers on it (by the way this is happening in Seattle frequently despite what the newspapers might tell you). We have high credit scores, we have a reasonable downpayment, we go in \$17,000 OVER asking, we skip all of those pesky contingencies, we write a cloyingly sweet cover letter, we are streamlined, and . . . and . . . AND . . . **we don't get it!** We lose out. We are not even in second place. We are like in 5th or 6th place. They sell to someone else. End of story.

But . . . but . . . NOW I HAVE LEARNED that it is possible to get David to Georgetown. He has been protesting for years, saying no way, out of the question, calling into question my sanity, saying we'd get one AND a condo downtown and he'd visit me on the weekends, etc. Yet he went to paper on this. I think Opal was my secret weapon. Living in a super cute but tiny loft apartment with a puppy, even an apartment with a front and back door, might have been my kryptonite.

We resume looking at downtown condos the next day as if nothing happened. I mourn for the perfect little house in Georgetown quietly; David seems to not even remember this ever happened.

June

Not much this month. Just "livin' on the hill" with a puppy. Work, play with puppy, go to park, home to tiny apartment, eat and drink and repeat. It is one of my "medical cycle" months so I had the full body scan and a round of doctor appointments. Mark and Lee, who live in London, came to America and there was a meal and some business. Mark and Lee are the wizards behind David's web site [check it out at <http://www.updikegaspari.com>] so photos shoots with Kevin and David in houses they sold take place. Design this, think about that, work on site for months getting it a fresh look and updated. The site has changed - go check it out.

July

As it turns out holding onto the vacant lot in Palm Springs that we bought at the tippy top peak of the market on the market's craziest high day is not, as they all say now, "sustainable." We had a 30 year mortgage on it (banks, what were they thinking? mortgages on sand? good times!) at a 6.5% rate (which seemed reasonable for a loan on sand since no one ever did those ever - but all of a sudden Washington Mutual started doing loans like that) but holding onto the lot just did not pencil out. Still, foolish me, I desperately wanted to hold onto it. Not only did I not want to sell it for \$140,000 less that we paid for it, I just wanted to continue dreaming about it, about what we could do with it, about retiring there, etc. Sometime in July I woke up (as usual David was shaking me and saying WAKE UP!) and we listed it with Roy and Jim in Palm Springs. I would not allow a sign to go on the property for many intelligent reasons. It didn't sell as fast as our Matthew's Beach house,

but it sold in a few months time. Once we had a signed contract it was not an easy transaction. The buyer of the lot was a very bad man. Low of character. Void of integrity. Literally a few days before closing he has his agent tell our agents that he's decided he wants to pay less. It was a cash sale. He had the cash to perform and had already released his earnest money deposit to us - we had it already so there was nothing more "to keep" as they say. This player was basically saying, "You go ahead and keep the deposit I made but I'm not closing and the lot is still yours. Good luck with that, goodbye." Nasty. I did the math on this however and lowered our price to match his demand and sold the lot. I had a hard time getting there (to selling the lot at all) but once I make up my mind to sell, well, I have made up my mind. I follow through. I am not stupid. We got rid of the lot taking an insulting beating from this guy on top of the enormous beating the market was already given us. So it goes. Onward

We took a trip to visit David and Paul on Guemes Island. We took Opal. And we took Inga. Or her ashes anyway. We had a great time visiting Paul and David and seeing their major remodel. They've done so much with the place since losing their island partners! We walked the beach with Opal, had great meals, the usual Guemes weekend. When the tide went out we took Inga's ashes down to the huge rock (which really is the size of a Mini Cooper) where the ashes of Libby and Samson "float" in and out daily with the tide. Now Inga has joined them. Opal was hoping that this act would finally make us stop calling her INGA. We call her Inga often. But who can blame us? Inga and Opal are identically sized dogs, they are both food crazy dogs, they are both little angels, they have the same face, and we are old. We get confused. We know some people who would have just named Opal Inga - we kid you not - but we need all of the mental exercise we can get.

Cowboys and Aliens opened in the theaters and I was there opening day, at the first matinee, with about 25 agents from my office. Once a year I pick what I think is going to be the blockbuster movie of the summer and I find a matinee showing with easy parking and I tell everyone to show up and I'll buy their ticket in if they do. This year I got about 25 out of the 70 agents who work in my office. I love my summer popcorn movies !!!

