

I will honour Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year.

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, 1843

AS WE HONOUR CHRISTMAS 2013 IN OUR HEARTS, WE THINK FONDLY OF FRIENDS LIKE YOU AND THE PERSONALITY TRAITS YOU POSSESS THAT QUALIFY YOU TO RECEIVE THE ALTERNATIVE INGLIS NEWSLETTER — THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL.

IAN

Speaking of gifts, when it comes to writing Christmas newsletters ... Ian is the gift that keeps on giving. He continues his reign as the Undisputed King of Inelegant Domestic Fixes.

Behold below his solution to correctly match socks after laundering. It actually worked until the "permanent" marker washed off.

He's still practicing criminal defense, exploding his coffee in the microwave and spraying the apartment with toothpaste from the Sonicare.

In court, he could easily be mistaken for an AARP model. Once back at the office, though, he rips those clothes off faster than you can say "L.L.Bean." He throws on his familiar thick, dark wool socks, capri hiking pants and threadbare T-shirt that protrudes out over the large phone attached to his belt. On his walks, there's something about the frayed baseball cap, serious countenance, short beard, deep voice, sunglasses, large backpack, heavy brogans and propensity to talk to the birds that compels people to offer him food.

The big news this year is that Precious caught up with all of his household tasks, some of which had been pending for years. In days gone by, Ian would have fixed a domestic hiccup before I even noticed there was a problem. All that changed in 1994 when he decided to do something about standing water around the house after a rain. (Rain: that quaint reminder of the 20th century.)



Ian's office got painted this year.



In what some may call overkill, he buried PVC pipe two-feet underground to carry water from the downspouts of the roof gutters to the creek behind our house. The project was successful, but resulted in a herniated disk. He hasn't so much as willingly changed a light bulb since. (Yes, it's his job because he's more than a foot taller than I am and we have 12-foot ceilings, so he's closer.) Now, when I bring a problem to his attention, he gets annoyed when I remind him every six months. His fixation with reggae accounted for his catching up.

One week in early March ...

Ian: "I think I'll go to the reggae festival Friday. Don Carlos is going to be there."

Toni: "Don who? Remember last year you swore off the reggae festival? You said it was packed with stoners who could care less about the music, which, by the way, you said sucked. Besides, we have 17 burnt-out light bulbs and no light in our bathroom."

Ian: "Yes, but I want to see Don Carlos. You know, 'Zion Train.'"

Toni: "Huh?"

The morning of the festival ...

Toni: "Are you aware they've issued a severe weather alert between 9 p.m. and 3 a.m.? They're predicting a horrendous thunderstorm with high winds and three-inch hail. Not to mention it'll be 45 degrees and windy. Still going?"

Ian: "Yes. I'm sure it won't happen and besides, I love storms."

Toni: "But it's outdoors, cold and in the middle of nowhere!"

That conversation repeated itself a half dozen times throughout the day. As evening fell, after assuring me he would find a way home, I agreed to drive him (Precious doesn't like to drive) to the event, a 45-minute trip from downtown through the part of Austin where you drive with your doors locked and windows up. "The Music Ranch" turned out to be a large, godforsaken junkyard covered in scrub oak and dotted with roofless, shabbily built stages, artificially dug hills, zero pavement and abandoned backhoes and bulldozers.

The assembling crowd looked like a field trip for death-row inmates. I could tell from the smell of ozone in the air that a storm was brewing. I wondered if this might be the last time I would ever see Ian. So, I chose my words carefully: "Don't wake me up when you get home. Also, you are a total idiot!"

I went about the rest of my Friday evening happily watching PBS in peace as Shields and Brooks, then Gwen Ifill assessed the week, flipping only occasionally to the weather radar channel, which showed red satellite images quivering over Austin. "*Quel dommage*," I thought, as an eyebrow rose and a corner of the mouth curled up. Then off to dreamland.

