

Merry New Year, Happy Christmas, Jingle the Hanuka and all that miscellaneous cheery holiday stuff.

Hi everyone! It's time for my somewhat regular Christmas letter. Some things are good. Some things are bad. Mostly, we are doing well. We didn't write a Christmas letter last year and as I am looking through my photos from the last couple years and trying to decide what to write about, I see why. The last couple of years have been an exercise in acceptance and letting go for our entire family.

Emily beginning her fifth semester at Front Range Community College. Last semester she took Trigonometry and Astronomy. She is scheduled to take Calculus and Astronomy II next semester. She is still talking about getting an electrical engineering degree. She seems suited for it but she still has lots of time and room to change her mind. She's getting all of the math and English requirements taken care of while she is at the community college then she can take her department-specific classes at CSU. I maintain the role of worried Mom when it comes to her. She is only seventeen and being in college with adults just seems like a lot to me. Now that she is a little older, I feel better about it. So many of the people at school don't realize how young she is. She seems to be doing great with it so my worry is probably unwarranted. She tried one semester of high school in the ninth grade and hated it. Her biggest complaint was that the students there acted like they didn't even want to learn. I had taken her as far as I could go with homeschooling. She had already gone through all of the high school level curriculum and was ready to move forward so we were a bit short on educational choices. She has made friends at college and has gotten into the habit of riding the bus around Fort Collins when she wants to do something off campus.

Emily is at the age to be getting her driver's license but we are moving slowly on that process. She has depth perception issues and it is proving to be a real challenge to teach her to drive. Her eyesight has gotten steadily worse over the years to the point that she is practically blind without glasses. The Optometrist says that her vision will level out at some point but it will probably get worse before it becomes stable.

Em worked for six months at King Soopers as a courtesy clerk. She enjoyed her job and especially enjoyed the money but they would not schedule her for less than five days a week and that was more than she could handle along with school so she had to quit.

Craig is Craig. I think that's what I have written in the last few Christmas letters. It's a real challenge to reach him educationally but we trudge along. He has no attention or patience for anything that he doesn't see merit in and he has unlimited focus for things that engage him. Same story, different kid, different day. I just don't understand the way my kids' brains work. I suppose that they would both be labeled as having learning disabilities. Frankly, I'm not too concerned about labels since they don't have much application in homeschooling. The kids can study on the level they need in order to be successful in each area.

We are on our 13<sup>th</sup> and final exchange student now. Our guy is from Thailand this year. His name is Mak. He got to see his first real snow yesterday and had the pleasure of shoveling it. He is a great person, incredibly helpful and is the most studious of all the kids we have hosted. Since our last letter, we have had the pleasure of hosting Wanny from Malaysia, Takahiro from Japan, and Tascha from Germany.

Les is still working at TDP as a project engineer and loves his job. He gets to invent things for a living. He does his consulting work on the side. He works way too many hours as usual. His back problem is manageable. Arthritis has set into his spine where he had it fused. I suppose that is to be expected after two surgeries.

I had been feeling gradually worse over the last year. I was tired and weak but had no explanation as to why. It turned out to be severe anemia due to ongoing "female problems." The problem culminated during our week long camping trip in the mountains. I spent my time laying in the shade of a big rock and hemorrhaging. I don't even remember much of what happened during the trip. I do remember laying there half asleep and feeling something on my arm. I opened my eyes and saw a squirrel sitting on my arm and watching me sleep. It surprised the heck out of me and I screamed which scared the squirrel and he ran away. It probably scared the squirrel more than me. He probably thought I was dead and was checking the situation out.

During the surgery, they decided they needed to take everything out. I had cysts on my ovaries, a tumor on my cervix, endometriosis on all of my insides including my bladder and bowels and horrendous amounts of scar tissue that had formed a solid sheet from my ribs all the way to my pelvis. The scar tissue was from life-long endometriosis. He said that a big part of the surgery was simply getting the scar tissue cut back so he could access stuff.

We were hit by the edge of the Windsor tornado in May. It was an experience that I will never forget. The kids and I were home when it hit. We had zero warning that it was coming and I was actually standing in the driveway when it went through. By the time we realized that there was a serious threat and went downstairs, the tornado had already cut a mile-wide path through town, killed one person, leveled 80 homes, and damaged 770 others. The winds blew our garage door in, tore the screen door off the door frame and generally wrecked everything that was outside including vehicles, windows, roof, doors, the hot tub, my beloved greenhouse, etc. I have never in my life seen hail like that before. Just one piece of it was big enough to fill my hand.

Even writing about the tornado now is difficult for me and my eyes are filling with tears. We have lived in Windsor for 24 years and to have our town devastated was horrific. We have friends who lost everything but their lives in the storm. Walking around after the tornado felt downright post-apocalyptic. Most of the cars that went by had their windows blown out. Some of the cars were being held together with duct tape and cardboard and were still on the road. The police were too busy dealing with other things than to give people tickets for driving without a roof on their car. It took months to get it cleaned up and there are still homes that haven't been rebuilt. Even though our home got hit pretty hard, we are lucky that we have a home left. Many others weren't as lucky. I spent the entire summer organizing contractors for roofing, garage doors, painting, windows, and such. Our Suburban was outside during the storm and was totaled. I thought it would be a smart idea to do a good portion of the work ourselves in order to save money. I spent most of my days over the summer swinging a hammer. All of the work on our home is finished except for the work on the inside of the bay window. I still have sheet rock work to do there.