August

And now all hell breaks loose.

Surrey Elton Tribble came to Seattle and there was a nice dinner with Gary and Curtis. Irene and Patrick had their anniversary and asked David and I to join them (so sweet of them). We walked from our apartment to La Bete and happily celebrated with them. There were dinners a plenty this month: Michael Stewart, Julie, the girls, Greg and Larry, Tim Allen. Socially a very busy month.

But all hell broke loose on Monday the 8th of August, again in the afternoon, when David again walks into my office at work with a listing of a new house printed out in his hand.

I want to make sure everyone UNDERSTANDS something here. I never check the mls for listings. I never go to the internet and search for houses. That's no longer part of my job. It's not what I do. It is however what David does. He does it constantly, hourly, all of the time. My point here is this: **David knows I don't search the internet for houses.** Thus if David never told me about a house or a condo, I'd likely not know about it (unless it was listed by one of my agents, THEN I'd know). Or if I did find out about it, it would be purely by accident and it would be too late. So David is in control of what I see and don't see. And on Monday August 8th he showed me another new listing for another house in Georgetown.

So he hands me the listing. I am still SMARTING from not getting the house we made an offer on in May. I am still so obsessed with that house that I remember its address: 6656. So now I'm holding the listing for **6650 Flora Avenue South** in my hands. I can't believe it. It must be the immediate house to the north I say. I do remember that part of Flora was particularly tree lined and grassy and I remember liking it and I drop the file I'm reviewing and off we go for cookies and coffee and to see how this house stacks up to the last one. In the not nice car (David always drives no matter which car we are in, he thinks he does it better than me) I am reading the listing. The house we didn't get in May was on a 6,000 square foot lot. The house we are driving to is on an 8,000 square foot lot. [Can't he drive any faster?] And we've already established that David will go to paper on a house in Georgetown. [Really. I know it's just a Hybrid Escape but I'm sure it goes faster than this.] And Opal, who goes to with me to work every day, basically she is always with me, is in the back of the Escape (aka the sad dog car now) ready to try out the lot. [Are we there yet?] We pull up. Turns out it is 2 doors north of the house we lost out on. Flora is a very very long block and they used up almost every number on both sides of the street. There is a house between 6656 and 6650. We go in. It's almost perfect. At first it does not seem as perfect as the house we lost out on. But give me a few moments to think this through.

This is on a Monday. On Wednesday we deliver our offer to the listing agent. So far we are the only offer. We wonder where the other 9 losers on the last house are at. I keep checking with the other agent to see how many offers there are going to be. Are they holding for multiple offers? What's the plan? She says they have no other offers and will look at them as they come in, first come, first serve. So, since we're the only people putting pen to paper, we go in lower than asking by \$30,000 and pile on those pesky contingencies. They counter back with only a \$5,000 change in price. We are very surprised and we sign it immediately. **BOOM** - we're moving to Georgetown. This all was wrapped up on Thursday the 11th of August. It took less than 4 days from when David walked into my office to us having a mutually signed around rock solid deal. Off to **Palace Kitchen**, one of our favorite places to eat, for our victory dinner.

The rest of the month is a blur of paperwork. Our wonderful loan officer Janelle handled me and my 100s of daily emails complete with scanned pdf attachments wonderfully. Can I just say getting a loan is not what it used to be. I'd heard about this (really?) but this was the first borrowing David and I had done since the **August 2007 CRASH**. I was alternately amused and annoyed. I kept saying, "Even with our credit scores?" The answer each time? "Yes, even with your credit scores." We were contractually supposed to close on the 30th of September. I could see no reason why we shouldn't be able to bump that up to a September 16th close. At some point in the process when Janelle kept referencing the 30th I said, "the 30th is for losers. Winners close on the 16th." It became our joke, but a good one as if you see it in your mind daily as the deadline it will become the deadline.

Michael Stewart took us to see **Porgy and Bess** at the Opera. Month closed!

