

The jolt of my own mortality arrived in the mail this week. I opened my new passport to find it lasts until 2024 – a date futuristic enough for a Sci-Fi title. Becoming an instant grandpa this past year didn't faze me, my imminent 50th birthday hasn't seemed like a big deal, but that 10-year glimpse to my 60th year felt like reading the expiry date on a milk carton. Crap, my life has a limit.

Still, when I'm finally hauled away, I won't depart with many regrets for missed opportunities. 2013 seemed filled with baby and bridal showers, Parisian snow storms and all manner of odd meteorological events. Deleting my way through a year of dodgy photos, I'm incredulous about what transpired, like uncovering an essay from university. "Did I do that?"

If a theme coalesced in this retrospective, it concerned kith and kin. Family featured even more prevalently than usual, from days at Yellow Point Lodge with Sheila, Rob, Cynthia and Kevin to the prevalence of nephews, nieces, and cousins various times removed at Tiki Parties, weddings and spontaneous laser tag events. Though relatives are more dispersed, Tristan made it out from Toronto for Wafflerama, we hosted Debbie, Roberta, Liz, Gabe and Dot for food, and got out to Butchart's with the McClung branch.

The first epic family experience of the year encompassed a 3-week trip to London and Paris at spring break with my folks, Julie's mom and the two younger kids. Julie's dream of travelling three generations deep, as we had in Cuba when Jon was a baby, posed certain logistical challenges which were only amplified by the sub-zero temperatures which froze Europe for almost the entire stay. Still, the cold kept many crowds and clouds at bay, and gifted the kids their only play in snow the entire year. We took in over 2 dozen museums, castles and plays. I remember as much the early morning walks when the sun kissed the Paris streets, or my sojourns across night-time London with Julie, Lucy or my niece Liz.

Back in Victoria, Emma began singing in the Joy of Life Choir with me in the spring. It was such a nice chance to relax together once a week, especially as her wedding plans coalesced. Since Lucy plays fiddle for one of Daniel Lapp's youth orchestras, the end of season concert had three of us performing together.

After an extended, wet spring that abated only long enough to offer the sun for Wafflerama in early June, July turned up its furnace. The kids slept outside with neighbours on Canada Day weekend. They went to horse-riding camp. Lucy performed with the Fiddle Orchestra at Butchart Gardens. Cousin Liz returned from Germany, combed the beach with them and played Beananza. Every sunny day that went by seemed to increase the threat to Emma and David's wedding, scheduled for the last weekend; Victoria only goes so many days without rain.

In the end Victoria set records for the sunniest and driest July in its history. I spent considerable time pulling sprinklers around the yard to keep the grass from taking on the usual colour of straw. This was just one of a silliness of activities that marked the lead up to the wedding. Since we were hosting it at Deep Cove, the details for everything from food to transport added to the usual stress for the parents of the bride. Peter Couch came over from Vancouver and helped





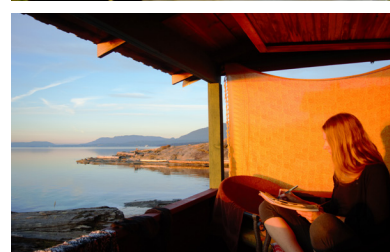
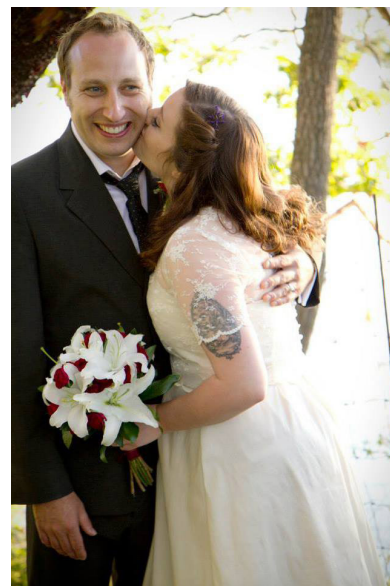


me stain the house. Various cousins – some of whom weren't even attending the wedding – undertook any number of tasks to spruce the place up or help with preparations. David's family arrived en masse to lend a hand with final set up (and take down).

The wedding was lovely – everything, in fact, one could ask of a day – beautiful bride, charming groom and lots of chattering family and friends enjoying themselves. If Julie had to run up to move a roll of toilet paper off the windowsill moments before the bride appeared, she also got a chance to groove on the patio in the warm night. Lucy danced every single song, I believe.

The next weekend, Deep Cove hosted the extended family for a reunion to celebrate 60 years on the property. We don't stop extending. My cousin Bill's branch alone has surpassed a dozen (all identifiable by the clever family tree shirts they wore). A favourite moment among a range of goofy events was the 3rd generation flotilla Ken and Bruce towed around the bay.