At 3:10 a.m., the ring of the phone jarred me awake. Barely audible over the pounding rain, Ian was begging so intensely that I imagined him on his knees sinking deep into the cold mud. The 45-minute drive back to the ranch flew by as I pondered a) how to get even and b) what down-and-out individual he would rescue from the storm.

"Do you mind giving Darryl here a ride?" Ian asked. Darryl had unsuccessfully tried to push a girl's car out of the mud (undoubtedly hoping to get lucky) and was thus soaking wet and covered in mud. Thankfully, he offered to sit on the rubber mat in the back end of the car. He asked to be let out about a mile down the road, where a decaying houseboat was propped up on blocks. We watched as Darryl inexplicably sprinted at break-neck speed down the road in his bright red running shorts and shoes and bright blue T-shirt and cap, mud flying everywhere.

Toni: "Um, tell me about Darryl."

Ian: "He's not bad, just got out of prison."

Toni: *Gulp.* "For what?!"

Ian: "He got into a fight on Sixth St. after some guy poked his girlfriend in the eye with a cigarette. He did three years, so he must've really messed the guy up." Very long silence ...

The next morning, Ian woke up to this:



but that day, in a pre-Christmas miracle, he completed every single task on his long to-do list — *cheerfully*.

TONI

Still writing *NursingNews* and op-eds for the *Austin American-Statesman*.

Wisdom in travel choices has been fairly spotty this year.

In April, Ian and I took the train to Chicago for our annual orgy of feasting at Rick Bayless' restaurants and wallowing in the glory of Chicago's architecture. In June, we visited Erin in Portland and stayed with friends of Ian's from high school in a beach house in Manzanita, Ore. I visited my friend Claudia from nursing school in the San Juan Islands. Those were great trips, but it was at this point that travel fun circled down the toilet.

Later in the summer, I went on an **eight-day** Spanish immersion trip with 12 total strangers to Querétaro, Mexico. Why would a person who had a degree in Spanish, had travelled all over Mexico for the last 40 years AND had retired from the clinical setting sign up for that trip? OK, I knew the director and thought it might be fun.

Unfortunately, half the strangers turned out to be visiting from sundry hostile planets. Imagine the fun of the 13 of us being literally stuffed into a tiny blue van designed to seat 11 and being carted around to museums, markets, restaurants, etc.

But alas, I could always retreat to my homestay family: a widow who lived with her 34-year-old son, both of whom drank like fish and ... smoked. ("No smoking" was the solitary requirement I had listed before the trip.) Of minor concern was that a) the house was filthy; b) the bed was too short to stretch out on; and c) the earplugs the señora had laid on my pillow were useless against the noise from the street. And saving the best for last ... the *only* bathroom in the house was *inside* the señora's bedroom, and the wooden door to it was so swollen that it sounded like a bomb exploding four times — when you opened it and closed it to enter and again to exit. One evening while creeping to the bathroom, I found the señora in bed with a man. "He's my brother," she announced.

I presented these difficulties to the director, confident that she would move me to one of the many spare bedrooms available in one of the other homestays. She said she would sleep on it overnight. "It's too late to move," she said the next day, "but I have developed a strategy for you: Sleep at an angle."

As wretched as this experience was for me, it turned out to be a goldmine for my therapist. Despite the trip, Mexico remains a place of magic and wonder to me, and I *will* return, next time with Ian.



Eating at a Rick Bayless restaurant

BURTON

About a year ago, Burton's girlfriend, Maja, bought a house in Junius Heights, Dallas' largest historic district. The yard consisted solely of weedy Bermudagrass, so Burton pulled it all up and happily went about installing a dry garden as a gift to Maja. After all, we're in the middle of the worst drought in 65 years here in Texas. When he was almost finished, a neighbor casually mentioned that landscapes in historic districts need approval from a) an official district committee, then b) by the city's Landmark Commission:

Burton completed the first phase of the yard and was promptly busted. He presented his site plan with plant list to a divided Junius Heights committee, which approved it on a 3-2 vote. But Dallas' Landmark Commission rejected it. They told him the yard was inappropriate and to tear out the cactuses and boulders and plant sod — or face a fine of up to \$2,000 per day. Burton called me saying he needed a lawyer. "The hell you do. You need the press!"

