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2016

Saturday October 29th 2016

A Preamble Because It Is Nowhere Near Christmas

I am sitting on a plane in FIRST CLASS, Seat 2-A, Alaska Airlines, flying to Detroit. It's nowhere near a holiday unless you want to count Halloween which is a mere two days away. But we all know this isn't "The Halloween Letter" so why am I starting it so early? The answer is because I promised David I would.

We were together in Palm Springs just a week ago. While there I was checking out my mileage account on Alaska's website. A week or so prior was my birthday for which I wanted nothing and so told David to skip the gift this year as I really couldn't think of anything I wanted. But while looking at the Alaska site in Palm Springs I realized something I did want: TO HAVE GOLD STATUS again with Alaska Airlines.

I was GOLD once with Alaska, back in 2008, the year before the tumor business. But then travel stopped and my status fell as low as it could go and stayed there for several years. But this year, due to pool and spa construction in Palm Springs, I needed to make more short and quick "contractor check-up trips" and the miles added up. Thus BINGO! when I checked my account a week ago. I was surprised to find I was only 14,683 flown miles away from being GOLD again. I hadn't been this close in 8 years.

So I say to David, "Hey I thought of something I want for my birthday." "What?" he asks. And I say, "I want you to be supportive of my next plan." I go on to explain how close I am to making GOLD and how beneficial it will be for *both of us* for me to make it. All I have to do is figure out two round trip flights that will equal 14,683 miles. How hard could that be? Then I poll all of our friends who are GOLD on Alaska for pointers. The best tips come from Michael Stewart who explains that a full fare first class ticket earns you 75% more in bonus miles, miles that Alaska *will count towards* my status level.

See? It's more than just flying. It's intentionally flying in and paying for first class so I can fly less than the actual 14,683 miles needed. I not only need to convince David I should do this, I have to sell him on the idea of me spending our money on first class seats that he won't get to enjoy! So David hears me make all of these purpose driven justifications ending something like this: ". . . blah blah blah and since I'll be in first class I'll have enough room to work on the Christmas Letter on my laptop while making these mileage runs.

So here I sit in first class flying to Detroit to take my family out to dinner and then turn around and fly home the next day. (They think this is about dinner.) I have power jacks for my laptop and cell phone, Bose headphones for the 11,000 plus songs I have in iTunes, plenty of room between me and the seat in front of me so my laptop can fit nicely on my tray table, and they keep bringing me warm mixed nuts and Bloody Mary's which, for some reason, I crave when on a plane. Tomato juice and flying? I don't know the connection but I know I rarely drink tomato juice when I'm not on a plane. I ask for gin so it's really not a Bloody Mary, it's a Red Snapper, but I don't want to get all cocktail technical with the flight attendants. I've started the letter; justification to David satisfied.

Monday October 31st

Okay, two days later. I ended up staying an extra night to allow more time to visit. This allowed me to spend some quality alone time with both my cousin Susan on Saturday night and then with my cousin Marsha on Sunday morning. Today I got to see Lisa, we went to a diner that I love on the main street in downtown Ypsilanti (the name is escaping me at the moment, Abe's?) and after a hot plate of "Hippie Hash" (*that* name I remember) I headed to the airport. But the main event was spending all of Sunday afternoon and evening with my immediate family. I went to my mom and dad's apartment where they are still living on their own and doing just fine (dad, 91, mom, 86.) The TV is always on (this probably explains a lot about me) and my options were a football game or Fox News. Clearly Fox News is the only choice there. I'd rather hear how the other side thinks than hear sports announcer's voices. Thus I spent the afternoon voicing the counterpoint to the crAZy pre-election shit I was hearing on Fox. It felt like being in an endless loop on Saturday Night Live: "Jane, you ignorant slut."

Dad thinks this is his last election. When I arrived he immediately showed me the program for his memorial service. Yes, THE program. He made it. He designed it, laid it out, found a photo of himself he liked, clipped out a poem he likes, got a glue stick and went to town. It's ready for Lynn and me to take to Kinkos. I didn't see this coming so I didn't know what to say. "Did you also make one for mom?" I ask. "No. She can do her own," he replies.

After nice words about the program, I spent my afternoon asking if he really believed this was his last time voting that he do Lynn and I a solid and vote for Hillary. My logic was it matters to us since we have to stick it out for the next eight years and he's not thinking he will. We have a reason to care about the Supreme Court; he believes he does not. *Do us a favor then*. His response was he WAS doing Lynn and me a favor by making America great again and thus saving the world for us. On Fox they said Hillary would destroy the whole world and he believes what they say on Fox. He told me so.

After awhile Lynn and her family arrived and I gave up. Michigan usually goes blue anyway. If it goes red this time, which I think is unlikely, it will be my dad's fault. Dad gets two votes; he always gets a kick out of telling me he gets to fill out mom's ballot.

We moved on from politics as families often do in times like this and then I took my mom and dad, my sister and brother-in-law, and my two nephews, and a possible soon to be "niece-in-law," to dinner last night. All-in-all it was a very quick, two night mileage run

with the added benefit of connecting with eight of the last eleven family members I have left. We are a very small family. Beyond that it was October in Michigan so there were the leaves. Michigan trees and their leaves in the fall. Always worth seeing. So miles plus family plus astoundingly beautiful colorful trees. Now back to first class.

Holiday Greetings !

To Our Family, Friends, Georgetown Neighbors, and Valued Clients:

Friday December 2nd

Well, I'm on a plane again. A mere month plus a few days later and I'm on a plane again. At least this time it is in the same month as Christmas. Today I'm flying to Austin, TX. As you can see I'm taking my "Get to GOLD" goal quite seriously. Again on Alaska Airlines, again in Seat 2-A, again paying for a first class ticket.

I love Alaska Airlines as they always seem to have a DIRECT NON-STOP flight to wherever I want to go: Palm Springs, Manhattan, LA, Chicago, Atlanta, Mexico and Detroit. They used to NOT have a direct flight to Detroit so I'd have to fly to Chicago and rent a car and drive - and that was a drag, and a lot farther than I thought it was when I was a teenager doing it - but flying Delta does nothing for me (mileage account wise, which is all I care about). Then, maybe two or three years ago, Alaska added a DIRECT NON-STOP from Seattle to Detroit and I became a super happy traveler. After the Detroit mileage run that I opened this letter with, I am now exactly 5,971 miles from GOLD. If I have calculated this trip correctly I'll earn about 6,200 miles this time. GOLD baby, this is the round trip that will push me there.

