



# CHRISTMAS LETTERS

by Mindie Burgoyne

*Christmas Letters*  
2006 - 2016

BY  
MINDIE BURGoyNE

## *Note from Mindie*

Published 2016 by **Heartwheel Media**  
5775 Charles Cannon Road  
Marion Station, MD 21838

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For the last ten years I've been custom designing a Christmas card and enclosing a very - make that very, very - long letter. When I first started the letters, I was detailing some of the family activities and updates on grown children. But as the years progressed I focused the letters on how I saw Christmas; how I felt and what I observed and remembered about Christmas holidays.

I'm sure there are recipients of my long letters who roll their eyes and exclaim, "What the heck? Who's going to read all this crap?" But I can't figure out who they are, and they are too polite to tell me. Every year I drop a few off of the list thinking they probably aren't interested in such a long letter, and every year several of those dropped call or write asking if I stopped doing the Christmas letter. So I continue.

This year in August (2016), I was attended a family reunion with my Granados relatives. I chatted awhile with my Aunt Marie who is in her eighties. She mentioned that

she didn't get a Christmas card and letter from me this past Christmas. She'd actually moved and letter never arrived. I was surprised that my aunt Marie cared about those letters and looked forward to receiving them.

I guess, as writers we never really know whom we touch. We just keep on writing and that what we produce is meaningful to someone.

Aunt Marie went on to say that she love receiving those letters – and that they were quite good, and that if I put them all in a book, she would buy it. This little book of my letters is for her and for any of my friends and family who enjoy my long letters at Christmastime.

Christmas is my favorite time of year – and I experience the season deeply. They say it's the season when you remember everything you've ever loved. This is true. But as we get older and we realize that many of those whom we've loved are gone, Christmas has a sorrow about it. But if we make an effort to lift our spirits into the magical mystery of this holiday that transcends time, we find that we're not so far away from those lost loved ones and memories of Christmases past.

Here's to all of you who occupy my Christmas memories. There are none so dear as Dominic, Daniel and Lara – my three children who first showed me the joy of being the "giver" at Christmastime. All the wonder comes back again

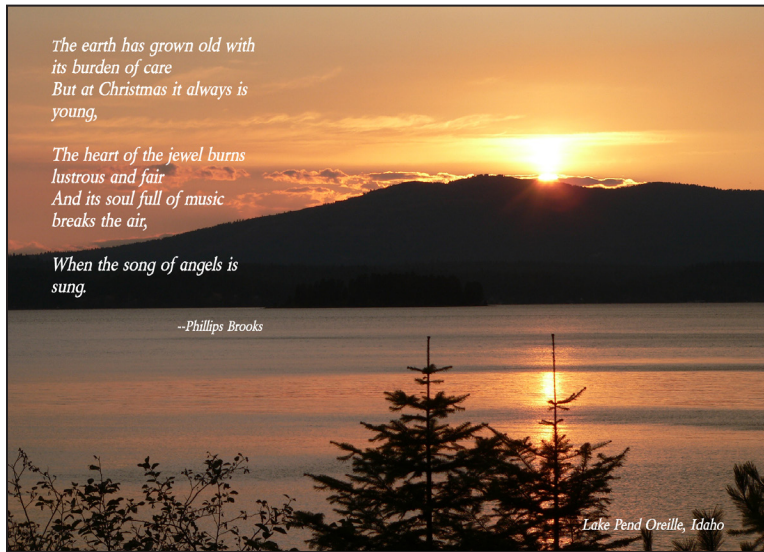
when we share it with our own children. And here's to my soulmate and partner, Dan Burgoyne who shares my present Christmases and ignites joy in every one of my Christmas mornings.

So to Aunt Marie and to our friends, relatives, choir buddies, guests on our tours - - - to all who have touched our hearts bringing your own unique joy to our Christmases - this book is for you.

Merry Christmas, everyone.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marie". The script is cursive and fluid, with a prominent loop at the end of the name.

*December 13, 2006*



*May the song of the angels resound in your heart.  
May the Light of the world, which darkness cannot overcome  
Bring peace, hope and joy.*

*Christmas is a time we remember everything we've ever loved,  
and we are especially remembering you.*

*Merry Christmas. Happy New Year.  
Blessing to you and yours.*

*Mindie and Dan Burgoyne*

Merry Christmas from Marion Station, eight miles from the southern-most tip of Maryland in the land of pleasant living – the Eastern Shore.

In September Dan and I took a 17-day vacation to Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and the Dakotas. Once we reached North Dakota we began tent camping our way through the Northwest. We spent time in Whitefish, Flathead Lake, Glacier National Park, and the Yellowstone region in Montana. We also visited northern Idaho, Washington and British Columbia. Dan planned the trip (around fly fishing) and taught me to fly-fish on the Flathead River. We fished the Madison, the Gallatin, the Jefferson, the Yaak, and the Yellowstone Rivers as well as Flathead and Whitefish Lakes. We drove through a blizzard on the Beartooth (12,000 feet elevation), saw numerous wild animals and visited the Blackfeet and Pine Ridge Indian Reservations. The picture on this Christmas card was shot from our campsite in Lake Pend Oreille, Idaho.

For those of you who's idea of enjoying the outdoors is looking at it from the window of a classy resort hotel or lodge, you need only spend time with Dan Burgoyne to experience the magic little gems in the natural world that can't compare to man-made comforts. I never thought I'd rave about sleeping in a tent (within chomping range of wild grizzly bears), in 20 degree weather, wearing the same clothes for 4 days, waking up with a full bladder having to walk to .... well, never mind where I was walking.

In truth, being awakened in the middle of the night to the sound of Elk calling to each other across the valley - a sound

much like a high pitched organ pipe in a cathedral - quelled my fear of the grizzly bears and made me forget I was sleeping on the ground. When I stepped out of our tent and saw the mist rising off the Madison River with the snow-capped northern Rockies as a back drop uninterrupted by brick, mortar, asphalt or human creation of any kind, time stood still for me. I experienced something rare - a new perspective that diminished the thought or need of modern conveniences - and Dan brought me to that experience. Of course Dan would say his experience was too often interrupted by human intervention - primarily that of questions and comments posed by his wife who couldn't seem to stop talking. Can you imagine being alone with me for 17 days with me having no one else to talk to but you and the grizzly bears? Oh well... Dan loves me in spite of my motor mouth, and I love him despite his propensity for silence and solitude when I, frankly, have something to say.

In April, I was contracted by Arcadia Publishing to write a book on a small town in Worcester County, Maryland to be part of their *Images of America* series. The book, *Snow Hill* was published and released on November 27th and features over 200 historic photos of the town and a good bit about its history. It's a thrill to be a published author. Dan is very excited for me - in fact, we went into Barnes and Noble to look at the display of the book when it was first released. Dan even bought a copy. Then as we were walking out the door he bellowed loud enough for everyone within fifty feet to hear, "Hey, aren't you Mindie Burgoyne who wrote that book about Snow Hill? I just bought a copy. Would you sign it?" I muttered, "Somebody please kill me now" and slinked out of the store.

By the way, they've scheduled me for a book signing there

on February 10<sup>th</sup> from 1:00 to 3:00 pm. If you're within 200 or so miles of Salisbury, Maryland that day, I do hope you'll stop into Barnes and Noble, buy a book and have me sign it... or bring the book you've already bought and I'll sign it... or bring the book you bought that I signed already and I'll sign it again. My biggest fear is that no one will come except Dan. Maybe he can bring the dogs... that will make at least four in attendance.

Writing and getting published is intoxicating, and like talking - I can't stop. I continue to write almost every day, and have launched a new web site where many of my articles are posted, and hope to finish *Thin Places: Walking through Celtic Holy Ground* by the end of 2007. If you get a chance, visit [www.writingthevision.com](http://www.writingthevision.com). I try to add something every week.

While our jobs - Dan's with Evans Builders and mine with the State of Maryland- remain the same, our family continues to grow and change. Lara and David moved into their own townhouse in Salisbury 30 miles from us. They are both working and continuing their education. Daniel and Amber are selling their place in Marion Station and moving to Virginia where Danny has a new job. Their 18 month old twins, Mia and Grace and little Daniel continue amaze us as they grow and to look more like each other every day. Albert is getting married on December 30<sup>th</sup> to Ruth Ament who grew up in a New Jersey neighborhood very near where Becky and Harry live now. Ruth and Albert will be married in Baltimore but live in Cocoa Beach, FL where Albert is currently stationed with the Navy with four years left to serve. Dominic still lives in Columbia and is beginning to develop quite a portfolio as a graphic artist. His talent is amazing. We haven't heard from Kelley in awhile, but understand that she has moved back to

Maine. Becky and Harry are still working hard at Delaware Valley Wholesale Florist. Connor and Benjamin are growing up to be handsome, creative young men that we are all very proud of.

Though Dan and I love our home here we miss the friends and family we left behind on the Western Shore, in Maine and various other parts of the US and world. Our lives have been so big, with so many associations and relationships that have changed us and made us better, but sadly are seldom nurtured due to our own neglect and distraction of daily burdens. Then Christmas comes and we send a card so these masses of friends and family know that we remember them. But is that enough to keep relationships strong?

