

February 2003 Happy Groundhog Day!

We have taken the annoying, impersonal, mass produced Christmas letter to its logical limit – simply posting it on the web, making you, the reader, do all the work to find it, download it, or squint to read it on the screen. It was bound to happen. Not only that, but we are ridiculously late sending it out. Some of you may already know why that is, but in any case, I'll apologize now. But if you are still with us, that must mean that you have some interest in what we were up to last year, so here it is.

Last Christmas, we stayed home for a change. Mike had lots of observing in December, and his relatives decided to spend the holidays at home in Hawaii. So we had a quiet Christmas with the kids (meaning not very quiet at all). Unfortunately, we forgot to give explicit instructions to Rhiannon, who under normal circumstances is praised for getting up quietly and letting her parents sleep longer. She happily got up and opened most of her presents (since she can read her name quite well) before we knew what was happening. On New Year's Eve, we remembered why we like to be elsewhere. The noise was incredible, with go-karts (planchas) racing up and down the street, firecrackers, guns and who knows what else, even the kids could not sleep. However, at 11:45 pm it stops, and everyone goes to light their fireworks. From 11:50 to 12:10, there are fireworks all over the place - the big exploding flower in the sky variety. Then back in the go-karts for another hour until they finally get too drunk to do that.

In March, we made the trek to Houston, babysitter in tow, along with her husband this time. They visited with their family and kept the kids, while we went to the annual planetary meeting there. It is a fine arrangement for all. Then I went to Hawaii to observe, and Mike took the kids to New Orleans to meet with his mother and relatives there. I watched clouds on Mauna Kea, and got a little data, while they went to the St. Patrick's Day parade and were pelted with cabbages. I went back to New Orleans in time to dye some Easter eggs before heading back to PR again. In May, I went out to Hawaii again, perhaps for the last time. After 3 days in the fog, I came home empty-handed, but had a nice visit in California with my family on the way back. One can now observe remotely over the internet, so in August and November I observed from my cozy office in Puerto Rico. Best weather I've ever had in Hawaii! And sure beats 3 days on an airplane, except not as many frequent flier miles.

In June, Mike's parents returned from an extended trip to Europe, and stopped to visit on the

way home. They were jet-lagged the opposite direction for a change, and had a good (though brief) time visiting with the kids. Rhiannon finished her first year of school, pre-kindergarten in late May. She swung between liking it and not, partly because the work was boring, and the art projects were chosen for cleanliness, which is often orthogonal to fun (i.e. no fingerpainting). But her Spanish got somewhat better, since the teacher spoke no English. In August, when Kindergarten started, she liked it better still, and is enjoying the activities. She is learning to read in both English and Spanish now. We were not too happy about the candy stand next to the playground that the kids visit nearly every day. However, it became clear that Rhiannon was learning a lot about math and economics from the experience, so maybe it is not so terrible.

Those of you with good memories may recall that late last year I became the proud owner of a horse. Initially, she lived in our backyard, but after several escape episodes, and some encounters with traffic, and subsequent falls to the pavement (by me, not the horse), I decided this was not the best place to ride. So in January, I moved the horse, Tali, to a ranch where there was an arena, a riding instructor, and a more controlled environment for us to learn to communicate. It worked out very well, although it is an hour away. Mike decided to go take riding lessons too, and in the summer, Rhiannon started learning as well. We are all enjoying our time with the horses, and finding something we all can do together. A friend of the riding instructor was looking for a good home for her Newfoundland, who she could no longer keep. I like big dogs, so I volunteered. I thought I'd seen big. But Othello simply has to be seen to be believed. He stops traffic every time we go for a walk – what kind of dog is that? (the answer means nothing in either English or Spanish to most people) How much does he weigh (165 lbs)? Isn't he hot here with all that hair? (probably, but he gets shaved). In spite of drooling, like such dogs are wont to do, he is very sweet tempered, lazy, and doesn't really eat much more than a Shepard or retriever. And since Puerto Ricans are generally afraid of dogs, especially large or black ones, he is the ultimate in large and black. No one will dare come near the house when he is visible.