The holiday are upon us. To celebrate I left work early yesterday and went to see Owen at his studio up on Capitol Hill and got more tattoos on my forearms. Flowers this time, six of them. Daisy like looking flowers. They are just black outlines now but I plan on having them fully colored in in the spring. Because flowers bloom in the spring. That's not really why. I said that even though it was stupid just because it popped into my brain as I was typing. The real reason for waiting is the current black outlines need to heal completely and I'm busy with a big project and can barely think straight these days. I have no spare time. So taking a few months off from ink art on my skin seems reasonable. Plus this month of the year, and the next few months coming, are rarely months of the year when we feel like we have money to burn. Certainly not on arm art. We need guard it so Opal can have dog food. Holidays can be very rough on the bank accounts of real estate agents.

After the new tattoos I rushed home, shaved and showered, threw on a suit, and, with David, headed off to our first holiday party of the season in the heart of the Pike Place Market. Not that we are going to many parties this season. That sentence made it

sound like we would be. We won't be. We have been invited to exactly two parties this month and both are work related events. Either none of our friends are having holiday parties or open houses this season or, well . . . I guess or they are and we simply didn't make the guest list. Or they sent me an eVite.

I say "work related events" as if that's a bad thing and it's not. Thankfully we both really like the people we work with. What's not to like? They are all real estate agents, and loan officers, and thus VERY fun and interesting people. And since I'm the guy who finds and hires and trains these agents, and since I don't hire icky people, any gathering with our colleagues is bound to be fun and hard to close down at the end of the evening.

Last night's party was a blast. Thrown by Roy and Janelle Steinberg, a good example of people who start out as "work colleagues" and segue into friends first and loan officers (Janelle) second. They found a loft like apartment above Sur La Table in the Market. Such a cool space. It held about 40 people nicely, it had decks with a lovely view of the Seattle Great Wheel (something I just love), there was a bar serving gin martinis, and there were about 15 people there we know really well and like a great deal. The loft had a bedroom and Janelle and Roy got to spend the night there with the party rental. I wanted to be THE LAST person out of there, I wanted Roy to have to push me out the door, but David would have none of that. David made us leave at a reasonable hour. Just as well as I had to get up, organize to be gone for two days, pack, and get on this plane to Austin. I made it. I see a Red Snapper coming my way followed by a first class nap. More tomorrow.

Saturday December 3rd

I'm in Seat 2-A again. I was on the ground in Austin for exactly 23 hours. It was pouring rain when the plane landed. And not Seattle like rain. I mean POURING midwest type driving rain. It rained for 23 solid hours. Thankfully things like that don't bother me. Chereese kept apologizing for the rain the whole time I was there. One of the main reasons Chereese forced Rebecca to move to Texas was the weather in Seattle. Blah blah blah she just couldn't take another Seattle winter and blah blah blah. I moved from Michigan to Seattle 39 years ago (come June 13th). Needless to say I've heard all of this weather stuff before. It's almost as boring as football.

So the girls picked me up at the airport, drove me to Donna and Lorelei's house, which is a real duplex with one side used for Airbnb which they generously let me stay in for 10 of my 23 hours in Austin. The five of us sat and visited for a while and then it was time for a great meal. One of the best things about these girls is you never have to eat mediocre food. All four of them love a good, really good, meal. They know food, they know drinks, and they know where to take an out-of-towner like me. The next day was sitting Donna and Lorelei's side of the duplex with coffee and then, surprise, another good meal. Mexican brunch this time. Brunch was followed by a tour of Chereese and Rebeca's new house. They own one now, in a neighborhood called Cherrywood, that they bought a month or so ago but don't get possession of until January. The sellers who have a rent back until the 1st said it was okay for them to take me there. Rebecca has a key so off we went. Thankfully I really liked the house. I liked the floor plan and could easily see it working for them. There were plenty of changes I'd make but who is

surprised by that? I seldom see a surface that I don't think needs to be changed. Well let's say 50% of the surfaces I see. To know me is to know changes will be made. Their house has an addition (I think), the master suite, with polished concrete floors and some great cabinetry room dividers. Those I would not change. Anyway David and I are hoping they outfit the guest room with a FIRM mattress on a queen sized bed by February. It will be more than a mileage run when we go together. David wants to see the house AND we both want to see more of them.

I'm kinda done for the flight now. The new Jason Bourne is on the flight digi-player that you get for free in first class (along with Red Snappers) and I think I'm gonna do something I seldom do on a plane: veg out. Usually I work on my laptop, even if it's just organizing folders and documents while eliminating songs from my iTunes list that I never need to hear again. But . . . I've been in a bit of a funk since the election and frankly I just want to be irresponsible. I was responsible through it all: I paid close attention, I watched EVERY debate, seriously I saw all of every debate for the past 2 years, I hung Sunday morning political shows, I really followed it. And never once did I think Trump could win the election. Either I'm just stupid or the bubble over Seattle is stronger than that damn dome was in the TV show *The Dome*. I really didn't see this coming. I assumed once you have been heard saying that if you are famous and rich you can grab women's pussies or push them up against a wall and kiss them and they allow it, well, really, I thought it was over at that point. Most of my sadness now comes from me wondering how I could have paid such close attention for over two years and not have seen this coming. I am dumbfounded. And very sad for the Supreme Court.

So work on the plane? Or drink on the plane and watch a mindless movie that you have seen four times before? (To my way of thinking these Jason Bourne movies are very repetitive: there's a chase scene, someone dies at the end of each chase scene, and then that's followed by some mumbo-jumbo about a secret program 25 years ago and then there's another chase scene ending with another death and then there's some more mysterious mumbo-jumbo, possibly with a hazy flashback. I'm almost certain this Bourne movie is going to be more of the same but . . . I'm in.) More later.