If you are receiving this card from us, know that sending it to you was not a rote action done with little thought. As I was decorating our Christmas tree, I thought of all the Christmases I've had. I missed my grandparents and Christmases spent at my Uncle Joe's with all my Granados cousins and the endless humor of my Aunt Chi-chi. I missed the wonder on the faces of my children waking up on Christmas morning and fun spent with my siblings as we watched our children grow up Christmas after Christmas. I missed Christmas Eve Masses at St. Bernard's, Saint Francis' and St. Joseph's with the parties before and after. As I remembered I ached for friendships and family life past that once was new and alive. You may be a part of those memories or part of the upcoming memories we are making here on the Eastern Shore.

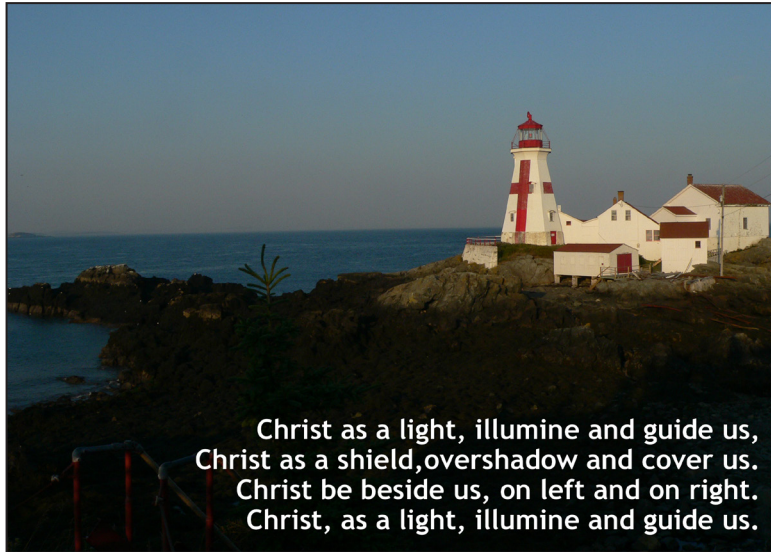
As our card states, Christmas is a time we remember everything we've ever loved. In some way, you have touched our lives and we are changed by it and grateful. We pray that the

coming year will find you and yours blessed with health and contentment, enlightened by wisdom that comes with age, and filled with the energy to nurture the relationships you've established with those you love.

Much love to you this Christmas,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Maudie". The script is cursive and fluid, with a prominent initial letter 'M' and a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

*December 17, 2007*



*May God touch your life with hope, peace and love,  
And illuminate your life with His light that can never be overcome;  
as He did for the world on that first Christmas.*

*Merry Christmas,*

*Mindie and Dan Burgoyne*

Merry Christmas from Marion Station. We are into our sixth year of living in rural Eastern Maryland, and our children keep asking us when we'll move back to civilization. We just smile. Some days I miss having stores, restaurants and shopping within 15 minutes, having my post office carry more than two types of stamps, having access to 7 network TV channels, and being able to hop in the car and get to the Smithsonian, Franciscan Monastery, National Zoo, Baltimore Inner Harbor, Red Hot and Blue, the Theater, and the Blue Ridge Mountains in under an hour. From Marion Station it takes me an hour just to get to Cambridge.

I don't miss the traffic, the crime, lines at the MVA, 8 to 10 lanes of cars, and seemingly endless vistas of concrete and asphalt. The Eastern Shore has a sense of place not repeated in Maryland, with its rolling farmland, endless marshes, miles of shoreline, waterfowl, and small towns that have more churches than stores. Our newspaper headlines are more about community than crime. A December front page headline in the Star Democrat read, "Traffic Light planned for Preston." This is big news if you've ever tried to drive through Preston at peak hours. The truth is, we love the Eastern Shore more every year we live here. We are home.

We bought a camper in June and took it to Dan's home state of Maine for a two week vacation. We traveled up the coast and spent about four days on Deer Isle, famous for its pink granite, and being the kayaking Mecca of North America. I read *Travels with Charlie* by John Steinbeck in June. Deer Isle was one of the towns Steinbeck visited when he wrote the book in 1960. His Deer Isle description sounded much like Crisfield and intrigued us enough to make it a vacation desti-



nation. In truth, it was much like Crisfield, only the waterman were called fisherman and they were after lobster instead of crab. Kayaking in Maine was much the same as Maryland, save for the occasional seal that swims by and scares the hell out of you. The lighthouse on our Christmas card is East Quoddy Head, on Campobella Island in Canada. We took a day trip there when we were camping in Eastport, ME – the eastern-most point of the United States. I snapped this photo just before sunset.

The best part of the Maine vacation was seeing Dan's family. Dan's siblings, David, Steven, and Kathy and many of their children and grandchildren live on a parcel of land in central Maine that spans over two hundred acres. The Burgoynes can celebrate on a moment's notice, offering endless hospitality. I had an easier time understanding the Maine accent this trip – though I got confused when a nephew asked his wife why she'd taken his khakis, and she responded that he'd taken her khakis. I finally figured out that they weren't confiscating each others' pants, but the implements used to start the car... "car keys" for those of you in the southern states. The Burgoynes are fascinating, artistic, and hilarious. I feel fortunate to call them family. They have a passion for life, devotion to their children, and a love for each other that is subtle and boundless... qualities in my husband I so admire. It makes for an exciting shared life having Dan's love and steady constancy compliment my crazy, non-stop, obsessive, talk-a-mile-a-minute approach to life.

In February I went for to Ireland to do some final research for the book I'm writing, *Thin Places; Travels through Celtic Holy Ground*. I spent most of the three weeks in the south of Ireland following the paths of saints and druids, visiting some thirty stone circles, church ruins, holy wells, and monastic sites. I

stopped when I felt the subtle urge to join a convent. I took a diversion from all things holy when I interviewed a retired policeman in Bandon (outside Cork City). He wanted to talk more about the conflict between Catholics and Protestants than thin places, and told me he could introduce me to someone who could identify and name Michael Collins' assassin. I declined the introduction as any sensible almost-fifty year old American female traveling alone would have. On this trip I also discovered yet another setting of St. Patrick's breastplate that speaks of clothing oneself in Christ's presence as a light to guide, protect, and reveal. Part of the setting appears on the front of this Christmas card.

Last month, Arcadia Publishing Company released my second book, *Easton – Then and Now*. It's similar to my first book *Snow Hill* about another Eastern Shore small town. *Easton – Then and Now* is an historical picture book chronicling Easton as it began as Maryland's Eastern capital, to how it evolved into the cultural hub of the Eastern Shore with upscale restaurants, museums, art galleries and shopping – still keeping that small town feel. The *Snow Hill* book had great success last year selling over 1000 copies (one third of the total printing) in its first month. I attributed this to having 500+ relatives and several hundred friends. Here's hoping you'll all be just as interested in Easton. The book is available on Amazon.com.

Our children are all moving along well in their lives. Albert and Ruth, married just after Christmas last year are expecting their first baby – a girl – January 17<sup>th</sup>. Becky, Harry, Connor and Benjamin are in New Jersey, all doing well. Dominic is a graphic artist, living in Columbia. Lara and David are still nearby, living in Salisbury. David just graduated from Salisbury University. Daniel and Amber moved to Culpeper Virginia this year, and little Daniel, Grace and Mia are growing

fast. Big Dan went back to the Iron Workers Union making more money with fewer headaches. I still work for the State of Maryland.

I was cleaning out our attic just before Thanksgiving and came across an old book of Christmas carols. My grandfather bought it for me when I was very little. The cover had a sketch of a family singing carols around a pump organ. Grandma told me the sketch reminded her of her own family when she was little girl, and her mother would play carols while the family sang. I remember my mother playing from that same book at our piano during the Christmas season, singing those carols to me, and teaching me to sing them. I also remember her choir coming to our house after Midnight Mass and singing around the same piano... along with much laughing and general loud partying. I repeated a similar process with my own children – music, choirs, and parties after Mass on Christmas Eve. It is these types of random experiences that weave the tapestry of Christmas memories we share - parties, food, friends, family, music, good times and some sad times like Christmases marked by loneliness or loss of a loved one. Christmas is like a great magnifier that examines our life and makes everything – good and bad - seem larger. I'm happy to say, this Christmas, all is good in our home.