In July, we attended the Asteroids, Comets, and Meteors conference in Berlin, Germany. It was a good meeting, although the weather was unusually hot that week. Few places have air conditioning, and those that do, turn it off in the evening. Even museums do not have climate controls and were somewhat uncomfortable. But all in all it was a great trip, good science, contact with colleagues and a nice get-away. The kids stayed with the babysitter, and were spoiled rotten, as usual. During

the time, the babysitter's husband had to go to the hospital for surgery, so the kids were passed off to the daughter, then to her husband, then to his mother - but we knew they'd be fine. Sometimes Puerto Rico is great.

In September, we spent a week in upstate New York. Mike had to give a talk at Cornell, so we decided to all go, and visit Mike's aunt and uncle nearby. The weather was beautiful, we rented a house on the lake, and had a lovely time. After talking excitedly for weeks about going on an airplane, Tris was then afraid of flying, especially in the prop plane to the Elmira airport at the end. After reassuring him that it would not go upside-down, he felt a little better. I'm not sure where he got this idea. The kids loved playing on the farm, seeing grapes harvested, and playing with their 4-year-old cousin. It was a great place to spend the height of hurricane season in the Caribbean! (though no threats this year)

Having traveled a lot already, we opted to skip the fall meeting in scenic Birmingham, Alabama. I'm sure it has things to recommend it, but we had had enough by then. Also, we were expecting our third child in December, and planned to go on an extended trip to New Orleans for the birth, as we did for Tristan's birth, three years before. So trying to get some things done first seemed wise. And it would have been. Too bad I didn't manage to do more of them! But one thing we did have to do before leaving was to prepare for Rhiannon's annual dance class show. This is a big production, at the local theater, with costumes, scenery, programs, etc. After endless rehearsals every day for 2 weeks, the 3-hour show was ready for the 4 performances. The babysitter's daughter took Tris for the weekend, so that we could both go to the shows. Since it took every minute to fix her hair and costume in time for each show, this was lucky for us. And the babysitter could also go see the show, which she really enjoyed. The kids did a very good job, and Rhiannon loved every minute of being on stage, which went a long way toward improving our attitudes about the whole business.

As soon as that was over, we gathered ourselves to go to New Orleans for two months. At the last minute, my 17-year-old cat developed a problem that required medicine twice each day, so we prepared to take her along too (in a cage that fits under the seat in front of you - no problem said the airline). So off we went to a rented house 2 doors away from Mike's aunt, in uptown New Orleans (whatever that means). The daycare place that the kids had enjoyed before was one block away, so it seemed an ideal place for us to get some work done before the baby and other relatives

arrived. Alas, a nasty flu bug put a crimp in this plan, and we spent 2 weeks being quite sick. However, after extensive plans for the midwife to arrive in time for the birth, and everyone agreeing that we'd probably have more warning this time, the baby was born a week early, no warning at all, in 45 min, with the midwife arriving for the last 2 minutes of that. Jasper Finn Nolan was born December 13 (a Friday) at 2:05 am. This is within 10 min of when Tristan was born, 3 years earlier. Not ideal, sharing a birthday with your sibling, but perhaps better than a birthday on or within a day of Christmas! All went well, and it was a memorable experience for all concerned. We had a great Christmas, nice visit with the Nolans from Hawaii and California. The kids especially loved playing with their Uncle Tom. We stayed through the New Year (a much quieter affair than the Puerto Rican one), and reluctantly headed back home Jan 21. With kids, cat and computer, security checks were not speedy. But we had a pleasant trip, all things considered. Tris now likes flying, and is only a little worried about airplanes turning upside-down with him inside.

So here we are, enjoying being back where no shoes or coats are required. The baby is growing fast, and the cat is doing fine. Another kitten showed up one day, and Tris picked it up and was enchanted. So we are back to 3 cats, 2 dogs and a horse. We still have a guest house, so feel free to come visit anytime. Our beaches are nice, water is warm, and the telescope is fun to see. The rice and beans are very tasty, and you won't get tired of them in only a week or two, so come on down to the island. We'd love to see you.

Happy 2003.

Ellen, Mike, Rhiannon, Tristan and Jasper

PS – Personally, I do not find these Christmas letters annoying at all – I look forward to getting them from many of you each year. Therefore, I try to write one, even if late.