Friday December 9th

It's the day after a large party. I'm a little, ah, fuzzy. And so thankful for our espresso machine. It's a La Vittoria Espresso Machine (use those 4 words if you want to google it) and it's almost perfect. Perfect would be PLUMBED into filtered water so I'd never have to fill the reservoir. I can steam milk better than most baristas in Seattle. Certainly better than any Starbucks employee. I can make foam that you can scoop like whipped cream. I don't just boil milk (Starbucks). Nothing makes me crazier than ordering a cappuccino and being handed a vat of boiled milk. When I'm being really snide (me? snide?) I'll hand a drink back to a barista and ask, "Tell me, I ordered a dry cappuccino and I got this. What would I have gotten had I ordered a latte?" I know what a cappuccino should *weigh*. It should not weigh what a pint of half and half weighs. Don't get me started. I keep asking David if we can buy a new better espresso machine for our Flora house (one that we could plumb in) and then drive this espresso machine down to our Amarillo house. David loves to spend money, and he likes gadgets and new things, but I've been losing this battle for years now. I have one more solid play

coming though and I really think I might have a shot at convincing him next time.

Anyway, I had more than a few drinks at last night's big party and a banana and espresso sure helping right now. There was a threat of snow in Seattle yesterday and boy do they get worked up here about snow. After 39 years here I still watch with fascination when the weather becomes the top story on the news and they go on and on and on about snow. An inch of snow that isn't even here yet will set them off. What would they do in Ann Arbor? So we used Uber. It wasn't cheap but no parking downtown, no worry about snow, and you can drink without counting.

The party was at the Rainier Club on 5th Avenue thrown by OB and Jill and Geoff Jacobi for the six Windermere offices in "our group" and it was lovely. The Rainier Club was decked out in holiday style, we had an entire floor to ourselves, and at one end of our floor there is a fireplace that 20 people could literally WALK INTO. It's huge with real with a real wood fire. Lots of food, 3 fully operational bars, and plenty of tables to sit at when you're done mingling on foot. My office, the Eastlake office, had 36 of the 61 agents show up but then add all of their plus ones and we represented with about 50 to 60 great people. Six offices, probably 50 ish guests per office I'm guessing a party for approximately 300. Wasn't there a movie with that name? 300?

The nicest thing was that the dreaded snow that threatened to kibosh the whole event didn't show up until about 8:00 PM. The party started on time at 6:00 PM with no travel problems to keep guests away. Once everyone was inside it started to snow. And it was just special. I honestly felt like I was in the movie *White Christmas* and we were having the surprise party for the General to compensate for no snow at the inn he runs and then, in the middle of the party, it snows. *It really snows*. In this dream sequence I'm Vera-Ellen. (Which is better than my other option of being Mary Wickes.)

Procrastination

You know I like to get things done. I live for large projects that cause me to have to make a list, do things, and then tick things off the list. And (mind you I am not complaining here) getting this letter out, along with the calendars for 2017, is a huge project. I have to renew a bulk mail account, I have to calculate postage for about 525 envelopes each holding a letter of indeterminate length and a calendar, I have to deposit that postage into the bulk mail account, I have to order and store the calendars, and I have to have the envelopes made. (Each year I pick a different envelope color, this year I went with a shade of green AND I did that months before Pantone decided that a shade of green was going to be THE color for 2017. Honestly. This is true. Possibly only Michael Kuntz will understand what I am saying here.)

And then I have to actually write the letter. Here's where the procrastination comes in. Truth be told I'd almost rather be going anything else right now. I mean not watching golf or football, but almost anything besides things like that. I got all of the steps above done months ago. Tracie and I went to the bulk mail place in early October. I ordered the envelopes in August (months BEFORE Pantone I tell you). I paid all of the money back when we had some money. But this part . . . this part is frankly hard.

I started this on my recent mileage runs. I was supposed to finish it in the days after. Instead I did other things that I don't really have to do (whereas I have to do this, I have a deadline). Even today I've avoided working on it for hours. I decided today should be the day I go through two years worth of Christmas cards that people have sent us and compare the return address on their envelope to the address I have in my database. Now you are wondering why I have two years of envelopes in our house, right? Have you seen our house? Have you seen the area we refer to as my office? Have you seen the folding tables I have set up here and there covered with carefully arranged piles of papers? Frank Kennard has. Frank is impressed with my organization. I found this cartoon years ago and have copies of it near the piles in my office at Windermere, near my folding tables on Flora and in my so far under control office on Amarillo:

That really sums up my life. I'm neurotic about things on paper. And rather than fight it, I've decided to just own it and go with it: I like paper in all of it's many forms, clipped recipes, tax returns, 36 Hours in _____ (now those are a book but too late - I saved them all), articles about Carly Simon or Patti Smith, years worth of electric bills, books, photos of interior design that I clip and put in a special pile, magazines, articles about hummingbirds, wills, medical directives, receipts for art we purchased 14 year ago any postcard or card or letter anyone actually mails to us, and on and on and on.

Things I should file. Things I should take to our safe deposit box. Things I should sort and then purge what's not needed. Things that should be kept at the Amarillo house.

Things pertaining to the Flora house. My Form 17. I actually have my Form 17 started for this house (aka, a Seller's Disclosure Statement, required by State law when you sell, NOT that we are selling Flora but things happen to houses and I log them when they do so I won't forget. If we do sell in 16 years I will be able to disclose what happened and when. What year was that huge storm that caused dampness in the basement? Where did I drop that hammer while hanging art that gouged the hardwood floors that I then colored in with a brown Sharpie? Buyers are supposed to be told.)

Now it seems I am procrastinating from telling you about today's procrastination. To avoid typing I have wandered around the house thumbing through piles of paper to see if there is an emergency hidden. I have decided that completely frozen and snow covered dog poop couldn't wait another day to be picked up and bagged for the trash. I have filled the espresso machine reservoir just to be sure I don't run out of steam tomorrow morning. I spied a new neighbor who just bought a very contemporary new construction house almost directly across the street from us picking up leaves and thought, as a Board Member of the Georgetown Community Council, I had to go introduce myself - that could not have waited another day! I have done two loads of laundry and two loads of dishes, the second load washing large platters that were not recently used but that might be dusty because of open kitchen shelving - surely that had to be done before the letter! Finally, after successfully avoiding the work for the better part of 6 hours, here I am, starting to finish this at almost two in the afternoon.