St. Anthony of Padua said, "Love is eternal; so that without love, all efforts are vain, no matter how much good we accomplish." Love is what lies beneath the surface at Christmas, and best flourishes in the spirit of humility. Every year someone will invariably proclaim disgust regarding the commercialization of Christmas, but I generally ignore these proclamations. Commercialism doesn't diminish Christmas. It's rarely the presents or shopping or decorations that we recall in our Christmas memories. It's always the people we remember, and

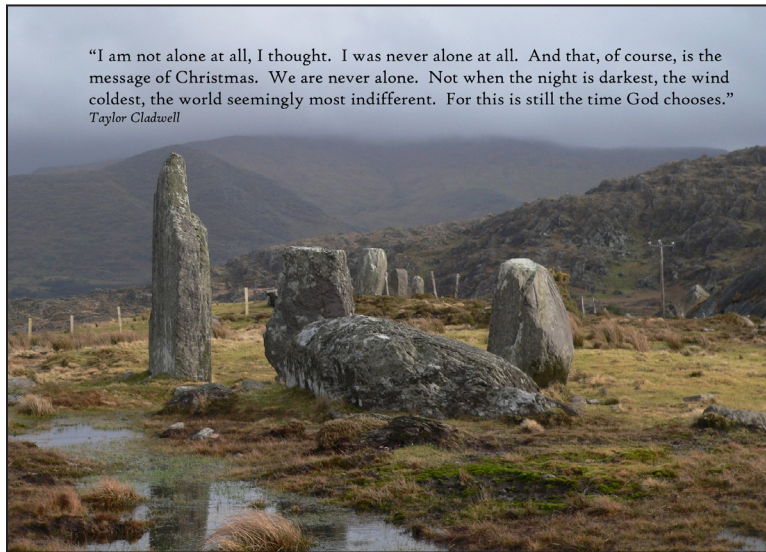
the experiences shared with people; experiences that occur when possessions and the trappings of this world are stripped away, and humility – the true understanding of who we are – arises and creates magic moments where time stands still. These become our Christmas memories... the affirmation of a child's imagination, school pageants, singing Christmas carols, little hands gripping the banister during the rush downstairs on Christmas morning, family dinners and gatherings, the first Christmas away from home, the first Christmas in a new home... these are the things we remember, and it's the warmth of these experiences that generate meaning and cause us to continue to look forward to Christmas year after year.

If you're receiving this letter and card, then you are someone we remember this Christmas – someone we care for and are likely to never forget. You may be a friend we met just this year, a relative we've known all our lives, or you may be someone we've not spoken to in a long time - but know if we saw you tomorrow we could pick up where we left off as if time and distance never separated us. Dan and I wish you a very Merry Christmas.

May God bless you and those whom you love during the coming New Year.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heidi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small dot above the 'i'.

*December 16, 2008*



*Please know that we are remembering you with love this  
Christmas.*

*We pray that joy fills your season, peace fills your home, and  
that all of your prayers are answered.*

*Merry Christmas,*

*Mindie and Dan Burgoyne*

Merry Christmas from Marion Station - one of the few places where Maryland is south of Virginia.

Dan and I still love it here on the Eastern Shore, and are in our seventh year in this old Victorian house. Our children have all moved away and live in 5 different states – the closest being three hours away. My son Danny asks me every time we speak when I'll move off the Shore and come back to civilization. I always say, "You're the one who moved away. Don't complain about the distance." Truthfully, I only say this to keep my motherly "guilt imposing" skills sharp. Dan and I know that each of our children must find his and her life, and make their own homes. We have found ours here in Somerset County. Earlier this summer Dan took me out on his fishing skiff. As I surveyed my surroundings - the murky blue-green water of the Big Annemessex River, the Laughing gulls and Caspian terns, the grassy shoreline, the smells of the marsh, the loblolly pines on the horizon – I knew I was home. And though I sometime fantasize about moving to places we've visited like Ireland, Montana, Maine and Nova Scotia– I belong to this place ... and just as our children want to wake up in their own homes on Christmas morning, we're happiest to wake up here in our Marion Station home this Christmas morning – and every morning.

Our children remain well though all are stressed with the recent financial recession. Becky, Harry, Benjamin and Connor are in New Jersey and doing well spending time with the boy scouts and soccer. Kelley is in Maine and just had a baby girl – Hannah Grace. Dominic lives in Columbia and is excited

to be working in the new Maple Lawn community near where we used to live. Lara and David moved off the Eastern Shore after David graduated from Salisbury University last December. They moved into an apartment not far from Dominic. Danny and Amber bought their first home and moved to Front Royal, Virginia. Their new house sits on the top of a mountain at the end of a three mile dirt road. Albert and Ruth had a baby girl in January – Bailea May - who is as cute as a baby girl can be. Dan and I visited them in Florida last April and were able to see Bailea again in July at Becky’s house just before Dan left to go out west. Little Daniel is has started school. Mia and Grace continue to enchant us – in stereo - with every visit.

2008 has been a tough year for us. We’ve suffered losses of loved ones, job loss, and sickness. For most of the year, Dan has been working out of state. When his job in Ocean City was completed in March he couldn’t find any work in Maryland. Through the Iron Workers Union he found short-term jobs in West Virginia, Ohio and Philadelphia. This became increasing difficult with on-again-off-again schedules, travel and strenuous work. Opting for better pay and more long-term work, Dan set out for a job in Wyoming in July - then ended up working on a wind turbine farm in Kansas. He’s been living out there since, with only one 4-day visit home in September for our anniversary. Thankfully he’ll be home for Christmas.

This is the first time in my life I’ve lived alone. And, I’ve developed some interesting skills in Dan’s absence – like how to ... manage a flock of free-range chickens, battle an infestation of poultry mites, relocate – not kill - black snakes, discard dead animal carcasses, fix and maintain an electric fence, balance the eco-system of a pond, repair a sump pump, jump start

a car battery, take metal to the scrap yard – and get paid for it!, add a phone jack, and start the truck with a screwdriver. I learned how many roosters are TOO many (more than one). I’ve also learned why people who live alone become eccentric about animals, talking about them like they’re people, and fussing over them too much. In solitude one becomes more aware of the actions and responses of creatures. The animals have been great company for me, but I realized after a friend said, “You sure talk a lot about your dogs” that I may be in danger of becoming eccentric. I secretly wondered if naming all the chickens after French literary heroes or making homemade broth for dog-food gravy was too over the top for a normal person.

In the past our Christmas card picture was taken on that year’s vacation. Since times were tough this year, we took no vacation. So I decided to use a photo from the trip I took to Ireland in 2007. As you can see, I added a caption - a quote by Taylor Caldwell. Sadly, being separated from Dan also means I’m separated from my proofreader. I still swear I’m dyslexic. My writing is always marred with typos. Dan usually finds them. I emailed this card to the printer having proofed it FIVE separate times in the course of eight hours.

That night when I was describing the card to Dan on the phone, I read the quote to him and noticed that I had typed Taylor *Clad*well instead of Taylor *Cald*well, transposing the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> letters of the last name. I shrieked and was so mortified – having a typo on the cover of the Christmas card!!! Dan tried to comfort me with this amusing statement .... “Well, Taylors should be CLAD well.” Please forgive the typo – It would have cost \$160 to fix.

I took the photo on the cover of this card one dreary February afternoon on the Beara Peninsula in County Kerry. The place is known as Cashelkeelty stone circle, and it stands on the summit of an ancient trackway known as the “Old Green Road.” Talk about being alone! Traveling by myself, I trekked a mile off the main road, straight up the mountain to find this stone circle. Nary a soul was on the path. Standing on the summit, the landscape stretched out for miles with views of the Slieve Misk Mountains, random villages and the Kenmare River. The only sound was the wind sweeping across the summit and whistling through the mountains.

I chose this photo for our Christmas card because I recall how I felt just after snapping it. I was miles from anyone I knew suddenly awash with the awareness of being alone – but not alone. It was later that I found the Caldwell quote and it seemed so fitting. Not so because it matched how I felt on Cashelkeelty ... but fitting because of what it says about Christmas. If we look deep into the season of Christmas, we find that which dispels darkness, defeats loneliness and conquers the loss we feel with human separation. We find love. With love we can never be alone.

In April my mother died. She followed her brother Bob who had died just four months earlier. My mother and Uncle Bob were named for my grandmother’s sister and brother - Robert and Elizabeth - who died in 1914 just weeks apart at the ages of 16 and 18. It’s strange to ponder that coincidental repetition of another Elizabeth following her brother Robert as time circles around us. Several friends and family members have also suffered losses this year, and this will be their “first” Christmas without that loved one. We think of them with spe-

cial fondness this year.

In doing my research for the book I’m currently writing, *Thin Places – Celtic Doorways to the Otherworld* – I read this quote by the late Celtic mystic, John O’Donohue. He said ...

If you could interview a baby in the womb, and it asks you, “what’s going to happen to me?” You’d say “you’re going to go through a dark channel. You’re going to be pushed out. You’ll arrive into a vacant world of open air and light. The cord that connects you to your mother is going to be cut. You going to be on your own forevermore and regardless of how close you come to anyone, you’ll never be able to belong in the way that you’ve belonged here.” The baby would have no choice by to conclude that it was going to die. ... when in actual fact .. it’s being born.

As we navigate through the revolutions of the passing years, Christmas is a time when we pause. We stop and reflect on birth, beginning, light coming into the darkness – a light that the darkness cannot overcome. We look forward to another year and hope for blessings. It’s a time we remember everything we ever loved, when joys and sorrows are magnified and felt stronger than other times of the year. Love is what knits the Christmases of our past into a garment of memory that warms us and cloaks future Christmases. It’s that love that pushes us year after year to make this season special.

I have a Christmas card on my desk my brother Mickey sent me last year. In it he wrote, “thanks for your Christmas card and letter. I don’t know where you find the time.” One thing every human being on earth has an equal share of is time. We all get 24 hours in a day. And though the extra pressure of Christmas preparation challenges my abilities to get this card

and letter out - there's no task that supersedes connecting with you - to let you know that you matter to us.