September

So now we know we are moving. It's no longer hypothetical, it's real. Now we can think about our stuff. We have stuff. Cheek to jowl in the tiny loft apartment. Floor to ceiling and wall to wall in a huge 20 foot by 20 foot storage locker in Interbay. We have more stuff than the new house will hold. That is clear. (How did David think we were going to fit into a condo downtown?) So I make spreadsheets of our stuff. I measure our stuff. I put all the measurements and locations of our stuff in the spreadsheet boxes. I think about Palm Springs, what could fit there? All of this, you

realize, was just a good excuse for me to rent a U-Haul and get my dog and pile in the cab with some new CDs and bags of Doritos and fill the back with stuff and drive to Palm Springs. Hello McDonald's Sweet Tea! Hello Truck Stops! Hello Road Trip! At places with wi-fi connections I'd type "dog parks I-5" into google and then I'd use the Garmin to get us there. We had a great time. A boy and his dog.

I spent Labor Day weekend in Palm Springs. I got there a few days early, unloaded the stuff, returned the truck, rented a car, and rearranged the furniture in a very small house several times. David flew down and spent time with me. He had a round trip ticket but I sold him on the idea of a joint road trip home with the puppy in the rental car. (Goodbye loud music on the road but there are other trade-offs.) Time in Palm Springs was warm and lovely. I taught Opal how to swim. It was a lovely relaxing time. It was the LAST relaxing time either of us have had.

We became the second owners of the house on Flora on Friday September 16th. (It worked.) Janelle ended up getting us a 30 year fixed mortgage at only 4.25%. Of course now you can get a fixed 30 year mortgage at well less than 4% most days (really, you can, today it's 3.75% fixed) and sometimes I hear about someone who just got one and I start to feel stupid for locking so quickly on ours. Then I kick myself and say "snap out of it" as I remember that our mortgage payment here, with taxes in it and with insurance in it, is still \$650 less per month than our rent was at Joule. There we had to pay a monthly pet fee for Opal, we had to pay monthly for 2 cars in the garage and the rent on the apartment was just much higher. Much less space; much more money per month. All told it is \$650 a month less here. And it's fixed for 30 years (Joule raised our rent on the day our first year was up). And I'm not exaggerating these numbers.

And if we ever get the shi, ah, ah . . . stuff? precious belongings? that we have in our Interbay storage locker outta there and over here we'll save another \$330 a month. (Big lockers cost more.) Then it will be \$980 a month less to be here this year than to be on Broadway last year. We have had no time to unpack and organize here yet so the stuff in storage is on the far back burner until we do. We have to create organization here before we can bring **one more thin mint** here.

On Saturday September 17th I was here at Flora at 7:00 AM with all of my tools, several boxes of those large black contractor trash bags and a helper who was born in Mexico. The first thing I did was gut the kitchen. By gut it, I mean REMOVE ALL SIGNS OF IT. Before we even made our offer on this house I presented a full plan to David wherein we moved the kitchen from where it was to where it is now. I kept saying, except for the sink it's just a matter of what room we have Albert Lee deliver the new appliances to. And if you saw our kitchen you'd know that's true. It's made with Lego. You can take it apart and move it quickly. Appliances roll.

This same plan, we call it the temporary plan, required we eliminate two of the three bedrooms in the house. Yes, that's right. It was a three bedroom house; now it is a one bedroom house. Oh, and that one remaining bedroom? It's in the base . . . wait, scratch that . . . it's in the lovely zen like lower level. Always remember we're real estate agents. We know the highly desired floor plans. We know what's marketable!

So another whole house re-envisioning remodel started. But this time more restrained. And, in my opinion, more sensibly. This time we are not going for the grand remodel or even what the market expects in a remodel. This time we are going for how WE, as in me and David and Opal and Calvin, really use a house. How do WE really use spaces? When company comes over, what do WE really need? What do WE want? How do WE live our lives day-to-day. And a plan was made based on our answers to those questions. Thus no living room. No guest rooms (sorry) (not really sorry).

What we have here now is an unconventional small house with open spaces. Open spaces perfectly suited for everything from cocktail parties with with tasty things to nibble on all the way up to sit down dinner parties. And open spaces suited to us when we're home alone having nachos on a Sunday night while watching **60 Minutes**. (Did you know we do THAT exact thing every Sunday night alone? It's why we won't go out on a Sunday night.)

Yup. One more remodel. Thankfully it is a very small house.

Guests come over and ask if this is our last remodel. We assume so. All of our friends laugh and start to recount our history with housing. Let them. They just aren't thinking clearly.