I don't know how far will get today but I do know this, this won't be 30 pages long this year. That will never happen again. It happened last year and we'll just assume last year was a personal best for letter writing and let it go at that. You don't need to beat a personal best again and again. I'm fine with what it was and fine with never going near 30 pages again.

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

I like the sound of those five words and seem to say them often. But am I using the phrase correctly? I felt the need now to check on my usage by going to Wikipedia. (See, a form of additional procrastination.)

Beneficial actions often go unappreciated or are met with outright hostility. If they are appreciated, they often lead to additional requests.

Well I nailed that one.

You might remember from last year's letter that I was going to try and say **YES !** to more things more often. An enthusiastic yes, a **bold**, all CAPS yes with an exclamation point spaced after it to convey just how much I want to do whatever I'm being asked to do. I might want to rethink this stance.

Our very wonderful neighbor Alison must have read that and then decided to test it. Early in 2016 Alison talked me into agreeing to become a board member of the Georgetown Community Council. Alison was on the board already and was now being asked to become the President. Flattery ensued, she said we'd have fun, she said we

could have very cold beer and the extremely hot hot sauce at Coliman's, a somewhat dive Mexican restaurant (that appealed to me greatly) on the very edge of Georgetown where the meetings were held. "Com'on, it won't be that bad" she said and finally I caved and said yes, I'd attend the meetings and be voted in. Now I am a Director on the board of the GCC. There were 9 of us for 2016.

Not long into the new year Coliman's closed. (Should I see that as a sign?)

I attend two meeting a month on alternating Monday nights. One is just the 9 Directors, the other is an open meeting for anyone in the community. So far the hardest part of this is disrupting my family's Monday nights as the meetings are at 7:00 PM and that's right when David wants to be having dinner with me. Meetings are supposed to last an hour. So far not one has ended at 8:00 PM. (Should I see that a sign?) But I really enjoy getting to know more of my neighbors. I have lived in many neighborhoods in my 39 years in Seattle and I'm gonna make the claim again: Georgetown is the friendliest of any I have lived in. People here are involved and they visit more on the streets when walking than other Seattle places we've lived.

The other day I was in our bathroom, which is way too small and badly laid out, and I was thinking about how much I hate our bathroom sink. Then I did the math: I have been hating our bathroom sink for five years now. We purchased in September of 2011, did the quickie 60 day remodel, and moved in in December of 2011. Five years ago this month. And I hate our bathroom sink. BUT I no longer care as I am hoping to not have to hate it for much longer.

The GGC just held the annual election for 2017 and there will be 10 of us serving as Directors for next year. But wait, there's more: Now, somehow, I am the new Treasurer for the Georgetown Community Council. How did that happen? Duh! I said **YES!** when I was very nicely asked by the current Treasurer. That's how it happened. I don't know how to be the Treasurer yet, what all it entails, but I was given the key to the GCC post office box at the Georgetown post office. I check the box once a week. I'm excelling at that part of my new responsibilities so far, but I'm wary of what's to come.

The Problem With Timeshares

Okay this paragraph isn't really about timeshares. It's about People magazine, one other thing thing from last year's story due for an update. Early last fall, that would be like September of 2015, People magazine started to send me a renewal notice in the mail every week. My subscription runs out in July of 2016. Renewal notices eleven months in advance? Annoying. So for a slew of reasons I decided to cancel. Not to just let my decades old subscription run out, but to actively end it. So I took a thick black Sharpie and wrote CANCEL on the invoice and put it in the postage prepaid for envelope and sent it back. This had no effect.

Notices continued to arrive several times a month. Each time I'd write CANCEL and send it back. It got to be a game sorta. Or a scene from *Groundhog Day*. I'd try a bright red Sharpie, I'd try green, whatever might get their attention, nothing worked. I have heard of timeshares in Mazatlan that were easier to get out of. As we approached my July expiration date the renewals increased in their sense of urgency. ONLY TWO

ISSUES LEFT, FINAL ISSUE, and then after July 16th (the actual end date on my mailing label) THERE'S STILL TIME and so on.

The issues of People kept coming. And thank god because I surely didn't want to miss the special summer issue with a huge photo of an all grown up John-John on the cover with the title, "The JFK Jr. You Never Knew." My first thought when I saw it: How many shirtless photos of JFK Jr. will there be? Because there's *always* a shirtless photo of JFK Jr., always. I remember where I was the day he died: On Guemes Island with my mom and dad and David. This was back when my mom and dad were willing to travel. This was two years prior to the rained ruined simple get-a-way weekend in Palm Springs when the only thing David and I could find to do was go to open houses and end up buying a small house without having any sort of plan to do so.

There were two shirtless photo of JFK Jr. in the article. One a full page full torso shot with him holding a can of Coke, the other a smaller, but better, sports action shot of some sort. There's a beach photo I remember that I was hoping to see again but no luck. Pandering to increase advertising revenue. It's December. I think they finally stopped sending me issues of People last month.

Sunday December 11th

It's the next day. I had been typing for a long time yesterday AND ignoring not only Opal but Opal's litter mate, Coco, as well. I said **YES !** once again to dog sitting Opal's sister. I have the joy of two 65 pound Weimaraners for a long weekend. How could I not? At some point in the afternoon it started to get dark (as it does here, but I'm sure it's sunny and happy in Austin) and I felt guilty they had not been to a park yet. David was off putting together a pretty big real estate deal, an important one with long reaching benefits, and so it fell to me to do the dog park run. Then there was mud and wet dog to mop up when we got home. Then I sat down to type again and David walks in and says, "What time are we picking up Julie?" and I realize I had zoned out doing this and had forgotten more than just the dogs. So I stopped, shaved and showered, and we got out of here barely on time for the scheduled pick up.

David is working with a buyer who is moving back to Seattle after years in the San Francisco area. They go out house shopping, often for a full day. Each day he comes in and happily tells me where she directed them for lunch that day. Noodle places each time, places we know little about. One day it was a place in Fremont called *Revel*. He said we had to go. We have now gone twice, last week with Mark and Mario and last night with Julie. Fremont is a long way from Georgetown but . . . such good food.

