



Every October I intend to start Christmas preparations right after Halloween with a well-crafted letter to friends. This intention develops into nothing but guilt as December enters its third week, so I've decided to leave it as a good intention, forget the guilt, and treat it as part of Mike's Christmas Tradition.

This letter is an attempt to solidify a more doable annual event – my birthday letter. Although January 27th is barely a month

after Christmas, it is so removed psychologically from the Season of Excess that it's a shock to realize my birth day is as close to the Holy Night as the 22nd of November – a date by which many folks have wrapped all their presents.

It's a very long month from December to here, made longer this year as Victoria has been bloated by almost constant dark cloud and rain. Maybe for friends below the equator the summer rushes merrily on its way, but the days here – which are just getting as pitifully “long” as they were back on November 22nd – are so very short and dark that the few moments when the sun slants down seem almost mythic.

The original plan was to be in Cuba about now. This has been scuttled by Julie's work schedule and the shockingly amusing news that she's got another croissant curled up in the bread basket! Yes indeed, my little league team seems to have once again hit a home run.... That's a lot of mixed meanderings there, so let me say clearly – we've got another baby due in August!

There's clearly something in the precipitation. It started just before my birthday last year with our friend's Rob and baby Hazel on January 22nd. little squealer will co-star in a Karen (due Aug 3), and sisters of friends, all of it around that magical



Katie's latest (and final) This summer alone, our debut with Julie's sister protégés of a bunch of whom seem to have been at November 22nd date.

Lucy, who turns three in the same month, is due for a bit of a reality check, and poor Emma gets outnumbered by ankle-high siblings – but really at 14-going-on-15 she can move up to the adult leagues to give us the controlling vote in the house.

Forty-one has been a pretty good year. It started with me finally finishing my travelogue of our trip from the *previous* year (travelpod.com/members/mbgower) and ends with me contemplating a new trip on our pending parental leave.



Last February we experienced the weirdest ski trip on a virtually snow-free Mount Washington. We're going up again next weekend, and blessedly this record rainfall has been turning into white stuff on the hills, so they have the best snow years.



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Also in February, we escaped to my cousin Chris's lovely country house for a kid-free birthday weekend for Julie. As Chris and Barb were in Seattle, we got the huge place to ourselves and made the most of twilight forest walks, roaring fires and their mammoth hot tub. There's nothing like getting away from everything for a few days (thanks, Grandma!)

We enjoyed another in a long line of grand dinners at Grandma Rosemary's for Easter – Julie's mom spoils us – and survived another of Emma's slumber Birthday parties. This year's Awards theme saw each of her friends winning an EMMA. April was also a big month as Emma did her last performance with Viva Choirs (although I have since somehow become VP of their board).



We left Lucy and our erupting garden – always at its best in spring – in late April for a quick trip to visit my kin Berk and Doris in Dublin. Our trip included a whirlwind weekend in London, where Emma and Julie were introduced to the good old city in brisk fashion: a 6am Saturday double-decker to platform 9 ¾; the Lindisfarne Gospels, Magna Carta and early Beatles recordings at the British Library; the food and fashion of Camden Market; St. Paul's grandeur; the endless British Museum; walking over the Thames on the Millennium Bridge, celebrating Shakespeare's birthday at The Globe; passing the Tower of London on a river trip down to



the Royal Observatory at Greenwich; a bird's view from the London Eye; Leicester Square on a Saturday night... Everyone is very stoked to get back some time.

Our week in Dublin passed at a slower pace, but the outings are still too many to list. Julie, the appointed travel guide for this leg, had us trooping around old Viking haunts and cobbled backstreets. Highlights included a drive through the green hills south of the city to quaff a beer at Johnnie Fox's Pub with Victoria ex-pats Janet and Ian (yet another pregnant couple); a hushed and misty trip to the ruins of Glendalough with Berk; and our final walk around the weathered cliffs of Howth... In fact most of my memories of Dublin are from outside the city; though it is a very walkable and history-filled metropolis, where we took part in pub crawls and rubbed shoulders with the ghosts of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce and Molly Malone. Through it all, Dublin's weather kept things interesting. I think we had rain and sun every day.



Back in Victoria, things continued to warm up through May. Emma switched to a week-on week-off schedule between her two houses, and the transitional Sunday brunches with Tusa and Rich have become a nice part of our week. It's been a real bonus for everyone getting to spend a longer stretch with Emma.



In June we geared up for another Wafflerama. With the outdoor pavilion and serving station, it was a less crowded affair even though we had well over 100 'consumers'. Most surreal part of this year's event was when the mayor of Oak Bay stopped by to say hi.

The following week, I drove Emma and some of her friends to Horne Lake for her class's end of year camping trip. I got as involved as anyone in the obstacle course, canoeing, caving, games of flags, etc. The evening campfires took on the trappings of a rite of passage. I'd known most of these kids since kindergarten, and I felt very privileged to get this glimpse of them in the final transition from middle school to their teens.

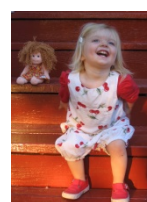
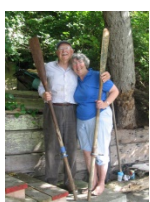


Later in the month we took part in another Dubney odyssey with Jeff and Joanne's family, this time houseboating Lake Cowichan. I came up here with my family as a kid, and I think I even spotted the old beach where our friends the Curtis' had their (no electricity or plumbing) cottage. With a full kitchen and entertainment system, this trip was hardly roughing it, but we did get in some hikes and campfires between hot tubs and Sound of Music singalongs. As a precautionary note, deep lakes are not the best place to swim in June. Almost everybody jumped in, only to have the bone-numbing cold sap every vestige of life from their limbs.