Before we settled on a puppy, when the search was still on and an older rescue Weimaraner was in the mix of possibilities, I looked at my age and compared my age to a dog's lifespan. I also looked at my health and energy and then I said to David, "**I think I have one more puppy in me.**" Next time it'll be an older trained rescue dog. But now I knew one more puppy could join us.

It might be the same with living spaces. Next time a condo in the Market where no walls will be moved, no floors replaced, maybe not even paint the walls. This is probably the the last remodel I have in me. And the garden might kill me before we find out if that's true or not.

Gotta stop for the day. Typing is hard. Typing with a cat in your lap off and on is harder.

Bye for now.

January 9th, A Monday

Okay I didn't finish over the weekend. Opal hates it when I sit and type all day. Our stuff hates it when I ignore it for days on end. In 3 days we are flying to Palm Springs. I'm not proofing this letter this year (again) because if I do I won't get to send it out until late NEXT week. Me, I'm hoping for tomorrow. Plus "my team" that helps me stuff and mail each year seems to be available on Wednesday. It's going to be close. There are 3 of you I absolutely COUNT ON to make all of the corrections and mail it back to me: Lisa, Merritt and Jancie. Maybe Alice? Anyone really is welcome to correct it and return. Any corrections you like. Really. I'll send anyone who proofs two calendars a year from now on!

Today was my office's "first" day back to work since the holidays. And by that I mean I hold a meeting on Monday Mornings each week and today was the first business Monday of the year. We had a pretty good meeting today, attendance is random but we always get the most agents at the first of the year because I give away DOOR PRIZES. Not stupid gag gifts, things people would actually want: Meals in restaurants around town with me and people they get to invite. I pay.

I'm back in Georgetown now as I write best at the white kitchen table. Here I can see the street and my new neighbors walking, coming and going. Strollers. Pets. A good deal of foot traffic on Flora. Alice Lanczos sent me a Christmas card. On the envelope she wrote: "I expect to hear that the Hill is way better than the land of strollers and soccer teams." Clearly she wrote that in expectation of getting our letter and clearly she was comparing life of Broadway to life with strollers & soccer teams in the Wedgwood area. Won't she be surprised? Broadway WAS BETTER than the north end but Georgetown really feels like where I belong. Much more so than Broadway. There's a great deal of foot traffic here, but of a much more normal kind. And we have strollers.

Every day I see a woman with 3 greyhounds and a stroller go power walking by. I hear, from others, her dogs are very unfriendly to other dogs. Sad for Opal. But - back to my point - again, lots of dog walkers and strollers and babies in Georgetown. There's one woman who puts a cat in a netted stroller and walks the cat and a dog. Later we found out it's our very cool new neighbor's cat and dog - that's the dog walker who is now a cat walker too.

I think I left off in September

The Rest Of The Year Is A Big Contracting Blur

What do you expect? I have a house. I have tools. I have a master floor plan. September ran into October which then melded into November which in turn crashed into December. Since we got the keys my life has been one big blur of construction. Every moment that I could be here, I was here. Every weekend I would get up at 6:00 AM, hit Vivace and read the NYT, and then come here. Opal was always here with me, playing in the construction debris. I was obsessed. I'm still obsessed, but it was much worse then. Demo, demo, demo, demo and dump runs. This went on with just me here, me and helpers, until the real contractors showed up on October 1st. Then shit really started to happen.

I don't remember much else from the last part of the year. In October my cousin Susan came to Seattle to dance and she and I had dinners and ran errands and got lost in my new neighborhood on the other side of a river whose bridge was out. I guess the locals knew. I'm an interloper. Susan got to see the house before that trip. I'll take photos back to my folks some day and they can all see it after. I turned 56. I worked on the house. In November I remember staying at Tim's house for a week while he and Monty went to stay at our house in Palm Springs. I stayed there to watch his two dog. Opal stayed there too. And I worked on the house. Thanksgiving came, hosted by Greg and Larry again this year. We didn't have a kitchen then. Obviously we're hosting next year (with our two oven stove). And I worked on the house. Somewhere in here we got our FIRST house warming card from Zelda Kay Fitzpatrick back in Michigan. Somehow I think we were talking on the phone, or maybe it was an email - it's all a blur I tell you! - an I mentioned what I was doing. I gave up the address and - so gratifying - personal mail in our new house. The card is still on the mantel.