Sunday Morning Stuff

I used to bring in both papers (from the front porch, it's still a thing), the local *Seattle Times* and the better *New York Times*, and start pulling the shit out that I never look at: sports sections, all circulars, advertising supplements. Then I would read the comics first so I could put them in the discard pile and get to the important stuff. I used to read ALL of the comics, but over the years this has dwindled down to 5 or so, then to just 3: *Dilbert*, *Peanuts*, and *Doonesbury*. Now I am down to one: *Doonesbury*.

I am now old enough to have seen the “*Classic Peanuts*” more than one time each, And then, recently, I found out that Scott Adams was one of the people who wanted to make America great again. I stopped reading *Dilbert* that day and haven’t really returned to it. So it’s down to only *Doonesbury* now (which was very clever and cute today). I am very grateful for *The New Yorker* for for satisfying my my weekly cartoon fix.

Random Gift Giving

I saw a great review in the books section of the New York Times today and it screamed at me: Gary Sarozek. I immediately went to Amazon and bought 2 of them. (I want one as well.) I don’t buy Christmas gifts anymore, and I seldom buy birthday gifts. I stopped doing both of those things more years ago than I can remember now. I’ve replaced doing those things with my new gift buying method: The Random Plan. Now if I see something that screams at me another person’s name, I just buy it and randomly give it to them on whatever day of the year it is or when I see them next. My gift method is not tied to holiday or whatnot. Although in this case Christmas Eve IS Gary’s birthday and then Christmas is the next day and I’m seeing him the day before I fly to Palm Springs in ten days so this gift seems less random. But if I had not seen this book review today Gary would be getting nothing. That’s how my system works. I am not a slave to holidays. Or birthdays. Or showers. Or retirement parties. I’m all random now.

Are David And I To Blame ?

Today’s *Seattle Times* had an article about how Seattle has become LESS diverse since 2010 while King County that surrounds all of Seattle has become rapidly more diverse. Seattle now ranks among the top 10 LEAST diverse cities in America. There are charts and maps and graphs. I’m reading along and then **BAM** I stop dead in my tracks:

The city’s second-biggest drop in diversity occurred in the tony North Capitol Hill area that surrounds Volunteer Park. Here whites now make up 90 percent of the population, a 10 point jump, Only Georgetown saw a sharper decline in diversity, due to a decreasing number of Latinos.

And then there is a table and coded map that ranks neighborhoods LOSING diversity and it goes like this: Georgetown, North Capitol Hill, Ravenna-Maple Leaf, Squire Park, and Crown Hill. Wow. Georgetown is the top of the list? This feels wrong. David and I moved here in 2011 (after the last study in 2010) but I’m sure we are not part of the problem as the 94 year old Italian woman we replaced wasn’t all that diverse either. Actually I think an old gay couple might be considered more diverse. Yup. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it: It is not our fault.

January, But First Water

Before I get all into January and what was what with 2016 let me tell you this: As I am writing this I get thirsty. So I get up frequently and walk over to the sink where we keep, pretty much 24/7, a large mug like glass of ice water. It’s a tall insulated mug meant for beverages, it holds 36 ounces of water (Yes, I just got up and measured it cause I really didn’t know, I thought it was like 32 ounces but I wanted to be accurate for The Letter.)

And why am I telling you this? What's the news here? Well, the news is that this year is the first year since the cancer/tumor/chemo/radiation business that I can successfully drink water like a normal person, like I used to be able to prior to those dark years. I love water, particularly extremely cold ice water, and I can down it like a champ now. It has been seven years of not being able to do this. Yes over the seven years it would get a wee bit better each year, but I could never take the cap off of a bottle of water and just drink it, down it all, without gagging and spiting up and coughing and having water come out my nose. The way bottled water is delivered, and by that I mean how my body takes it in, is very different from taking it in as water in a glass. You need water and I love water so I never stopped trying. But here's how it USED to go: I walk over to the sink, I'd drink the water BUT would stay in front of the sink and then 90% of the time I cough and gag and water would fly out of my mouth (or nose) into the sink. David would watch and hear this. After a few years when he realized it sounded bad but that I wasn't going to fall to the floor and die, he'd stop watching me as much. It got better each year, but by small degrees.

Back in January of this year it just seemed to stop being a problem. I'd go to the sink, I'd drink the ice water, and nothing would happen. After a while, when I felt like it was flipping from being hard 90% to the time to being hard only 5% of the time, I commented to David, "Hey I think I can drink water again like a normal person." And so we'd pay attention. I'm pretty sure I can say that it's only a problem about 2% of the time now. I can take a plastic bottle of water and *fearlessly* drink it (at work no less, no where near a sink). I can take a bottle of Pellegrino out of our fridge and just drink it all at once. This is such a relief to me as I'm draining this 36 ounce mug at least 5 times a day. I am constantly refreshing the ice in it and constantly drinking the super cold water around the ice and repeat. At night I drain this thing about twice between dinner and bed. And I get up 2 times a night and drink more water when I do. It's not always perfect. There are times when whatever used to not work in my throat rises up and sprays water out of my mouth or nose, but it won't kill me. It might embarrass me, but it won't kill me. I am very happy about this turn of events AND I feel much healthier drinking about 200 ounces of water a day.

Ah, January

In 2015 I made a resolution for 2016 to see on average one movie each week with David and to write them down. They didn't have to be first run movies on the big screen in a theater to count. Any movie counted. They just had to be real movies watched on the big screen or DVD or Netflix with David.

So now I am looking at my calendar for the month of January this year and here's how that went:

1) Love and Mercy, 2) The Big Short, 3) Carol, 4) Do I Sound Gay? and . . . there's no 5)

So much for that resolution. I should never make resolutions, I just don't take them seriously. I do take them more seriously than any "challenge" someone else tries to impose upon me. Those I just scoff at. And mock. Yes, I might mock them, particularly if they are challenges on Facebook.