Dan and I are blessed to have lives connected to so many people. .. and it is to those of you that have made a difference in our lives that we send this card. It may be the subtle difference made by a business acquaintance or neighbor. Or it may be a huge difference made by a close friend or family member... but that difference you make in our lives - subtle or deep - is such that without you, there would be a vacancy. And yes ... my house is dirty, my shopping isn't done, my gifts aren't wrapped, my preparations not yet complete ... but our Christmas memories rarely include the clean house and the gifts. We remember people and the times we shared. We remember you this Christmas. We thank God for you and pray that your Christmas is happy and full of joy.

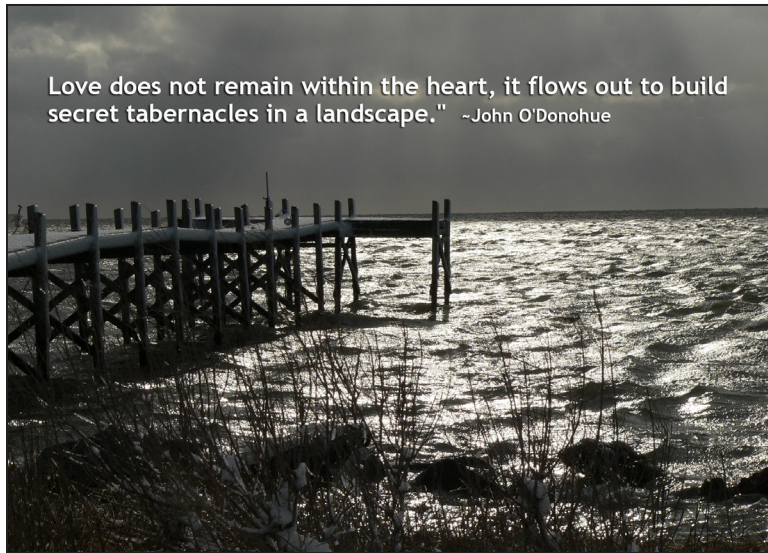
May God bless you and those whom you love.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Heidi".

*December 12, 2009*

Merry Christmas from Marion Station, a town halfway between Norfolk and Annapolis that was once famous for strawberries and is now known as the hometown of Miss Maryland 2009. Who knew? All is well here at our house, though this was hard year for Dan. He was injured on that job in Kansas last December. He's been recuperating and receiving treatment for the last year. He will likely be having back surgery very soon. So Dan has been home every day. Some women would complain, but not me. With Dan home, I never get lonely. He takes great care of the animals. He can always make me laugh no matter how dismal the day. And remarkably, he still acts interested in what I'm saying... even when I babble -chattering like a talking doll with ADHD - on steroids. It's been a hard year for Dan Burgoyne, coping with physical pain and the inability to do what he wants to do. But he stays cheerful. Hopefully next year, I'll be writing that he's feeling better, back at work doing a job he enjoys.

Our children continue to live fast paced lives, managing to struggle through these tough economic times. Harry and Becky are doing well, though Becky has had some health challenges this year. Dan bought Benjamin an inflatable kayak for his 13<sup>TH</sup> birthday which he seemed to be excited about. Connor is the sweetest young man, very kind, very thoughtful. We reconnected with Kelley this year and met our delightful, newest grandchild - Hannah, who looks remarkably like her mother and her grandpa. Dominic got a new job at a restaurant where he prepares the meal at the table for customers. We can't wait to see him in action. He's living in Columbia and still



Love does not remain within the heart, it flows out to build secret tabernacles in a landscape." -John O'Donohue

*This year at Christmas, our love flows out to you.  
May you and yours be blessed, sustained, comforted,  
and encouraged by the love that connects us all  
during this magical season  
– the same love that connected heaven and earth forever –  
on that first Christmas.*

*Wishing you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.*

*Mindie and Dan Burgoyne*

doing some graphic artist work independently. Albert, Ruth and little Bailea live in Georgia where Al is stationed. Bailea loves music, and we love seeing her little angel face in the pictures Al and Ruthie send. Danny and Amber are happy in their mountaintop home – Danny working hard in construction and Amber balancing work, kids and school. Little Daniel (already in first grade) and twins Grace and Mia (who turned 4 this year) continue to enchant us with their magical personalities. Our youngest, Lara will graduate from the University of Maryland next week with a degree in Economics. She and David bought their first home this year in Eldersburg (Carroll County). All of our family pictures are on my facebook page, so if you're not my friend yet, please "friend" me.

The biggest change agent in our 2009 was undoubtedly Facebook... that funny little "social media tool" that reconnects long lost friends and faraway family. It's the quintessential communication platform for people like me that love to talk. On Facebook I can talk (type) into cyberspace leaving my words to dangle until friends and family log on and snag them, and occasionally comment back. And I never know if they're bored... which is a good thing. Dan (who does NOT have a Facebook page) calls it "Two-Faced Book" because he says I'm a different person when I'm on there. On Facebook, information can go viral, spreading from friend to friend to friend. That's what happened for me this year when my book *Haunted Eastern Shore: Ghostly Tales from East of the Chesapeake* was released in October. I talked about the book on Facebook and soon had over 1000 people following what I was saying. I kept talking and that number increased to 2000 by the end of the books first month in print. One week later the first printing

—expected to last a year - was sold out. Who knew I could generate huge success just through talking? Sister Eileen Patrice (bless her cold little heart) would be shocked! I'll never forget that comment she wrote on my 5<sup>th</sup> grade report card hoping to get me to stop talking .... “Her concentration diminishes while her garrulity increases. “ Hmmm, where are you now, Sister? ...hopefully in a very quiet part of the heavenly kingdom. Wait ‘til I get there.

In June, I went to Paris and Germany with Dorchester County folks. By the way, anyone who thinks the Parisians are rude to Americans hasn't been there recently. The tough economic times have brought out the best in everyone – traveler, merchant, and citizen. The Europeans were so hospitable and gracious to us in both countries. My favorite sites on this trip were the Cathedral of Notre Dame and the Köln (Cologne) Cathedral. One could sit for days in and around these two architectural masterpieces and not be able to see everything. The art, surviving the ravages of war ... depicting the faith of a people ... lingering centuries after the artists and the faithful had departed, was overwhelming. In July, Dan and I took the camper and went to Hartford CT, Maine, and Prince Edward Island. In Hartford, we visited the Mark Twain house, the home where the author lived longest, raised his family and wrote his best works. After Hartford, we headed for Maine and visited the Burgoyne clan. Each Burgoyne family lives on some share of 200 acres in Carmel, Maine. Dan's brothers David and Steven built their houses on that land, and the cluster of Burgoynes living there now includes three generations. They are a remarkable testimony to family, passionate about each other and about the charismatic beauty of their North

Atlantic landscape. They are poetic, artistic, hard working, intensely funny and loving. A highlight of this visit was getting my “cards” read by young David's wife, Amy. (Don't panic, my conservative, Christian friends. Everything went okay and no demons claimed me).

Ten days of camping on Prince Edward Island was fabulous. The island is only about as big as the Delmarva Peninsula, but the difference in the landscape from east to west and north to south is remarkable. Everyone should see PEI before they die. The light houses, the beaches, the small fishing towns, the lobster suppers (lobstah suppahs), the art and crafts, the music, the céilidhs – and the mussels (80% of cultured blue mussels consumed in North America are grown on PEI) all make Prince Edward Island culturally rich and a great vacation destination... (Why do I sound like a travel writer?)

In September Dan and I spent six perfect days in Ireland celebrating our 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We renewed our vows in front of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Romanesque arch at Clonfert Cathedral, the place where St. Brendan the Navigator started his most famous monastery. I have to admit; I'm still crazy about Dan Burgoyne, and love him 10 times more than I did when I married him in Glenwood Gardens under the oak trees in 1999. Later in the trip, we visited Wicklow where I finally met my facebook friend Maya Hanley, in person – and where Maya introduced us to the well-known member of the Chieftains, Paddy Moloney whom I was able to interview for the book *Thin Places* (yes, I'm STILL writing this book and hope to finish before I turn 70). We spent the last days in Dingle and wondered why we don't live there. I still feel like Dingle isn't really in this world ... we pass through some strange vortex to



enter Dingle, and time stands still for the duration of the stay. Magical, mystical things happen to the traveler in Dingle.

Every year I choose a photo for our Christmas card from that year's vacation photos. But this year Dan and I decided to choose a photo depicting the place most dear to us – home – Maryland ... the Eastern Shore. Our climate here is temperate and we rarely get snow, but last March we had a snow storm, and I ran all over Somerset County snapping photos of the landscape. I shot the photo on the front of this year's card a little after 4:00pm in Frenchtown just after the snow had subsided. The scene was beautiful ... very much in character with an Eastern Shore winter. In the summer, the pace here is fast with the activities of the waterman, the seafood processors, the fisherman, the tourists, the boaters, and the festivals. But in the winter, the landscape sleeps, much of the activity quieted down, resting, waiting. It is in the winter landscape that details emerge and appear more prominent. The lone blue heron soaring across the marsh, the hum of the motor of a workboat in the distance, the stray feral cat, the elderly man sitting in the local store, even the sound of the tide lapping up onto the shore – all of these are more pronounced in the uncluttered winter landscape, as if the colors were brighter.

