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21st. December 2020

Dear friends,

What a year! For us it started normally. A bit of grandchild minding in the summer holidays, trivia at the pub, the regular routine. From The War of the Worlds - "With infinite complacency people went to and fro over the earth about their little affairs, serene in the assurance of their dominion over this small spinning fragment of solar driftwood which by chance or design man has inherited out of the dark mystery of Time and Space". Our complacency extended through February - a trip to Melbourne to catch up with family and friends, and for Poss to attend the 50th anniversary of starting nurses training. Thank you to those kind people who accommodated us.

On a previous trip to Melbourne we returned to Newcastle the "long" way. This was via the Olympic Way to Cowra then staying at Orange. As we passed through Cowra that trip we stopped at the Japanese gardens, but it was too late to go in. This time we stopped at Cowra for the night then went to the gardens, and were not disappointed. We arrived at opening time to take advantage of a cooler morning for what became a very hot day. There is plenty of shade and beautifully manicured garden, and many places to sit quietly. Recommended. We only went as far as Wellington that day, then back to Newcastle via the Golden Highway. It is a longer trip but less traffic and many interesting little towns on the way. And it avoids the hassle of going through Sydney. Bonus.

Normality continued into March then Covid took over. We barely moved from the house except to go out for a therapeutic walk. Much of the rest of Newcastle had the same idea, social distancing on the walking paths was tricky. One seemed to perpetually wear an apologetic smile while skirting around others and not wanting to appear rude. Poss's birthday was at the height of the lockdown, the children came each in their own car and sang happy birthday from the street. Nicole joined in via the Internet. A touching moment and an advantage of living in a quiet neighbourhood. A local deli supplied a browsing platter for two, phone from the car outside and a quick handover through the car window.

Poss and I were relatively unaffected by the lockdown - less going out and more couch time. The most significant impact was not being able to use the library. Our children had differing experiences. Sandra was able to work from home and wished that was the way she could continue. She has since been able to negotiate 3 days in the office and 2 at home as the new normal. Beth decided she would like to get away from being a chef and try something else. Her timing was terrible, she resigned a week before the lockdown so was not eligible for job keeper, and couldn't claim job seeker either. Eventually she had a job with a cleaning agency, mainly servicing NDIS clients. It wasn't her preferred occupation and has since become an office worker in a major electrical contractor's office. So far she is finding it to be exactly what she was hoping to do.

Joanne and Scott had no leisure at all. Scott continued as a community nurse, an essential service. He also undertook the training for dealing with Covid patients, but fortunately hasn't had to put it into practice. Newcastle has fared well, a smattering of cases and nothing for four months now. Joanne was able to do some work from home, and for a while had the three daughters at home as well. "Mummy, why are you talking to yourself?" "I'm having a parent teacher conference". Despite the added commitments at home, Joanne was able to complete her Master of Information Studies (Children's Librarianship). She wasn't able to do the placement at another library, which was normally a requirement. Instead they allowed her to do a written assignment. She was a little disappointed as she was looking forward to some away time.

It is hard to know how Nicole is going. She told us recently she has been in Melbourne for 10 years - how time flies. The split between her and Andrew is now permanent, her divorce was granted this year. We think she is settled but hard to tell - is she really OK or just putting on a brave face for the parents. She is planning to visit in January, we are looking forward to it.

We still have our week of timeshare in Coolangatta, and planned to go if possible. It is fixed to the second week of the NSW winter school holidays. Fortunately Queensland opened the border at midday 10th July, which was the day we were scheduled to start. I said to Poss we should just park in NSW and walk in but she didn't think that was a good idea. The resort is on the opposite side of a road that runs along the NSW border, the walk would have been about 50 meters.

In September, we stayed at Boambee Bay resort, a few kilometres from Coffs Harbour, for two weeks. The railway group of which I am the Treasurer had its AGM on 12th September. At the time, the resort had a special of a week for \$299, a bargain. It happened the book in/out day was the 12th so to avoid travelling to or from Newcastle on the same day we booked 2 weeks with the 12th in the middle. We had intended spending time with Poss's sister Barb but due to the Covid rules of the nursing home where Poss's mum is staying, it ended up being just a lunch together on one day. I think we drove to every small village for many kilometres around Coffs Harbour.

Poss was able to visit her mum Dawn on the way to Queensland in July, but while we were in Coolangatta they changed the rules to exclude people from Newcastle, so we couldn't visit on the way back. Only recently the rules were relaxed so we made a special trip to see Dawn. Unfortunately she is not in the best of health. She is confined to a chair because she has fallen often and has broken a few bones. So she is not getting much exercise. Last year I commented on Dawn's mental state. It turned out this was partially due to some medication she was taking. Now she has good days and bad days, we visited on two days and it could have been two different people. It hasn't been a good year for Poss's

family, she lost sister Bronwyn and sister-in-law Debby to cancer. Poss was not close to either of them but it's sad to see people you know have died.