Opal turned five in January. David and I celebrated our 1st year of ownership of our Amarillo house in Palm Springs. David had plenty of real estate transactions in the air at the time so he celebrated in Seattle by working while I celebrated alone in Palm Springs over Martin Luther King's birthday weekend. While there I supervised the installation of three brand new toilets. These were all Toto, dual flush, soft close seat and lids, fancy-assed new toilets. White ones. A gift to the house on its one year birthday. One of the toilets we were replacing was black. While I can hate our Flora house bathroom sink for five years, I cannot live with a black toilet for any amount of time. I also had our two-sided, gas fireplace made over. Now it has a new burner base to evenly disperse the flame and black sand hiding the flame element and black ceramic balls of varying sizes stacked on the black sand. (We were over the glass thing, been there, done that.) After the fire is on for a long time you can turn it off and the black balls are so hot they glow red as if they just came out of a kiln. The month flew by.

And, on January 19th, we closed on a refinance of our Flora house with Bank of America. A 15 year loan, only 180 payments, at a fixed rate of (wait for it) 3.25% with minimal fees cause they like me (they told me so). The first payment will be due on March 1st. We applied for this re-fi on November 20th in 2015 so it took 60 days to complete. A ridiculous amount of time but we had no deadline so it didn't matter. We were doing it for two reasons. One of those was the interest rate. The other reason will be revealed later.

February

It is a leap year so there will be an extra day to get shit done.

On February 2nd, we closed on a refinance of our Amarillo house with Bank of America. A 15 year loan, only 180 payments, at a fixed rate of (wait for it) 3.25% with minimal fees cause they like me (they told me so). Sound familiar? The first payment will be due on March 1st. We applied for this re-fi on December 10th in 2015. So it took 52 days to complete (only 8 days faster even though they had literally all of the paperwork and documentation from the Flora re-fi. Again, I didn't care. I only wanted the interest rate and the 15 year lock.

We spend President's Day weekend at the Amarillo house, this time together. Just us, no guests, alone together. David went to Lowe's and brought home a dishwasher. Edy (our new guy in Palm Springs who replaced Jesus, our old guy in Palm Springs) took the old out and put the new one in. A very minor improvement (the kitchen still needs to be gutted) but this dishwasher works and does not leak water onto our pockmarked, raw concrete floors. The Oscars are televised on the leap day. We have caviar and crab cakes and Dom Perigean while watching the Oscars. Not a party, just the three of us: David, me and Opal. We call it family time. We have a very small family.

March

We made our first mortgage payments on both of our new home loans! Wow-wheeee! One down on each and only 179 more payments to go. We plan on making every one.

The math on our current ages vs the 179 payments left to go goes like this: When David is 73 and I am 74 we will own two houses free and clear. That's the current plan. In the meantime I am geeky and nerdily happy each month when I get to make the mortgage transfers on my B of A page and then go into Quicken and number the just made payment in our register as 001. 002. 003. I used two leading zeros because we are heading to 180 and it was important to me the register look right. We are at 010 now. The plan is working. And we look really good on paper.

Nothing else happened in March worth mentioning other than the one thing I haven't told you about yet. It's coming later in the letter.

April

Something completely random and terrible happened in April. Not to us, but in a very oblique way it involved us. I had the story all typed out here but after I read it I realized I didn't like it. It's too awful for a holiday letter. So I deleted it. Perhaps coffee someday if you're really curious.

Another awful thing that happened in April is that Cherese and Rebecca left us. It was months in the coming, actual more like a year in the coming. We knew it was coming. They moved their mom and dad to Austin in the spring, then came back to Seattle and listed their Capitol Hill house for sale, packed up the car, and then had a final Seattle meal with us on Friday the 8th. We went to Dino's, the new pizza place on Capitol Hill. We drank, we ate, we cried, and it was over. They moved in with us in 1996. They left us in 2016. Twenty years. Now they are in Austin, Texas. Cherese likes the weather there better.

Oddly, now that I actually look at my calendar, the other bad thing happened the very next day but the girls were many miles down I-5 by then. It's funny really looking back at a year.

May and June

We worked a lot. David, and his business partner Kevin, were listing homes for sale for sellers and were strategizing to help their buyers win in the dreaded "multiple offer" scenario. Mind you it's not "dreaded" if you are the seller or you are the agent who is representing the seller. But if you are representing a buyer with reasonable yet limited funds in a hot price range, say anything below \$800,000, wow - that's a hard job. Or at least it was this year in Seattle. I'm sure you've heard that prices in Seattle are now the fastest rising home prices in the nation. I'm sure you've also heard at least one or two stories about houses that have sold for \$100,000 more than their asking price. All of this is true so far for 2016. Seattle prices now have certainly eclipsed where they were in 2007, the year before the great economic mess we recently lived through.

As a manger this was no fun at all. Every day one or two of my agents would come to me with a sad tale of one of their buyers who just lost out on a house they really wanted I have 64 agents working in the office I manage. It was hard trying to keep everyone's

spirits up and keep everyone in the game. And if buyers keep getting out bid and don't get the house that means the agent, who has still done the same amount of work, and often MORE work for that buyer, doesn't get paid. Case in point that I remember because it was so upsetting and sad and stressful for David. David had a buyer he really liked, a chef relocating to Seattle from where I don't know, who wanted to buy a house. She was working in a lower price range, and thus a VERY popular price range, where many buyers wanted to be, and she kept getting outbid on houses. Each time she'd pay good money for an inspection, she and David would do all of the paperwork, they were putting together super clean and attractive offers always well past the asking price, and they would get outbid. (I mean she would get outbid but to agents it feels like it's happening to them too.) This happened many times. I don't know, like 5 times? Maybe it was 6 times? David felt just awful for her each time. Finally, just when David was fearful she was going to just give up, she won. She got the house. I'm sure she was happy and relieved. I know David was.

In 2008 and 2009 and 2010 not one person called me about becoming a real estate agent. No one wanted to do this for a living those years, even those of us who *were* doing this for a living and had been for 20 years. This year the calls have come back. Calls, emails, resumes, many many interviews. For most of this year, in addition to all of the other things I do at work, I have been training 9 new real estate agents. Nine. At once. They didn't all start at the same time but they all basically started this year. So far six of them have sold their first house. I love this part of my job best.