At the beginning of July we got in a rare trip to Vancouver to pick up some Julie-coveted bookshelves from Tim Chan and Sarah Gee's. Lisa Parker came by for dinner and we hopped on board one of those crazy free-for-all conversations long into the night.



The summer slipped into its comfortable routines of backyard barbecues and Deep Cove evenings. The family "camp" on the Saanich Inlet continues to be as resilient as ever. Lucy is part of a new wave of kids (although she's technically a generation older than the rest) chasing around the yard. Despite the tug of jobs and other interests for Emma's age group, there were still some loud games nights – I take great delight in the company of my cousins' children. If the teenagers are starting to spiral away from the comfort of Deep Cove, at the other end of that teens/twenties orbit, her older cousin Natalie got married on the property in August. I flew right over the event coming home from an emergency work trip in Cranbrook (where I got to swim in Wasa Lake and relive a few more moments of childhood, driving past the Garvin's beach property).



Natalie's nuptials started the wedding season for us (the same weekend as our 6th anniversary and Lucy's second birthday). There followed a lovely outdoor ceremony for Lisa Parker and her man Dean Bergen in the verdant fields of the

Comox Valley. Also outdoors was Emma's Auntie Tove's voodoo wedding in her Grandma's yard. I've known Tove since she was about 8, and was more touched than I thought I'd ever be at a ceremony where the cake was decorated with Day of the Dead figures.

The summer also saw a shift to digital for my lawn cinema event. The quality of the sound and image convinced me that celluloid is a luxury I needn't afford. Free of the cost of renting and shipping films (not to mention lugging 400 pounds of projectors around), this event can happen more than once per the summer.

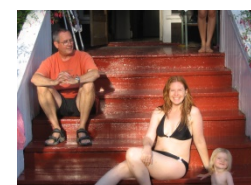
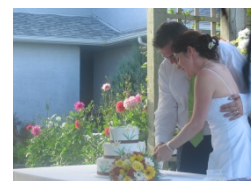
What summer would be complete without minigolf? We took a lovely bike ride on the Galloping Goose to Mattick's farm for a round in preparation for the Cactus Jack extravaganza up island. Organizer Jack Showers once again rigged things to win his own event, but I had a shot at the trophy all the way to the final hole on the last round. Emma finished second for our family; Julie managed to outshoot Lucy.

September could have been better. Emma was excited to receive her first reply letter from Foster Parents plan, only to find out our foster child Sessemu had died of malaria in Togo. The next week, Emma's first day of high school was altered drastically by the news that a classmate of hers from middle school had died from contaminated street drugs. With Emma's old classmates spread across the city at different schools, it was a very difficult week. Fittingly, a service was held at the middle school. The whole episode has forced Emma and her friends to grow up a bit faster than I would have predicted last spring when I heard them all talking about the future around the campfire.

Things happen in threes. Julie's old family dog Brodie was put down at the end of the month. He was bought as a puppy when Julie's dad was diagnosed with cancer, so it was especially difficult because of all the associations.

This isn't to say September was all somber. We had our annual trip to the idyllic (though increasingly polluted by crowds) Saltspring Island Fall Fair – and had a great visit with Brian and Anne-Marie's family, who make the BC Ferries odyssey from Vancouver.

The month ended with me on a course in Denver. Between frenzied studying for a technical certification, I sent emails back to my friend Ian Armstrong, who had collapsed the previous week in a supermarket (not, as initially reported, due to the high price of his favourite cereal) and was lying in hospital with a serious brain injury and undiagnosed underlying condition. He's now back at work, although I'm sure he'll never fully recover from all the jokes about the metal plate in his head and the totally unspectacular circumstances of his injury.





We hosted Thanksgiving at our place with my family squeezed around a table that stretched through two rooms in the house. Julie chose the occasion to put in some not so subtle hints about the lower bathroom, initiating a reno project that continues to this day. I won't get into particulars, but let me just say that replacing the subfloor around all the pipes is a hassle. We now have new floors through most of the main floor, and I've learned how long it takes to tile a bathroom.

For someone who allegedly works half-time, I was swamped in work through the fall, putting in another flight to Cranbrook for a client, etc. I also had a more welcome task of a different nature when we began looking after our new friends' 2-year-old one afternoon a week. Kiran and Lucy became fast friends and it's been a little quiet without him around since they got daycare worked out.



Halloween through Christmas did the usual fast forward, but I have to mention that my Racer X costume, though recognized by only one person, kicked super hero butt. Lucy had several Christmas parties to get the hang of the Santa routine and was an expert in wrapping-paper removal by the time the season of singalongs, parties and our big kid-friendly New Year's bash ended.



And that gets me back to the rain, which as I write this, has finished a night-long pounding on the eaves, and paused to let the sun stab through on the first day of my 43rd year on the planet. Lucy is happily hobbling around in some temporary casts she must wear to straighten out her feet, and the whole family is sitting on our upstairs couch enjoying the light streaming in. So far, 42 looks pretty promising.

PS If you want more photos (with captions) just send me an email and I'll point you at my website.