We have an old fashioned mail slot here, not in the door, but in the wall. The postman actually walks up our porch steps and opens a slot and drops the mail and it lands in a catch area inside the wall. I cleaned this up and sprayed it black and made it look new and fresh again. Send mail. We love finding it there. We hate Opal's reaction to it getting there however. 98108.

The first week of December I did an insane thing: I agreed to attend a 4 day seminar held at the convention center in Lynnwood. It was work related. How to be better at doing what we do. 4 days. But wait - SOME of those days were 12 hour days. Start at 8:00 AM, get home at 8:00 PM. Crazy schedule. I wanted to do this tho' but it meant 4 days of NOT coming to the house. 4 days of NOT seeing the progress Ted and Geoff and Dan were making. The hardwoods were finished some of those 4 days and we wouldn't have been allowed in here anyway, still it was all just hard on me.

I know it's a long way back, and I don't know what your reading retention is like after I drone on like this, but if you remember we moved on December 15th. I honestly don't think David and I saw any friends, went to any movies, play, nothing in all of December. It was all about packing the art and the apartment up and moving precious stuff here on our own first and getting ready for the movers. It was all consuming.

Remember the part about the master social calendar we keep and how I refer to it now and then as I think this letter through? I just glanced at it. On the 9th and 12th of December I wrote, not as historical info but when in my PLANNING MODE, "stuff calendars" and then "mail letter." Today is the 9th, but January. I am just over one month late it would seem. Sorry.

What would this letter be without something for Surrey and Gary to cluck about? I ask you. I offer up this this year. It was sent to David. He forwarded it to me. In case you don't follow political news, here's a good example of what redacted means:

Begin forwarded message:

From: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX@yahoo.com
Date: January 5, 2011 5:24:49 PM PST
To: david@updikegaspari.com, kgaspari@windermere.com
Subject: Feedback from web site

name: XXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX
email: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX@yahoo.com
telephone: 206 XXX XXXX
message:

Hi David,

This is XXXXXXXXXXX, of XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, XXX block of XXth Ave E. No, I haven't gotten itchy feet again and am searching for a house, but I did want to let you know that I have been moved by Michael's plight and letters. I'm glad to hear that things have improved for Michael, but I also want to encourage Michael to think about compiling his letters as a book. I believe he has a manuscript worth publishing. The story is of a metrosexual journey through America over the last twelve years or so. It's a story everyone can relate to - of partnership, houses bought and sold, the economy, of meals tasted and experiences shared and then from health to sickness and back again. Michael's tone in the letters is intimate, honest and funny and very relatable too. I think more people could share his voice if he found a publisher. I also think the letters have commercial appeal. I know very little about actual publishing, but I am a reader and I know a compelling story when I see one. I also know that people love to read letters. So in case that no-one has yet suggested any of this to you, I am diving in and encouraging Michael, with a little help from you, to get an agent who will find a publisher for his wonderful letters.

Best to both of you

XXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX

The Friendlist Place On Earth

Is that Disneyland? I think not. I've been to Disneyland and hardly anyone spoke to me. Nope, I think it's Georgetown. A few last things on my mind and I'm dashing off to Kinkos with this. No proofing first. Really. Sorry.

So I have to say, and again I'm not exaggerating or making this up to make some point or defend our odd choices, but I have to say I have lived in Seattle for over 34 years now, in many many different

parts of Seattle, and I have never lived anywhere as friendly and outgoing as I have here in Georgetown. Even before David and I moved in here, back when we were new to it and only working here, lots of neighbors took the time to walk over here and introduce themselves and welcome us to the neighborhood. Not just one family. Not two. Many. I already know the names of more of my neighbors here than I ever did after years in other places. People stop when walking by and ask, "Hello. Are you my new neighbor?" and I come to find out they live a block away. Yet they see us as neighbors. Nice. And our neighbors, the houses beside ours and behind ours, super friendly. I already feel like people here are watching the house for us, would feed our pets, etc. It's a nice surprise that we didn't expect. As soon as more stuff is packed away we plan on having everyone who's name we know in Georgetown over for cocktails and appetizers. So far that would only be about 13 people, plus us would make 15 - but that could be a nice sized little event if everyone showed up.