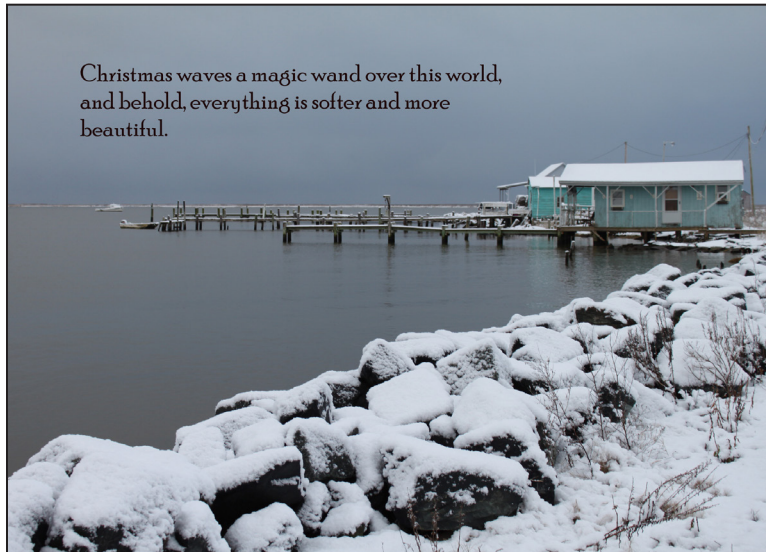
That's kind of like Christmas ... during this season everything seems magnified – love, loneliness, wealth, poverty, health, sickness, togetherness, separation ... everything weighs twice as much at Christmastime. Here's hoping your burdens are light and your blessings abundant ... but if you are feeling down, know that we are praying for you ... and that we trust ... no - we know, that strain of hardship will lessen for you soon. Love lies close at Christmas, nestled in invisible taber-

nacles filled by those gone before us, those that know us now, and those we've yet to meet. And from those tabernacles, we can draw strength. Even the love of a stranger can be found if we but look around us. And love heals the hurt, eases the suffering, fills the loneliness and can make any burden lighter.

Christmas is a time we remember everything we've ever loved, and we especially remember you. We recognize the greatest blessing is people that color our lives... family, friends, work colleagues, acquaintances in the community, people we serve and those that serve us. We wish you happiness and health this season and prosperity for the New Year. May God bless you and those whom you love.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heidi". The script is cursive and fluid, with a small dot above the 'i'.

*December 16, 2010*



Christmas waves a magic wand over this world,  
and behold, everything is softer and more  
beautiful.

*May you and yours unravel the mystery of Christmas –  
finding clues in the faces, the voices, the music, and the infant.*

*We are never too old to be reborn.*

*Wishing you an merry Christmas and a happy, healthy and  
prosperous new year.*

*Dan and Mindie Burgoyne*

Merry Christmas from Marion Station. While I neglect the shopping, the bills, unreturned calls and unanswered emails, there's a magical scene outside my office window. The first snow of the winter (in a place where it rarely snows) covers the magnolia and crepe myrtles. Beyond them the grass, the road, the mailboxes and the telephone wires all have a layer of snow covering up any harsh imperfections. Though there's only a sliver of daylight left, a few juncos are still flitting in and out of the bare branches of the pecan trees, and these thick flakes falling from the sky at twilight generate a sense of urgency in me to celebrate Christmas and remember all those who make our lives so rich.

Snowy scenes like this move me to remember ... good times, winters past, friends and family, those no longer with us to celebrate, my little children playing in the snow, my grandchildren talking of Santa, and Christmas music that subtly plays in the background – music on which all the memories rest. Just as snow covers up all the imperfections in the landscape, Christmas paints our past with memories of everything we've ever loved. Our Christmas card this year has a photo I took in Crisfield during last December's snowstorm. It's a crab shanty in a place known as Ape's Hole located on the Pocomoke Sound. It's a along an old dirt road traveled only by the owners of the shanties and nosey people like me who want to take in humble scenery uninterrupted by too many things man-made. It's a barren place. It's a thin place.

This year was an exciting year for travel. Dan and I sold our pop-up and bought a new teardrop style camper (with a

bathroom, furnace and air-conditioner) so we could extend those trips we love to take into the less temperate months. We enjoyed short trips this year to Cherrystone, Swallow Falls, and Charlottesville. In the summer we spent two days in Salem, MA scoping out history and all things “witchy.” We camped on Winter Island next to an old WWII airplane hangar with views of Salem harbor, Marblehead and the Winter Island lighthouse. We camped right next to a witch-fortune teller who had her own UPS-style truck (painted psychedelic blue) with a fortune-telling office and card reading table inside. It also had a sofa, a chair, coffee table and twinkling lights laid out on top of the truck - living-room style - for evening conversations, complimented by speakers that played soothing, new-agey music. One accessed the truck-top terrace via a built-in ladder on the back. It kind of reminded me of an artsy Beverly Hillbillies truck. The morning of our last day there, she packed everything inside and drove away. The Salem waterfront was beautiful, the museums remarkable and seafood fabulous. One night we went on a ghost tour. I asked the tour guide what people in Salem do for fun. She said, “They go to Boston.” She continued that the town was cursed and all who move to Salem become miserable and then circumstances beyond their control will never allow them to leave. This compelled us to permanently cross this town off our list as a consideration for a retirement location.

After Salem we came into Dan’s home state of Maine and we met up with my cousin Katie and her partner Robin. They live in a log cabin on lots of acreage in Sidney near Augusta. From there we loaded up our twin Subaru Foresters and headed for the North Woods where the roads are unpaved, pri-

vately owned and there is no electricity or cell phone towers. For four days we camped on the north banks of Moosehead Lake with our campsite right on the shore. The campground was at the end of a 35-mile dirt road – north of Rockwood. Generators were flipped on at mealtimes only. All other times, campers roughed it without electricity, cell phones or the Internet. The wild scenery was worth all the lack of creature comforts. Wildlife was abundant, and landscape nearly untouched. What I noticed most was the sound of quiet, except the occasional boat or seaplane. I asked the campground owners what they did when they wanted to see a movie. They laughed and said, “We wait until we go to Florida for the winter.” Dan taught Katie to fly fish and the three of them fished and fished. What did I do? I talked to anyone who would listen, wrote a lot of notes, and took about a thousand photographs. What fun it was to spend time with my childhood soul-friend, Katie. Though we’d only seen each other once in the last twenty years, it was as if no time had passed, and conversations ran the gamut from childhood memories at our grandparents’ house, to our shortcomings, our crazy family, and the aches and pains of growing old. I can’t wait to see her again.

After our stay at Moosehead Lake, Dan and I followed the Golden Road from Canada to Millinocket, past Mount Katahdin and North East Carry and took in much of the Maine landscape that Thoreau wrote about. We ended that vacation in our favorite spot in Maine – the Burgoyne homestead in Carmel where three generations of Burgoynes live. As always, the Dan’s brothers and their wives and children, and Dan’s sister, Kathy, and all the nieces and nephews were so welcoming and

the time seemed too short. We miss them soon as we leave.

Dan had surgery on the broken disks in his back in April. I swear his doctor looked all of 19 years old. I was ready to become the inquisitor and test this doc's entire medical competency and maybe even request another doctor. How much experience could someone that young have? Apparently a lot. Turns out he did his neurosurgery residency at Hopkins and co-founded the Baltimore Neurosurgery and Spine Center. So he's a real young looking smarty. The doctor says they won't be able to tell much about the success of surgery for a year. Dan copes daily with quite a lot of pain, but he still has time to take care of the animals, and the house, and listening to me go on and on about my day. He's the only one who can make me laugh when I'm miserable. I don't know what I'd do without him.

I'm still writing *Thin Places: Celtic Doorways to the Otherworld*. Hopefully it will be done before I'm ready for the nursing home. To help keep me inspired, I'm taking a group to Ireland May 15-24<sup>th</sup>. We'll be covering much of the south. If you know anyone who wants to see some spectacular sites in Dingle, Kinsale, Cork, Kildare, Kerry, Tipperary and Dublin – with an excellent tour guide who talks non-stop, please invite them to come. [www.thinplacestour.com](http://www.thinplacestour.com)

Our six children are well, and scattered across five Eastern states. We're a little sad that Albert will not be home for Christmas. He'll be somewhere under the surface of the sea in a U.S. Navy submarine defending our country. Please pray for him and for Ruth and Bailea who will be spending Christmas apart from each other.

An early Christmas gift and the highlight of the year was

the birth of a new grandson – Tristan. Lara was due to have him on Thanksgiving Day, but he didn't come until December 2<sup>nd</sup>. I was lucky to be there for the birth. For those of you who get the chance to see your grandchild be born – I highly recommend it. Forget what they say about it being messy and gross. That's a minute factor in the setting. When you see that new little life come forth from the hidden womb, your very existence is dwarfed by the greatness that is that child. The mess is like leftover wrapping on the floor at Christmas. It has to be picked up or pushed out of the way, but never overshadows the thrill of the gift. And the only thing rivaling the experience of seeing your grandchild be born, is watching the your own child morph from baby girl into mother in one seamless act of reaching out her arms and drawing that newborn to her chest. There are simply no words. Suffice it say, it's a life changer.