July

Landscaping. Gardening. Fussing the yard and pond. The Georgetown Garden Walk was the second Saturday in July and I had to get ready. The day came and another 600 plus people walked through my yard.

Towards the end of the month I flew back to Michigan for six days. My cousin Mark was turning 60 so what's left of our family units (it's 2 units, my Aunt's with 5 members and my mom's with 7 members. If we all show up it's only 12 people by my way of counting family members. My way of counting means if I don't know them I don't have to count them. If I couldn't even recognize them if they were standing in line in front of me at Starbucks, I don't count them. Even if they are alive but I haven't seen them in 40 years, I don't count them. Eleven. I only count eleven. (Hey, I think I'm the 12th man in this family counting situation ~ now that's ironic !!!)

August

David turned 60 on August 28th. A few days before that we flew to Manhattan. (This is how the air miles pile up, Detroit, Manhattan.) We were only there for five days but we finally got to see *Hamilton* on Broadway. David and purchased tickets almost a year in advance and we paid reasonable prices for the tickets. Others, who want to remain nameless, did not. Our tickets were in the \$275 each range as I recall. Pricy but less than one of Cher's five farewell tours.

We managed to eat at two of our absolute favorite restaurants, we walked the city, we had the usual great time we always have there. We really like Manhattan and try to

spend four or five days there each year. It doesn't always get to happen, but when it does it's almost magical for us.

September

Cherese and Rebecca were coming to Seattle for a few days on their way to Manhattan where they were going to get to see *Hamilton* as well. Because David and I were in New York for his birthday I didn't get to "do" anything for him. But once I knew C & R were going to be here I picked a date, cleared it with Rebecca, and planned a surprise cocktail party for David in the back of a bar on Capitol Hill. It was sorta very last minute but I pulled it together. David was holding an open house in Issaquah that day (he does work all over) and I told him the girls and I would meet him at Herb and Bitter (the bar) on Broadway afterwards. People arrived before David and it all went off exactly like a surprise event should. Perhaps even a bit better since it was 21 days after his actual birthday.

Cherese and Rebecca stayed in our house on Flora, they were only here about four days, it was like old times. I don't recall if it rained or not because I seldom think about rain.

October

I started doing mileage runs. This letter has come full circle now. And I have a very full week of work ahead of me, so i need to move on.

BUT I Missed A Few Things

Here's a fairly major one in that it consumed a huge amount of time and energy in 2016. It also generated thousands of air miles. Back up a second remember how I (and I do me *I* as in I'm the guy 100% responsible for these parts) managed to pull off two almost simultaneous mortgage refinances with B of A over the holiday last year? Basically from Thanksgiving all the way through the New Year, I was providing paperwork to a loan processor in like Colorado (nothing with banks is local anymore). As soon as I had that done, the day after those two loans closed, and based on the appraised value of the Flora house, I called the same team at B of A who had all of our "paper" and asked for a HELOC on Flora. It helps to have two really great mortgages and look so good on paper. The HELOC was approved in the last part of March. This only took a week or so since literally they had everything on us already and they had a great appraisal (their own) on the house. That's Home Equity Line Of Credit Because you never know when you are going to want a swimming pool.

In May, over Memorial Day Weekend, Cherese and Rebecca, now of Austin, Texas, and their good friends, and ours now too, Donna and Lorelei, all met us in Palm Springs for what I like to call, Lesbo Weekend. It was our first and we had fun. As I said food and drink is big with all 6 of us. We had a pool that came with the Amarillo house but it was a sad sad sad affair. But we used it and hung out and had fun and we all plan to do it again in 2017. I think it's a thing now.

On the last day David and I were there, Wednesday June 1st, after all of the guests left, we stood in our backyard as a small bobcat ripped the gate off our side wall and drove in. Two guys and a jackhammer and a bobcat outfitted with a bigger jackhammer and a scoop and POW. In less than two hours our old pool looked like a bomb went off. Twisted rebar sticking out of chunks of concrete and plaster. We watched it as long as we could and then we went to the airport for our noon flight back to Seattle.

This started many small back and forth flights for me as I monitored the progress down there. I designed the pool by taking photos of Kevin and Kent's pool (this pool is a direct rip-off of theirs, but I did ask then if it were okay first). There were some tweaks to the size and layout of the spa and steps, but from the photos the contractor and pool company came up with 4 really good renderings from 4 angles.

It's finished now and it makes all of the difference in the world about how we feel about going there. We have a beautiful brand new pool, and a very spacious spa, with a water fall and jets that spray water from the deck. All new plaster and tile. And nice new concrete patios around the pool. For me it is all about having the spa. Especially in December and January. Lisa has rented the house for the whole month of January but she said I could visit her there over MLK weekend!

Neither of us have been there since September and we are really looking forward to going for Christmas. David is DRIVING down with Opal and some stuff on the 17th, next Saturday. I am flying down on the 21st with no stuff. We don't have to rent a car. Or a dog. It will be desert cold BUT the spa will be 104°

And Now For The Big News Item

David and I hope to be moving again, and for the last time (really) in 2017. We are going to try to build a house. A brand new house, one designed specifically for us and with our input. When it is finished we will slowly move into it, savoring every minute of the experience of finally moving into a house that will not only need no work, but will be done to our tastes and desires. Once we move we will rent our current house to some lucky family, or couple, or, if I correctly understand the new Seattle laws, the first person to stumble in drunk and strung out, carrying an ink pen to sign the lease. But we aren't selling it. I have a plan to own it in 170 more payments and I'm sticking with that plan. And that mortgage. (I get so happy when I think about those numbers.)

Where will this house be? In Georgetown, we are not leaving Georgetown. But where? Well, it's going to be built on the vacant lot that sits next to and came with our Flora house. If we can pull this off it's going to be better than a year's worth of sex for me. You know how I love a project. And construction. I will be able to see construction from my kitchen sink daily. And not just random construction, OUR construction. Imagine me being able to come home from work every day and SEE progress on something I am so invested in. Every day. Every day I can walk around it, walk through it, and think about it. Every day I'll be able to watch guys arrive before I leave for work and every evening I'll be able to check it out when I get home. I'm giddy just thinking about it. I tell David it's like foreplay daily for almost a year and then the Big O, the big shudder when you finally move in.