Oh oh oh and the DOGS. I guess if you love dogs you just move here. It seems as if everyone has one. We've met them all near to us. We welcome them into our huge side lot to run and play with Opal. And of all the dogs there's Wyatt who lives behind us across the alley. Wyatt is owned by Stephanie and Alison and we arrange play dates often. They had us over to dinner, we took Opal. This weekend they are in San Francisco but a house sitter is in the house with Wyatt. I emailed and "borrowed" Wyatt for 3 hours yesterday. Opal requires nothing of me when Wyatt is here. I really am looking forward to loving it here.

Another thing I am looking forward to is spring. Why? This house sits on a 4,000 square foot lot. And next to this house is ANOTHER 4,000 square foot lot. We own them both. You could build a house on the vacant lot and sell it from profit but we are never in this for the money. We will make that lot a part of this lot as quickly as possible. Anyway, in the middle of the vacant lot there is a huge dogwood tree. HUGE. It's the 2nd tallest tree on the street. (The tallest tree, about 8 doors north of us, is astounding.) This tree is so big I didn't even realize it was a dogwood. I had two arborists come and take a look at it. I wanted to know if it would last for 15 years. If someone knowledgeable told me this tree is at the end of it's life and won't make it 7 years, I would have had it removed. I was hoping for a long span remaining. I love the tree but I wanted to know it would last if I was going to plan a whole garden around it. The base of this tree is easily larger than the table I am sitting at now. I'm at the white table, round, 5 foot round. I can tell the tree's trunk is bigger.

I hired one of the arborists to climb up into the tree and lightly thin out some of the dead wood. It didn't need shaping per se, but it had been ignored (thankfully, no topping or crazy pruning) for the last 50 years. The arborist told me, both of them on separate days had the same opinion on this, that the tree was likely 125 to 150 years old. I think one arborist was in the 150 range, the other lower, neither said there was a sure way for them to know. Even if it's just 100 years old, wow. This house was built in 1941. The woman whose estate we purchased it from was 94 when she died (last year, not recently). She was born in Georgetown and worked her whole life at the Sears store on 1st Avenue. (Back when Sears was the big thing - I remember going to Sears in Detroit with my family and it was a BIG THING.)

Think of it . . . she was born in Georgetown, worked at Sears on 1st her whole life, bought this house in 1941, raised a family here (how exactly?), grew old her, and was the only owner of this house until we came along. But even before she got here that tree was here and she never messed with it. (By the way, she died driving, not in the house. All of our neighbors have told us about her crazy driving and how no one would ride with her anymore.)

We put an 8 foot X 8 foot glass slider directly in front of this tree. We have too much furniture and we've run out of places to put it and one night early on David, mostly as a joke, put the eames chair on a rug in front of the 8 X 8 slider in the middle of our kitchen. Literally. There is an eames chair in front of the refrigerator. But you know what - we liked it there. Now one of us sits in the chair waiting for hummingbirds in the morning or having a cocktail while the other cooks dinner at night. I sit there and think about how to plan out a 4,000 square foot garden. But mostly I admire the stupid tree. I'm 56 and I'm dumbstruck by a tree. I want to see it bloom.

Another year behind us. In a way of year of upset and turmoil even tho' neither of us were ever upset or in turmoil. But David and me? When we're not fixed in a place it seems like upset and turmoil. Now that we've landed again (landed . . . what a cute choice of words when you live literally next to Boeing Field) we feel much more at peace. Greater peace will come when we have all of our stuff under this roof. We may have to dump half our books and select pieces of furniture to fit in here, but, well there are worse things. We're both grateful for this house and its solidness and integrity. And its triple pane windows and beefed up insulation package (thank you Port of Seattle). Sleeping here has been pure joy.

We are both grateful to Ted and Dan and Geoff and Nathan who got us this far on the path of making this place our kind of livable. We are both grateful that Opal has made it to one with no problems or drama. We are grateful for our friends who actually keep in touch with us. (I really think the shallowness of social media is not healthy for society as a whole. But I could be wrong.) We are grateful to each be 56 instead of dead. Wait, David's 55. He's probably MORE grateful about that. We are so grateful that Calvin lived to make it here (it was touch and go a few weeks last year). With supervision we let Calvin into the yard. He's so happy.

And I'm grateful that this letter is now over.

David's at the stealth dog park with Opal and is due home any minute. When he gets here he's going to be so grateful to sign this letter and have me join him once again in the TV Lounge.

We're still here, pluggin' along.

Goodbye for another year,

and please keep in touch, we love mail,



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