Poss was going to Curves gym at the beginning of the year, but Covid saw them close. They have reopened with restricted hours but Poss decided it wasn't working out and decided to quit. She has continued walking, a few times a week at ridiculous o'clock in the morning. Sadly I haven't had the motivation to go with her - too early and I don't walk at the same pace. My exercise is mainly flexing the fingers on a keyboard. Last year I was in a Strong trial run by the Hunter Medical Research Institute and I put on muscle. I had put my name down for any other medical trials they were running, this year they asked me to be a control in an asthma trial. While I was doing the tests (lung function normal, no sign of asthma) I was asked if I would do a 1 year follow up on the Strong trial. Because I have not been doing any exercise, they determined I had lost muscle and put on fat. I had less endurance but surprisingly my strength was about the same. We have resumed our Sunday morning "tennis", now at different courts. At the same time as we play, there are a group of serious tennis players about our age on another court, most humbling to watch how it should be done.

Poss is still cleaning two mornings a week, working for the same people now for over 20 years. She is also doing a morning for Joanne each Thursday. The video recorder gets a good workout, she watches many building shows and a smattering of UK cop show reruns. At the same time as watching TV, there's been a lot of crocheting, rugs for the grandchildren. We haven't subscribed to any of the streaming services, the recorder has around a hundred hours of unwatched free to air and allows us to skip the ads. We are both fans of foreign cop shows on SBS, especially the Nordic noir. SBS put these on at unsociable hours and with little explanation so sometimes the recorder is set up not knowing if we are capturing reruns or new series. The Canadians also have shows we like such as Cardinal and Tin Star, a similar noir genre.

I have been playing guitar on and off most of my life - not well, just for my own (and sometimes others) entertainment. Mostly it was strumming the same stuff from decades ago and nothing new. So I decided I should take lessons. I went to a tutor who fortuitously worked a block away, hoping to learn some blues guitar. Somehow this morphed into classic guitar. After a few visits the tutor thought I should get a book, which I did. This was fortunate as the lessons stopped with lockdown. I haven't been back but now I can strum AND pick - still not well. There's half a book to go, it keeps me occupied. Another Covid casualty was the ComputerPals sessions for teaching computer skills to elderly people. I helped out for the first few months and they resumed recently but I'm not sure I'm cut out for tutoring people. We were trying to teach a class how to use Gmail, with the request that they set up an account at home and play with it, explaining that it could be deleted and a proper one established once they were confident. After 2 weeks one of the men was struggling and I asked what he had done at home - "nothing, I don't own a computer" - Argggh! They have finished for the year and maybe I'll check it out again when normality resumes.

My interest in electronics has been rekindled, and I've started a project. It took over my life for a few weeks but now I'm waiting on parts to continue. I also applied to become a member of a local amateur radio club. I'm not that interested in amateur radio, but I get access to a lot of good test equipment. And there's a few like minded nerds to talk to.

The bush block has become a bit of a liability. It is just a little too far and difficult to get to, so plans of setting up a weekender have been abandoned. While we are debating its future, we decided it could give us some return from logging. We were fortunate that the devastating fires were stopped at the Orara river, about 8km west. Rumour has it the price paid for hardwood logs has gone up, and the last time it was logged is over 10 years ago so it seems like a good time. It was simple last time but now we needed to apply to run a Private Native Forest then submit detailed logging plans. Fortunately the son of the previous logger is prepared to do the work and believes he can deal with the paperwork too. Nothing will happen until 2021 so we'll see how it works out.

Our volunteer planting project on Ash Island will end in 2021 in its current form. It was begun 25 years ago as a 10 year project, the results were so gratifying it has continued until now. National Parks have taken over the area and will maintain it. We will still do some planting on Ash Island but not supervised by the government (Local Land Services). The plan at this stage is to plant on Ash Island every second month and LLS will organise planting in different locations for the other months. We will hang in there and see how it works out.

Poss had me promise to do one major job on the house each year, but this year I let her down. The chosen project was fixing the front fence. Unfortunately we have been unable to come up with a satisfactory design that we can both agree on. So I guess it's two major jobs in 2021.

Despite the disruptions to school, the local grandchildren have all done well with very flattering report cards. Anna, now a teenager, survived first year of High School. She is part of the school marching band, we saw them at an evening market in Gloucester a few weeks ago performing for the first time after the lockdown. They were very coordinated considering they had to practice individually and hadn't played together for months. Michael finished primary with an excellent report card and will start at a High School in Adamstown. Emily is elected to be a school leader for her final year at primary. This is a bit of a surprise as the prospective leaders have to make a persuasive speech and are voted in by classmates. Although she is capable, we didn't know she would want to do it. I have yet to see Lucy's report although I'm told it is also excellent. I'm looking forward to reading it on Wednesday.

So on Wednesday the year (almost) ends as it started, looking after grandchildren. Christmas morning will again be at Joanne's. In the past, we've started very early because Scott has worked every Christmas day for many years and we have breakfast before he leaves for work. This year he is not working so we will have a later start, then his family are planning a picnic for lunch and I think we'll be joining them.

It's surprising how much space describing a mundane year can take. I hope this finds you in good spirit and you are enjoying life, and may the next year have less Covid and more sparkle. I read "I'm going to stay up until midnight this New Year's eve. Not to see the New year in, but to make sure this one leaves". My resolution should be 'take more photos'. I looked through the year's snaps, not a one worthy of general viewing. So this will have to do.

With Love - Alan and Poss