

I'm starting this letter in the glow of our Christmas tree, hoping for inspiration from its lingering scent and beauty.

My dad and Uncle George vied throughout my childhood for the superior tree. We'd trudge around Mr. Hodges' acreage on Downey Road, near the family property in Deep Cove, squishing through cold mud and cow patties in search of the perfect one.

The George Gowers also hunted for their tree at Mr. Hodges. Some years we'd arrive by chance the same day, and my dad would take an early critique of their catch as they shouldered it over the barbed wire gate. "George likes a bushier tree that can stand in the front window. I prefer one that shows off the ornaments."

I never heard how the brothers connected with Mr. Hodges, a taciturn bachelor living in a one-room shack abutting his tiny abattoir – maybe the tale has died with the three of them – but for one or two days a year, his forest would echo to a dozen Gowers jubilant in the hunt.

This November, George's granddaughter Gabe brought us a find from her husband Steve's family tree farm in Terrace. There never was such a tree. It's decorated with the glass chains and ornaments dad always used. A Grand Fir in name and aspect, it could stand proud beside any of its past relations that have graced a Gower home. It went up early to counter the bleak COVID year of 2020, and yet its scent remains strong on Dec. 27.

I haven't completed an annual birthday letter since dad died in October 2018. There are abandoned attempts scattered digitally and physically across my workspace. It's easier to write about him now; the more daunting task is trying to cover **three years** at once. Gabe and Steve's long engagement, which could have spanned two letters, ended (successfully) in a lockdown wedding this past July. Their lives aren't the only ones that have forked in three years. Katie and Marko, who tied the knot in my last newsletter, brought their baby girl Izzi for her first Deep Cove summer. Many tales to attempt...



QUARANTINE PLANNING

Day 2

- ☐ CLEAN ROOM
- ☐ CLEAN HALLWAY
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST TOILET
- ☐ TOILET EQUIPMENT
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST FOOD
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST WATER
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST PHONE
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST MEDICINE
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST FIRST AID KIT
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST FIRE EXTINGUISHER
- ☐ FINDING NEAREST EXIT

Day 3

- ☐ REALLY CLEAN ROOM
- ☐ NO MORE TOILET
- ☐ NO MORE FOOD
- ☐ NO MORE MEDICINE
- ☐ NO MORE WATER
- ☐ NO MORE PHONE
- ☐ NO MORE MEDICINE
- ☐ NO MORE FIRST AID KIT
- ☐ NO MORE FIRE EXTINGUISHER
- ☐ NO MORE EXIT

A woman with short brown hair and glasses is smiling in a kitchen. She is wearing a white apron with an orange border and a logo that says 'W' and 'LAWYER'. She is standing next to a wooden countertop where a silver laptop is open. There is a yellow bird-shaped object and a bowl on the counter. Two black cat-shaped decorations are on the wall behind her.

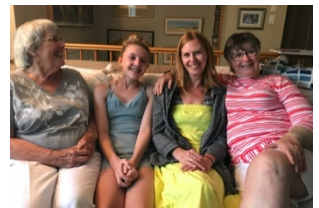


Between sprints on the kitchen work, we farmed ourselves out for outdoor projects: a ramp for mom, deck and roof work for Rosemary, an 'atrium' on Government St, stairs at Deep Cove.

The year saw Emma back in school starting a degree in social work to move her up the ranks at Child Protection Services. She and her cousins Ellie and Elizabeth (the E's) bought a house in Langford this fall. Lucy decided the middle of a pandemic was a good time to start working at Jubilee hospital. Jon got his first job, bussing/hosting at Heron Rock Bistro.

IBM's office in Victoria closed in November. Whether the company leases new space depends, I suspect, on what the new Normal becomes. Strange times. I managed to acquire a company foosball table that now resides at the end of our bed. It has hosted some epic 4-way games. (Lucy maintains her savant status; beware.)

I think everyone is looking forward to leaving behind the year and this heightened lockdown phase (which reduced Christmas to a series of 1:1 walks and Zoom calls with friends and family). May 2021 be better for everyone!



It's my birthday today. I've spent the month since starting this letter poring over 2018-19 photos, debating how I can possibly cram in two more years.

It either seems too much, or too little. So instead, random photos throughout this letter (more at wafflerama.com), and a brief, disordered epilogue of now-mythical times of airline travel and physical interaction...

A first, then second trip to Maui during spring breaks with the Ron Gower clan. Never am I more grateful to our parents than when experiencing all the rich relationships with four generations of family, all flowing from time shared at Deep Cove.



A Pride and Prejudice Ball at the Empress, dancing in an opulent setting with friends and family adorned in

regency gowns, some invented by modest modiste Julie. (I, the sole man in our group, wore Dad's dress kilt.)

An opportunistic day trip to Seattle in a packed van for a performance of Hamilton. Barely made the 9pm ferry home.

Sharing food: a Sunday brunch filling the house with good smells; an afternoon wine and cheese on a sunny deck; hosted dinners with family and friends, digging into a plate filled with the colours of a garden harvest. Pie. That connection of breaking bread together.

Getaways to Winnipeg, San Francisco, Paris and Yellow Point with my perfect wife.

The odd annual rituals of mini-golf tournaments, 'camp outs' at Fort Rodd Hill, jungle croquet, fiddle retreats, waffle breakfasts, Salt Spring fairs, and inner tube floats in the bay. The occasional thrills of victory and prizes.





Family holidays to Parksville in summer, California in spring (Hogwarts, Disneyland, Palm Springs, Joshua Tree, Davis, Yosemite), and Mt. Washington in winter.

Deep Cove. In February pruning trees and pulling reluctant ivy from the moist soil. In August, singing and marshmallow toasting around the fire ring. Experiencing the inlet's water in its many moods.

Lucy reading her way past all the landmarks and the Pride parade during our Father-Daughter odyssey to New York in June.

The Odd Fellows hall crammed full of 100 people dressed like characters from Wes Anderson films.

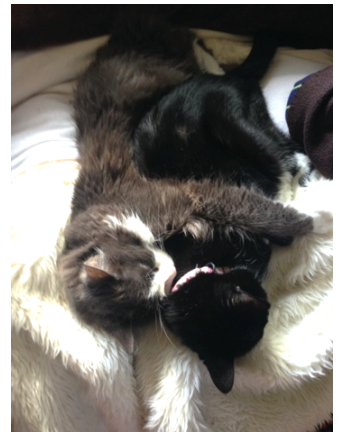
Old cats that go into that good night with a satisfied purr and cuddle.

A journey with my mom to one of her most hoped for places; the moist greens and isolated sounds of Haida Gwaii.

My kids playing fiddle, evenings at Butcharts, in concert halls, festivals, dances and garden parties. The sound of piano and violin practice drifting up the stairs to where I work at my desk.

The joys of rare snowfalls, and warming by the fire afterward.

The gift of a lucid and active final summer at Deep Cove for dad. He trounced all of us in croquet, then with some coaxing, discovered he could still call a field of square dancers to "swing your sweet."



With his cane warding hazards at bay
my father pokes his way,
down what seem many more stairs
to the beach and his cautious
submission to the sea.

He has held naked, pudgy infants as they've lifted
fat feet away from the intimacy of sand grains.
His own baby-soft soles,
released from buoyant sandals,
make the rough stones and shells
exquisite discomfort.

At waist depth he lifts water to his forearms and torso,
feeling his body accept the quick chill,
then allows himself to settle back
into the ocean, his body gentled and held up,
his feet free at last of their earthly cares.