If you know you're in love when all the songs make sense, then you know the meaning of Christmas when you witness a child being born. Everything is made new again – a perfect little being comes into the world with no faults, no grievances, no sorrows, no fears – like some great shining promise of good things to come needing only to be nurtured, guided and protected in order for the promise to be fulfilled. My Uncle Tony sent me an email Christmas card that was an animated slide show of cities around the world all decked out for Christmas. While Silent Night played in the background, images of Paris, Seoul, Dublin, Beijing, Budapest, Vienna, Beirut, Copenhagen, Tokyo, Red Square, New Delhi, Hamburg, Lima and Perth flashed across the screen – each city with its own unique Christmas trees, lights, stars, and celebratory decorations. I couldn't help but wonder how the birth of one baby

*December 16, 2011*

so long ago could impacted the world, cross faith barriers and unite so many people around one common theme. I'm guessing it isn't the birth of Jesus that had the impact, but more the birth of the message he delivered. It stuck.

I've often thought every world leader, regardless of his or her religious affiliation, should read the Sermon on the Mount every morning, just to keep focused and balanced. Lots of good leadership wisdom there ... Love and help others less fortunate than you... Don't be too impressed with yourself... Don't use your power to exploit those who are weak ... Use your power to lift others up... Don't cry, because things will get better... Recognize and identify a lie when you see it, even though it may make you instantly unpopular, and cause you to pay a price, maybe even the ultimate price... Don't hide your talent. Let your light shine, and know there is a special place in the world for that only you can fill. .. And remember, nothing is more important than love. It is the ultimate gift. And love endures past this life into the next. There is nothing stronger and nothing can extinguish it.

I'll get down off the soapbox now and stop trying to fulfill my secret desire to be a priest (hee hee). Christmas always gets me thinking. Writing is my natural progression for letting those thoughts run loose. Please know how special you are to us. Know that we are thinking of each one you this Christmas, and we wish you happiness, health, and prosperity in 2011. We pray that all your prayers will be answered.

God bless you and those whom you love.



Merry Christmas from Marion Station where this time last year there was snow on the ground. Today it is overcast and a mild 53 degrees ... typical for this temperate part of the Eastern Shore. 2011 completes our tenth year here in the Vance Miles House. It's the longest I've ever lived in one place - since I left Riverdale when I was fifteen. It's home.

Dan and I hope this letter finds each of you mostly done with the stress of holiday preparations. We hope you're relaxed, soaking in the season dedicated to new birth, new life, peace and the remembrance of everything we've ever loved.

Our children are and their families are all well, though this has been a year of illness for us. Dan continues to deal with the complications of tearing two discs in his back in a work accident. Becky has been struggling this year too, but thankfully her illness is not as serious as we'd initially thought. Little Daniel just finished up his eighth month of chemotherapy, and can hopefully get back to dreaming about things common to eight-year-old boys. I broke my foot in February on a trip in Savannah. It wasn't until September that I could walk without assistance. And just last Tuesday, I was admitted to the hospital after suffering from a mild heart attack. I write this on my first day home. There's nothing like a life-threatening situation to get a person all "deep and meaningful." I'm hoping I can write this Christmas letter without becoming morose.

On the cheerful side of 2011, travel colored the year for Dan and me. I started a new blog called "The Travel Hag" and set out on travel adventures I could write about. We went to Savannah, the Outer Banks, and Ireland. We completed a



*At Christmas, all roads lead home.*

*May the peace of Christ go with you,  
wherever He may send you.  
May He guide you through the wilderness,  
protect you from the storm.  
May He bring you home rejoicing  
at the wonders He has shown you,  
May he bring you home rejoicing  
once again into our doors.\**

*Wishing you and yours blessings this Christmas.  
May all of your prayers be answered in the New Year.*

*Mindie and Dan Burgoyne*

*\*Celtic Daily Prayer: a Northumbrian Office*

cross-country rail trip on the California Zephyr. I also started a local women's travel group called the "travel hags" – women with goddess attributes who love to travel. We went kayaking down the Transquaking, Pocomoke, and Annemessex Rivers, camped at Janes Island and Elk Neck, had dinner at Old Salty's, went to the Chestertown Book Fair, and shared several exotic meals in torrential downpours whilst listening to a live, full rendition of Robert Burns' *Address to a Haggis*. We hope to do more this year. Please join us. Hagmen are welcome

For those of you who have been receiving my Christmas letters since 2006 (and have read them), I'll now type the line that has appeared in every letter for the last six years. "I continue to work on the book about Irish mystical places entitled *Thin Places: Celtic Doorways to the Otherworld*. "Who knows when – or if – I'll ever write that book? The mystical sites, the people I've met, the stones, the trees, the landscape of Ireland – all these things have a magnetic draw that keep pulling us back there. Being able to encapsulate that draw and its meaning into the pages of a book would fulfill a real purpose for me. I figure I'll do it when a publisher gives me a deadline.

Dan and I led a small group on a tour of Ireland's southern region last May. Our guests were from Canada, California, Washington State, New York and Virginia. We started in the Boyne Valley and then went to Kildare, then Cashel, then Ardmore, Cork City, Kinsale, Gougane Barra, the Beara Peninsula and Dingle. Her Majesty, the Queen cramped our style a bit when she arrived on our heels for her Ireland tour. She was a day behind us, with a similar itinerary. I can understand her going to Trinity College in Dublin, but Cashel? Really? Then Cork City? Sheesh! Was her staff looking my website when

they scheduled her stops? Then we had President Obama following Her Majesty. There's nothing like being an American in Ireland when the Prez visits. It's kind of like having a rock star in the family. The Irish absolutely LOVE him, and you have to bite your tongue to keep from saying, "You know, he's not all that." Jesus himself could have walked down Grafton Street and not seen the excitement the Irish showed for President Obama – who took the adulation humbly, with class.

The recent crash of the Irish economy didn't harm our tour. Hospitality was as warm as ever – if not better. Ireland's landscape was no less magical. I never tire of seeing these holy places. But watching others experience them magnifies the personal thrill. Being able to lead travelers to the very spot where the Children of Lir are said to have perished after nine hundred years in exile, or introduce friends to the Hag Beara, or watch a group try to make sense of a stone circle that predates the pyramids, or help a pilgrim collect water from an ancient holy well... these things create spiritual bonds with new friends – soul friends. We have another tour coming up this May. We'll be traveling to the West of Ireland – the Aran Islands, Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Connemara and Clare. Consider joining us.

Every year Dan and I try to get away for our anniversary in September. It's hard to come up with affordable places that we haven't been to already. This year I discovered a deal on a US rail pass for \$389 that allowed 8 stops in 14 days. I crafted an Amtrak trip for Dan and me that began at Penn Station in Baltimore, hit Chicago, went across the prairies of Nebraska into the Colorado Rockies, then across Utah and Nevada into California. Our first stop was Granby Colorado. We got

off the train, rented a car and explored the Grand Lake area and Rocky Mountain National Park. We had a cabin on Lake Granby and three days to explore some of the most stunning scenery in America.

The photograph on this Christmas card was taken on the Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park, a 48 mile winding road that is the highest continuous highway in the US reaching elevations above 12, 000 feet. If you look closely in the lower left of the photo, you can see the road snaking across the mountains.

Traveling along this road was like riding into a painting. All the surroundings were woven together into a spellbinding landscape. At every bend in the road there was something new to see, or hear, or smell. The Never Summer Mountains, still capped in September with last year's snow – or a herd of elk in the valley whistling to one another – or the scent of pine that descends on every wooded trail. Even the quiet consumes the senses. This part of the Rockies has such a sense of place. It overwhelms you when you stop and notice the details. The John Denver songs played constantly in my head. .... *Come dance with the west wind and touch all the mountaintops, sail o'er the canyons and up to the stars. And reach for the heavens and hope for the future, and all that we can be and not what we are.*

They say the California Zephyr is the most scenic train ride in all of North America. I believe it. There's something about passing through a vista of connected canyons and mountains and rivers, while being able to relax to the rhythm of a moving train. For Dan and me, that trip was a comforting end to a great travel year, and a memorable celebration of our love for each other.

At Christmas, our focus is always on home. I can't imagine being anywhere else. Mark Twain made a reference in one of his letters to his mansion in Hartford, CT. He wrote ... *To us, our house was not insentient matter -- it had a heart, and a soul, and eyes to see us with; and approvals, and solitudes, and deep sympathies; it was of us, and we were in the peace of its benediction. We never came home from an absence that its face did not light up and speak out its eloquent welcome -- and we could not enter it unmoved.*"

I've read that quote so many times. I've been to the Mark Twain mansion in Hartford, and the home does have an aura – a spirit about it. But it's not connected to me. It's not for me. The spirit of that home is something outsiders can only observe.