We were out of power for 5 days after the storm. I wound up setting up a kitchen on the front porch and cooked on our camp stove. We bought a gasoline powered generator and used it to keep the freezer and refrigerator running. I'm thankful that we had experience with camping and had lots of supplies on hand. Grandma was right about keeping the cupboards full "just in case."

My garden was a flop this year. After getting hit by the tornado and replanting, we had two more huge storms which wiped everything out. The tornado wrecked my new greenhouse and we had to replace it. I usually receive much pleasure from my gardens and this year, it was simply heart breaking.

I've had a few art shows lately. The most recent was at the library in Windsor. My paintings were hung on the walls for a month. Due to my health situation, I haven't been able to paint for months. It's been very difficult for me since arts and gardening have always been my escape from the pressures of daily life.

My photography business was taking off and doing well when my health issues put a chink in that chain. I am now the proud owner of a beautiful collection of professional photography equipment that I can't use. The constant weight of the camera was more than my messed up hands could tolerate.

We were adopted by a stray dog who found the kids in the park. The basic story is that he kept running away from his previous family and they couldn't decide if they wanted him back or not. I got into negotiations with them over it. They weren't exactly nice people and I sat in my own dining room and watched her hit the terrified dog for no reason. It was a challenge for me to sit there and "negotiate" with her when my instinct was to leap up and throttle her to protect the dog from her. We were not in the market for another dog but he fits in well with our herd.

Our little dog, Snippet is trudging along. She has spent quite a bit of time in the vets over the last couple years due to two compressed disks in her spine. She is nine years old and is otherwise healthy. She has always been a mellow little dog and is just a little bit more so since she started having back problems. The two dogs get along quite well. Henry is five times the size of Snippet but she's still the boss. He hides behind her when he gets scared.

Mom and her little poodle, Brie have been staying with us for a couple months. I'll let her tell that story. She is going through some personal changes. We aren't planning too far in the future on that situation. We are taking one day at a time and will just wait to see what the future has in mind for us.

A few days before the tornado, our bedroom in the basement flooded. We had to rip out the carpet, buy a new mattress, patch and repaint. I did most of that work by myself. We still don't have the new floor in but that is pretty far down on our priority list about now.

As I was working in the bottom of our bedroom closet, I was bitten by a spider. My finger turned black and got all nasty. Within a couple hours, there was a black line running up my arm so I made a mad dash to the doctor. It was very scary for me. I haven't quite felt the same about spiders ever since then.

Les called me from work a few months ago to ask me to meet him at the emergency room. He was having acute chest pain. His cholesterol was through the roof but other than that, all the test results came back normal. It turned out just to be a muscular issue but was quite a wake up call.

You know it's been a long year when the staff at the emergency room greets you by name.

We remodeled our upstairs bathroom. The floor had gotten soft due to a water leak and we didn't have much choice in that matter. I tried to talk my family into replacing the door with a wall and never using the bathroom again but they wouldn't go for that idea. As soon as I took one thing apart to fix it, something else fell apart and we wound up having to remodel most of the bathroom. For example, when I went to unhook the plumbing under the sink, the pipes disintegrated from rust and age. What

started as a floor repair turned into a full scale remodel. It's not completely finished. I still have sheet rock to patch. Maybe the sheet rock fairy will visit me on the next full moon.

We have added three cockatiels to the family. Their names are Socrates, Plato and Rene DesCarte. I love the little critters. I hand fed two of them when they were babies. They like to sit on my shoulders and watch me paint. Socrates likes to ride my hand while I type. He is just about as tame as a bird can get.

The beginning of September of this year greeted me with more surgery. As a result of over-use, I wound up with "trigger finger and trigger thumb" on my right hand. Each morning, I woke up with one or two fingers locked down. I had the tendons on all five digits of my right hand released surgically. I decided to stay awake during the surgery and only have a local anesthetic. That was quite the experience. I could feel every cut and movement the surgeon made. For the most part, it didn't hurt. When he cut the pinky tendons in my hand, it hurt a lot. I didn't know that part of my hand wasn't numb until it was too late. Since the surgery, I have regained most of the use of my right hand I still can't make a tight fist or use my hand for anything requiring strength or endurance. I can write but I can't draw or paint which is heart breaking to me since my whole world has been full of creating art since I was old enough to hold a paint brush.

We took a weekend trip to Mesa Verde while Wanny was here. It was a fun little break.

Les and I took a trip to Anchorage, Alaska in the beginning of December. He was there to work. There are only about six hours of sunlight each day in Anchorage this time of year. Even during the day, it was overcast so we didn't see the sun the whole time we were there. I spent most of my time in the hotel room enjoying the silence. At one point, Les was working inside a building and a moose walked right up to the window and looked in at him.

Somewhere in my processing of the events of the last couple years, I went a little nuts. I think I found the level of stress that my psyche could no longer tolerate. I think I'm finally back on an even keel.

I suppose that about all the news that's fit to print. I feel like I should go back over this letter and edit out some of the more negative things to leave this as a cheery little hello instead of a whine-fest. If I did that though, I would wind up editing everything out and simply sending a Christmas card instead. It's been a rough couple of years.

Here's looking forward to better days.

Love,

Cyndee, Les, Emily, Craig, Mammoo, Mak, Snippet, Henry, Brie, Socrates, Plato, Rene DesCarte, three nameless goldfish and a partridge in a pear tree