Of course we've never done this before and we don't understand many of the moving parts. It's a lot easier to pull off 3 simultaneous mortgages than it is to get plans approved by the City of Seattle. We already had a survey (thankfully done a few years ago when we were putting up fences) but now we needed things like soils testing, geo-tech reports, and structural engineering reports.

Fortunately our architect, Peter Cohan, understands, and is used to, all of this. Most of it we understand after he explains it to us a few times. We waited until February, until after all of the mortgages were closed as I can't do *that many things* at once, to first email Peter about this. We've known Peter for over ten years now (I think ten, we met Peter through Julie and I met Julie selling her house on 17th when we still lived on 17th also OMG, that was over 17 years ago, do I have this right? Is that possible?)

Anyway we met Peter at Julie's many dinner parties. We've been dining with him for over a decade it seems but we never once talked about building a house together because it had never once crossed our minds that we ever would.

So we emailed Peter in February to see if he'd have any interest in working with us on this (he said **YES** !) and our first meeting with Peter was in March. He submitted our plans to DCI (the name of the City department that issues building permits, stands for Department of Construction and Inspections I think) on November 3rd. So about 8 months of meetings where Peter and me and David would talk about houses and how we like to use ours. We'd ramble on about pros and cons of our previous homes and what we like about the floor plan we live with now. Peter would sketch ideas as we all talked.

Each time we'd meet he'd have different floor plans based on our prior meeting. As I recall we had at one time about nine different floor plans. Surprisingly David and I were able to *AGREE* on one and then we narrowed our focus to tweaking that plan. We all had input and each of us came up with ideas. Peter came up with the best idea, a twist to the front of the house that allowed for what we are calling "the feature" on the inside. It's a pretty cool feature but I'm not saying what it is until I know we can pull it off. Plus mystery is important.

I spent the better part of Friday trying to understand several City websites that deal with liquefaction. Georgetown is sitting on a liquefaction zone. The geo-tech guy who bored down 50 feet in our backyard and pulled up black wet sand described liquefaction to me as building house on a tray of jello. So there's a covenant that I had to fill out (first I had to understand it) that David and I are signing in front of a notary tomorrow. Part of the permitting process is agreeing to have this covenant recorded at King County and attached to our new address. Simply put it is a recorded disclosure to anyone who might buy our new house about the tray of jello. Our current Flora house is old so even though it sits on the same tray of jello no one was obligated to warn us when we bought.

Was This When America Was Great

The day after Thanksgiving David and I took a slight break from our Netflix viewing diet of twisted serial killers (*The Fall*), regular serial killers and rapists (*Happy Valley*), and

legal thrillers (*Goliath*) to watch two old time, happy, black and white movies that I for some reason recorded on our DVR. Even though we record about 50 things a week, sometimes when I'm bored and have the time, I'll just sit and scroll through what's on TV on some channel for every hour of a week. While my cranberries were simmering I did this for TCM, the Turner Classic Movie channel. I set two things up to record.

One was *You Can't Take It With You*, released in 1938. I drove David crazy the whole time because I kept asking him, "Which one is Jimmy Stewart?" "Is that Jimmy Stewart?" as I don't think (Michael and Lisa are going to get worked up now) I have ever actually seen a movie with Jimmy Stewart in it FROM BEGINNING TO END. No, wait, he starred in *Rear Window*. I've seen that several times. But don't bring up *It's A Wonderful Life* because although I know that plot I have never seen the movie FROM BEGINNING TO END. I have seen parts of it every year for the last 50 years, and many skits based on it, but I have never sat down to watch it whole. This movie reminded me of the Munsters. So I liked it. There were black characters in the movie but they were always in the kitchen.

Next up was a movie called *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, released in 1948. Surely you can see why, knowing absolutely nothing about this, I had to record it based on its name alone. This one starred Cary Grant. I have seen him in one movie before, *North By Northwest*. That I can remember that is.

So the movie opens on an alarm clock. A man's hand turns it off. A few moments later it goes off again. A woman's hand turns it off. This happens a few times, man's hand, woman's, hand, back and forth, and then the camera pulls back and you can see the man and woman sleeping in twin beds with one bedside table between the two beds and one alarm clock on the table. And they are fully clothed in pajamas.

I liked this movie because it was about a money pit of an old house and tearing it down and then new construction. Prices were being quoted for houses and repairs and building all of the way through and we were getting a complete kick out of that.

There was a black character but she was the cook and housekeeper. She was large and over weight, therefore you know she was jolly and happy. She was in the kitchen when she wasn't raising the two children. Her name was Gussy.

Cary Grant worked on Madison Avenue as an ad executive. Think *Mad Men* only in the 40s, not the 60s. He had to come up with a tag line for a product and his boss was putting the pressure on him big time but with all of the house construction problems he could hardly think at all. He fails to come up with the slogan. The product was ham. It was called Wham. Finally he is put on a forced leave due to not making the Wham client happy.

Cut to the last scene, the next morning. Cary Grant's at home, the kids rush in and ask why he's there, was he fired? Then big happy Gussy comes out of the kitchen and says "Come and get it" and the kids squeal and run to her and ask what's for breakfast. She says orange juice and scrambled eggs and you know what, and the kids say, "Ham?" excitedly.

And Gussy says, “**Not ham. Wham. If you ain’t eating Wham you ain’t eating ham!**”

You see the light turn on in Cary Grant’s eyes and he says to Myrna Loy, “Honey give gussy a ten dollar raise.”

In the final shot Cary is smoking a pipe in a lounge chair in the huge yard in front of their brand new, perfect in every way, white house. Myrna is by his side and drinks are being made from a cocktail cart. The two kids are running on the expansive lawn, playing, and beyond that, if you look closely enough, you can see Gussy cleaning this large circular porch that juts out from their new home. Cary is holding a magazine looking at a full page ad of a Gussy like figure holding a large ham with Gussy’s tag line below it.

She got \$10. He got her intellectual product and with it his job back.

Is that when America was great?

It’s going to be a rough eight years.

Happy Holidays None-The-Less !

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