I believe most houses ARE insentient matter. The house becomes a home when a family consecrates it. It's the people that live in the house who share meals, tell stories, make music, grieve for loved ones lost, put up a Christmas tree every year, and rejoice when little faces find the magic in the season – it's these people – the families - that fuse with that insentient matter to create the *heart and soul and eyes to see with and approvals and solitudes and deep sympathies* that Twain refers to. And sometimes the fusion is so deep that it lives on in a home long after the family members fade away. The home retains the spirit. And if we're lucky enough in our lifetime to experience "home" like that, we'll return to it every Christmas. We'll try to recreate wherever we are.

Dan and I laid the foundation for our home, and each family member from Becky to Tristan has added his or her unique piece to the charism. I remember when Grace and Mia used to applaud when their car turned into our driveway. They feel

that heart and soul of our home. I hope in time they - and all the grandchildren, and their parents - know that they not only are a part of it, they helped to create it. All of them are of this home – and it is of them.

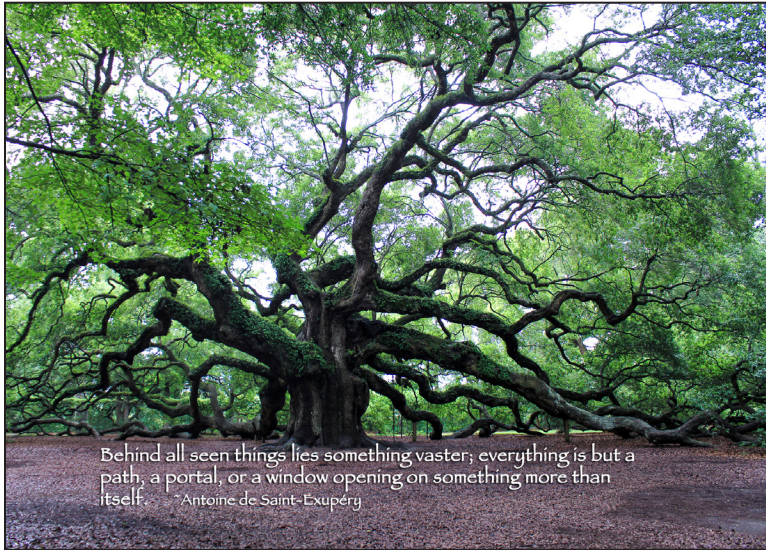
If at Christmas all roads lead home - you are part of our sense of home, and this Christmas has led us to you. We want you to know that you matter to us, that we remember you at this special time. We're praying for you. We're grieving for you if you're experiencing sorrow, and rejoicing with you if you're celebrating. And though this letter is but a simple gesture that we extend to those we love at the end of the year, the love we have for you exists every day.

May God bless you and all those whom you love this Christmas. Have a happy, healthy, prosperous new year.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Heidi". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.



December 12, 2012



*May you and yours be warmed by the love that touches the whole world at Christmas. May your families be blessed, may your homes be joyful, may your new year be filled with miracles, and may all of your prayers be answered.*

*Know that you are dear to us, and that we are remembering you with love at Christmastime.*

*Dan and Mindie Burgoyne*

Merry Christmas from Marion Station, the town that missed disaster by only five miles in the wake of Hurricane Sandy. Our friends to the southwest in Crisfield didn't fare as well, and we remember them prayerfully. This year we marked ten years living in the Vance Miles House. It's still haunted, but it's home. I haven't lived in one place for this long since my childhood home in Riverdale. I always figured we'd be itching to move after a few years. But it's our refuge – our safe place and we are comfortable here. I'll never leave the Eastern Shore landscape, and this house makes for a warm home at Christmas.

Gracie, our seven-year-old granddaughter told me she loved this house. She loved how everything was all stacked up everywhere and you could find good stuff in those piles. I asked her what she would do if Grandpa and I ever decided to move. She thought a minute and then said, "Well .... I guess I'd just burst into flames."

We're staying for a while so Gracie doesn't have to go through that nasty transformation any time soon.

It's nice to know the little ones love coming here. We're abundantly blessed with family. Becky and Harry and the boys are well. Ben was one of three students in his high school to make the National Honor Society. Connor is still crazy over soccer. He admitted to me last summer that he is "a soccer legend." I loved that. Al, Ruthie and Bailea are in Kings Bay, GA where Al is serving our country in the US Navy. Bailea has curls that Goldilocks would envy and a personality that makes Shirley Temple seem drab. Dominic is busy working as the

Banquet Manager for La Fontaine Blue and seems to like it, though it takes all of his weekends and most holidays. He's recently adopted a cat that is more like a dog. She follows him everywhere, even goes to work with him.

Daniel started his own business this year installing windows and building decks and is doing well for the first year. We were his first customer, and we love our new deck. Amber has just started Pharmacy school and their twins, Mia and Grace are in second grade, and growing up so fast. Mia tends to exaggerate. On Thanksgiving I told the grandkids I'd give them a penny for every pecan they collected from our yard. Mia came in with a coffee can full and said, "I just counted these and I've got fourteen thousand pecans. How many dollars does that make?" Lara and Dave are thriving as the doting parents of Tristan, our blond, two-year-old prince who wants to talk so badly that he incorporates the words he knows with ones he makes up. He can talk a mile-a-minute, and does so with hand gestures and expressions more befitting a businessman than a toddler. And he plays me well, too. He calls me "Gammy" and I melt. Sometimes I say, "What do you want? Anything. It's yours. You want me to get out my checkbook?" I can't imagine refusing him anything. His parents know this. Could be problematic later.

Dan and I are well. Dan is fully retired and though he moves slowly, he always makes the effort to push himself a little more each day. He spends most of his days taking care of our old house, the yard, the animals and giving me the support I need to balance my job and hobby. I'm still doing rural economic development for the State of Maryland (my 8<sup>th</sup> year) and I'm still writing. Though Dan and I travel as much as we

can, our best times are spent at home with each other and with the kids when they visit. We are blessed to have this tribe. And grace has smiled on us again this year. We have a new grandchild on the way. Lara and David are expecting a new baby on June 4<sup>th</sup>. Life is full and our family is our greatest joy.

For those of you who have known me for a few years, you'll recall that there is always a spot in our Christmas letter where I write that I'm working on a book about mystical places in Ireland. Year after year I write that I'm going to finish it. This year I got serious and put a book proposal together and pitched three literary agents. All three requested proposals. (This rarely happens.) One agent placed it with a mid-size NY publisher and I accepted their offer. But as we got into the marketing process it became apparent that my book wasn't a good fit for that publisher. They have a strong focus on spirituality and rarely touch the travel markets. My book is more travel than spirituality. We both realized the book would do better with a publisher that had a strong travel focus, so we voluntarily parted ways, but the process was very encouraging, and I will pick it back up again in 2013.

I went to Ireland without Dan this year. And while I was lonely, we had a fabulous tour. Our guests were perfect, our bus driver, Mick was not only professional and competent, he was entertaining. He taught us many Irish bus driver-isms like "Hold your wind to cool your porridge." Our tour took us through the west, to the Burren, Connemara, the Hill of Uisneach and Holy Island. Every time I go back to Ireland, I am changed by the experience. The land has a magnetic draw, so I keep going back. In September (5-15) I'll be escorting a tour to Northern Ireland – Donegal, the Antrim Coast, Lough Neagh,

Derry and Armagh. Last September I spent a week in County Tyrone with my friend (and guide) Maura Brooks. She opened my eyes to many “thin places” in the North, and those sites will be the foundation of next year’s tour. Think about joining us. Information is on line at [www.thinplacestour.com](http://www.thinplacestour.com)

In April Dan and I visited Charleston, SC. It was the first trip I’ve ever taken where I didn’t want to come home. What a magical place. The pulse of the town and its history, the stories, the Live Oaks, Folly Beach, the seafood, the harbor and the colors all mix together to form this exquisite soup that always leaves you wanting more. Charleston has become one of my favorite destinations.

The picture at the top of this letter is of the Angel Oak – a Live Oak near Charleston that is said to be the oldest living thing east of the Rockies. Estimations on its age run from 500 to 1500 years old. Its circumference is 27 feet, and it stands 66 feet high with branches that cover over 17,000 square feet. Arborists estimate that the root spread underground is as vast as what we see above the ground. Old tales tell about the ghosts of African slaves appearing as “angels” in the tree. The tree has a mystical quality. It sits in its own little park on Johns Island, and its heavy branches now lay on the ground so the visitor walks into the tree canopy instead of under it. There were other tourists there when we visited. I noticed that all of us walking in the tree were silent. If anyone spoke, it was in whispers. The Angel Oak is cloaked with an unspoken call to reverence.

Khalil Gibran wrote “Trees are poems that the earth writes on the sky.” The Angel Oak is like that. Though it’s made up of wood and leaves, there is an elemental presence about it

that is set apart, a presence that transcends time and space and weaves it all together. Like a poem, the tree brings us into a higher level of our own existence. So Antoine de Saint-Exupery’s words about the vastness beyond and portals and openings seemed a fitting caption.