Back-to-back weddings and reunions deplete the reserves. Julie and I recuperated for five glorious nights in a beach cabin at Yellow Point to celebrate our 14th anniversary. During our winter visits to this resort, a faintly ghost-like quality imbues all the summer accoutrements on the property; the pool lies dormant and murky, the rows of outside tables do nothing except gather rain. Eating corn on the cob in the hot glow of an evening sun then swimming the pool's cool length felt a bit like returning from the dead. We played tennis, rode bikes







along hilly roads to Fredrieich's Honey and basked in the realization that our friend Chris had bequeathed us accommodation the envy of the envied. No one gets into Yellow Point in the summer, and here we were with a cabin nestled right on the beach, the whole front opened up to the sand and sunrise.



The rest of August is a haze of field dances, waterskiing, day trips and children's games. The most memorable fleeting moment at Deep Cove may be a late afternoon run to Pat Bay in Bruce's new speedboat, with Julie riding up front, tanned and laughing, my perfect girl of summer.



Jonathan lost his front tooth on his 7th birthday, during the Cactus Jack minigolf extravaganza, while Lucy won the kids trophy; an alignment of milestones. I'm a bit sad knowing I'll never have a 6-year-old child again. It's such a fun, tender age. "I think I'll be six now for ever and ever."



We continued our walks to school in the fall through the greenery and changing leaves of the season. Now the kids call me from SJD at the day's end and I meet them partway on the return. It lets them play at their own pace on the monkey bars while giving me more time to get work done. It also lets them grasp a bit more freedom. I love the quick flight of joy as I spot them trudging towards me. They look so small from a distance, ambling along side by side. There's something metaphorical about approaching them like this, as if I am reliving a memory of my past.



School brought on the usual slew of activities, field trips and visits to Salt Spring. Lucy took up the cello. Jon cleaned up in junior competitive badminton. His other front tooth popped out during Thanksgiving dinner. Lucy had 8 teeth extracted at once. (The tooth fairy had an exceptional October at our house.) I got a chance to see Tristan and Alice on a quick work trip to Toronto. I guess it will be awhile before we all get out to a pub together; just before Christmas, they announced the arrival of the Frank Gower family's first great grandson, Isaac.







As the weather turned, our races down the chip trail became frosty skids. Parks staff almost entirely drained Goodacre Lake, so the cold snapped the remaining water to ice many times, at which the kids tossed anything they could get their hands on to try to break it. Any day that the sun appeared, I'd try to take a small walk around the neighbourhood with Julie at lunch.

I hear as much as feel the late autumn: the dun sound of rain on the skylights; winter storms pulling at the house corners at night; the impertinent chirp of a hummingbird on a cold morning; the distant, muffled sound of the school bell on those days we trudge (then race) late up Oscar Street.

And then there is the music. Except for Lucy's first rock show (Stars, at the Alix Goolden Hall with the Macdonalds), my favourite concerts this year all came later and involved Daniel Lapp. He played piano and fiddle in a jaw-dropping session with Calvin Vollrath, then a few weeks later switched to jazz trumpet for Kelby McNayr's CD release party. Just before Christmas, Lucy, Emma and I all performed at his Home for Christmas concert, which as always somehow pulled off being intimate and blissfully over the top in the course of one night. And then it was Christmas, and another fun all-ages New Year's Eve at the Odd Fellows Hall.

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Once many years ago, I was griping about ketchup as Rob Macdonald and I sauntered the aisles of a Thrifty Foods. All that stuff tastes the same, yet on our last visit Julie wanted the Heinz, which was double the brand on sale. I bought the cheap stuff. "Mike!" In my memory Rob actually stopped us in mid aisle. "You buy your wife the Heinz, and you tell her that you love her."

The small minded may accuse Rob of gross brand loyalty – maybe he even owns the stock – but this moment has stuck with me as a silly but concrete example of the selfless gesture of love. I'm still working at the core truth of this:







you can't hold back even a bit on such acts. If I groan about the Heinz Tomato Ketchup as I pick it up, I have failed to do it right; but get to where I feel an affectionate grin at her silly nature, and dang if it isn't a delight to buy.

Writing so much about tomatoes may seem odd in a birthday letter, but what I'm really talking about is kids. Agreeing to have kids, and knowing in my heart I could do this with love, despite the sleepless nights and socially constrained existence that would lie before us, was at the time something I thought I was doing for Julie. In the ten years since, I continue to be stunned by how much that decision has enriched my life. How much I've been the beneficiary of my own act.

A small example is books. Julie collects children's literature, so regularly pulls out a new, incredible story to read at bedtime. It's a favourite part of the day; I frequently get so caught up I read ahead after they're asleep, then get to enjoy hearing their reactions to it read aloud the next night. I'd never before read the Little House books, never encountered Beverly Cleary. One from this year became an instant favourite, *Tom's Midnight Garden*. Great children's literature is great literature. Now, when we go to thrift stores, it's kids books I seek, not records. They are in abundance, so not only do I get more to show for my efforts, but there's the satisfaction of hearing Julie's exclamations of delight.

She never gets that excited about the ketchup.



More photos and anecdotes at [wafflerama.com](http://wafflerama.com)