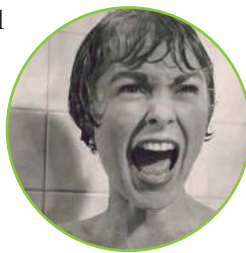
The front page of the [March 20 Dallas Morning News](#) featured a large photo of newly elected Pope Francis above the fold — and below the fold, an equal-size photo



of Burton in his yard along with the story. The same day, the *Dallas Observer* reported its version of [the story](#). Two days later, a *Dallas Morning News* columnist [commented on it](#). Three days later, Canada's *Treehugger* magazine chimed in.

Several Texas newspapers picked up the original Morning News story, and the Observer published several more stories on it.

Hundreds of spirited comments reflected that a public nerve had been touched. It was a tough race, but the



following made the **TOP FIVE:**

- 1) "Being that this is Texas, I'm surprised they didn't just shoot him when he refused to plant grass."
- 2) "I hope the City of Dallas doesn't come rip out my historically inaccurate double-paned windows and working toilet."
- 3) "Yawn, first-world problems."
- 4) "If he's forced to rip out his beautiful water-efficient plot, I hope he has the sense to plant plastic football turf like we do here in El Paso to get utility rewards."
- 5) "As long as I get my free birth control pills, who cares?"

As you can see, outrage at the Landmark Commission and support for his xeriscape were universal and high-pitched, which gave Burton the confidence to appeal the commission's decision.

At the highly publicized appeal in May, he distributed color photos of the wonderful cactuses they had told him to rip out as he presented his case. Commission members grumbled (they are a humorless bunch), but allowed him to keep his yard with minor adjustments.

After that, Burton sent an email to a fairly large group of supporters: "Thanks everyone! Gardening in an historic district is not a costume party of vague nostalgia. It's about what works right here, right now. Perhaps I should get a child with polio to place in my yard next to the chickens, the outhouse, the tethered goat, the well and the burn-pile of trash. Maybe line the yard with lawn jockeys. Tree-huggin' lefty nature lovers and gun-totin' libertarian nanny-state haters unite! We are one now."

In September, the Observer awarded it the [Best Xeriscaped Yard](#) of 2013.



Burton's yard in March



His yard in November

JOHN

About this time last year, John graduated from the Austin Fire Department academy. Mid-summer, he transferred to a special operations station where they do neat stuff like respond to hazardous materials spills or leaks, water rescue, search and rescue of high-angle or confined spaces and ... grow mustaches.



Held in November, "Movember" is the month when guys grow and compare mustaches to raise awareness for men's health issues. Participants begin the month clean-shaven and end the month comparing and appreciating each other's mustaches in a manly, non-gay way. (Source: *Urban Dictionary*)



John's recognition for getting off probation? Getting hosed.



ERIN

Erin is still in Portland and escapes to Texas for breaks in the weather. In the dead of the Oregon winter, she and Ian go camping in Big Bend.

Kaiser, where she works as a nurse, is sooo progressive.

This year, they began offering a new treatment for hard-to-treat depression — transcranial magnetic stimulation. Approved by the FDA in 2008, a large electromagnetic coil placed near the forehead sort of reboots the brain's electric circuitry in the region involved in mood control and depression. Erin says her patients respond really well after only a few treatments. It may well replace electroconvulsive therapy because it's effective and doesn't require direct electrical connection to the body. Cool stuff.



In Big Bend



John recruiting future firefighters.



John's brand-new iPod did not survive the washing machine, but his chapstick and money routinely do.



John's cat, Tina, clowning around. She stays with us when John pulls double-shifts.



Talula (Burton's daughter) and I made a peach crosstata for a Fourth of July get-together.

Here's wishing you a **2014 FULL OF REGGAE, SOCKS THAT MATCH,** *your own bathroom,* **SOME RAIN** and lots of **APPLAUSE.**

*Cool,
The Anglers*

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