To us, Christmas is like the Angel Oak. The physical manifestations of Christmas, decorations, wrapped gifts, lights, trees, traditions, toys, celebrations, wreaths, Santa, food, candles, stars, mangers ... they all comprise this majestic, outer beauty that makes up Christmas. And we love it. But just behind the outer shell is the vast world of the heart that feeble words could never describe. It’s this world that magnifies all the good and bad in our life. If we are loved and connected we feel the love even more strongly at Christmas. If we are lonely, that too is magnified.

I’m always puzzled when people complain about the glitz and the materialism of Christmas. So many say that we’ve gotten so materialistic that we miss the meaning. Pure intent always finds the meaning. If the spirit of Christmas is in your heart, the gifts and glitter are a demonstration of joy. Some use them, some don’t. But they don’t detract. An empty heart, a lonely heart will see the outer shell in and of itself alone, because for them, nothing lies beyond. Their portals are closed. These people will always be searching. But what they are looking for can only be seen through the lens of love. And love can only be spread by love. So perhaps we should look for them and reach out.

I figure childless families should go out and get a kid to spend Christmas with. The joyful freedom and innocence children project at Christmas transforms even the stodgiest

*December 19, 2013*

of adults. All the stories say so. It was Tiny Tim who moved Scrooge, the Little Drummer Boy who gave the greatest gift, and little Cindy Lou who pulled at the Grinch's heartstrings. What happens to that wonder and magic and imagination? Why does growing up mean we must shed our belief in magic? Christmas is a time when we try to capture that in ourselves if only for one day. To really believe that there is "something vaster" behind the decorations and traditions, something that will wrap us in love and bind us with all who have gone before us, and all who are yet to be born. Something that will help us shed the image of ourselves that is clothed in secrets and lies, and reveal our real selves. The selves we were as children.

There is one child we all keep with us at Christmas. He's at the heart of it. He is the one we celebrate. He's the baby who was love - and was born into a mean, disbelieving world, and who lived to change that. His love was so strong that it is still alive after all these years. And it is reborn Christmas after Christmas.

So here's to you and yours. We wish you love and wonder and magic. If you're suffering, we wish you hope and strength. If you're happy, we celebrate your joy. If you're searching we hope you find what you need in the secrets hidden behind the landscape. As for us ...we'll be with the children trying to absorb as much magic and wonder as possible. Know that if you are receiving this letter, it's because you are special to us.

Merry Christmas. May God bless you and those whom you love.



Merry Christmas from Marion Station, that little hamlet on Maryland's Eastern Shore set between Westover and Crisfield that was named for a little girl whose father donated land for a railroad station. When local officials asked him what he wanted to name the station he said, "Marion after my daughter." A town grew up around that train station, a town that was an important agricultural shipping hub, particularly for strawberries. Strawberry barons built ornate Victorian homes flanking the lane across from the station. The locals called it "Millionaire's Row." It's the same lane Dan and I live on today some hundred years after the boom when all that wealth was created, though it's a bit more humble in its surroundings these days. The spirits of those who built Marion Station still creep into this old landscape, and little Marion Horsey's name lives on through all of us who call Marion Station home. There's a palpable connection to the past here. And somehow, we sense that we belong in this particular place.

2013 was a year of beginnings for us ... and a few sad endings. We lost our Uncle Sonny (Lou Granados) last summer. We remember him for hosting our Granados clan every Easter when we were kids, and for preserving much of the Granados heritage so that we 500+ living Granados descendants of Ramon and Maria Concepcion could feel that connection with our ancestors. Every time I made my way down to Ocean City to see Uncle Sonny he'd have a family story to share. I'll miss those visits. While it's a sad ending for the Granados', those stories and family memories he left us will help keep us connected.



*Walk in the mystery of Christmas  
and find the gift that was meant for you.*

*Love,  
Dan and Mindie Burgoyne*



*Remembering you this Christmas and wishing you love and blessings.*

As one life left us, a new life arrived. This year we welcomed grandchild #9 – Catalina Morgan who has the face of an angel. She belongs to Al and Ruthie who live in Georgia. Dan and I haven't met her yet but we're excited that she'll be visiting this Christmas with her big sister, Bailea. Our eldest grandchild, Ben is graduating high school and has decided to serve his country in the US Army. We're so proud of the young man he's become. His 11-year old brother Connor spent a week with us and made us remember how fun eleven year olds are. Like most his age, Connor thinks deeply about things, has a lot of wisdom and can have fun without feeling awkward about it. He hasn't quite reached that age where he think most adults are stupid. He's young enough to find the wonder in flying a kite old enough to do it with style and skill.

Last summer our 9-year-old twin granddaughters Mia and Grace came to stay with us while Amber (their mother) interned at the Crisfield Pharmacy. We did the beach (often), we rode bikes through Janes Island, flew kites at the Inlet, went to the Boardwalk, rode all the rides at Jolly Roger, did Theater Camp, toured St. Michaels, Oxford, Cambridge, and almost all of the Queen Anne's County nature trails. We rode the Lewes Ferry to Cape May and the twins got a tour of the Bridge and visit with the captain (thanks Shari). We went to the Sea Glass Festival, a ghost tour in Berlin, a cemetery walk in Crisfield, fishing with Grandpa, ice cream in Chincoteague, and snowballs and fireworks in Crisfield. We watched all the Harry Potter movies and created enough artwork to fill a gallery.

I saw the twins last month and asked them, "What was your favorite thing of all that we did last summer?" I recounted much of what I mentioned above to refresh their memories.

Mia said her favorite thing was coming into my office in the morning and talking when it was just the two of us. Grace said, "My favorite thing was the walks we took at night when it was dark and we could see the stars." Go figure. All that entertainment and what they liked best was staying at home. This made me realize that the entertainment was really for me, trying to squeeze every bit of fun out of our time together... to make important memories. Silly me. I was missing that the strongest part of lifelong memories is the people you spend it with, not so much the place you visited or the things you did. The memories of being with people who teach us about ourselves are the stuff that life is made of. And I learned a lot about me this summer. It was one of the best summers of my life.

And the grandchildren keep coming. We expect grandchild #10 to arrive in a few weeks. Lara and David are having a baby girl next month. Her name is Primrose. She will be sleeping in her mother's crib, wearing her mother's baby clothes and hugging the teddy bear Lara used to hold. Primrose's arrival is much anticipated and her 3-year-old big brother Tristan (aka Muffin Man) is getting excited about the arrival. Lara dug out her old Cabbage Patch doll from our attic and gave it to Tristan so he could have a baby too. He feeds it, puts it to bed, wheels it around in his little shopping cart and occasionally spansks it for being bad. Then hugs it, kisses it and says, "Awww, don't cwy baby. It's okay." That kid should have an agent. Though Tristan looks like his daddy he has his mother's laugh. Could it really be that long ago that I was hearing her little laugh? My love lived inside that little girl's laughter. Now I see it coming around again only now it's her love inside Tristan's laughter ... and time circles around us.

All our grown kids are doing well though we don't see them as often as we'd like. We keep in touch weekly (sometimes daily) via Facebook, texting and Facetime.

This year I launched a series of ghost walks in Eastern Shore towns. We named the series Chesapeake Ghost Walks, and due to the current popularity of ghost walks, they were very successful. I led a total of 29 tours in 2013 through Easton, Cambridge, St. Michaels, Denton, Crisfield, Princess Anne, Pocomoke City, Snow Hill, Berlin and Ocean City. All but three sold out. In September I led a tour through the northern region of Ireland and got some great press coverage, one media outlet stating that our *Thin Places - Discover the North* tour was the most comprehensive commercial tour of Northern Ireland that anyone knew about. Both of these successes gave Dan and I the courage to officially start a tour company - Travel Hag Tours (Dan wishes the name was different). Through the company we'll run Chesapeake Ghost Walks, tours of Ireland and eventually local group tours targeted at women who want to travel with girlfriends. Dan is doing all the behind the scenes research and admin work while I craft the itineraries and develop the products. So far, so good.

One of our friends asked me why I keep going back to Ireland. Why not Scotland, Wales, France? I didn't have an answer. Then I started to think ... "Am I in a rut?" But on day 3 of our Ireland tour this year we visited Glencolmcille on the Slieve League Peninsula in County Donegal. As my tour group scattered, exploring the glen, the graves and the old stones, I walked around to the back of St. Columba's Church and looked out across that glen. In one single moment I knew why I kept returning to Ireland. In some strange way, I 'm connected to

that land. There's magic in the landscape. It transforms me. It transforms Dan. Why go somewhere else?

The picture on the front of our card was taken last year in Northern Ireland. It's known as the Dark Hedges, and is Northern Ireland's most photographed spot. This lane leading to an old County Antrim plantation is lined with beech trees that were planted in the 1750s. They've now grown to create the ethereal canopy of silver-limbed branches. The Dark Hedges was the setting showing the Kingsroad to Winterfell in the Game of Thrones series. It captures that "sense of the otherworld" - the thin places where the two worlds mingle in the magical Irish landscape. The picture of Dan and me on the inside of the card was taken on our anniversary at the Rock of Cashel in County Tipperary. This year we're running two tours to Ireland, one in May - *Discover the North* repeating much of the 2013 tour but with an overnight stay on Tory Island, and a 2<sup>nd</sup> tour in September - *Castles, Saints and Druids* where we'll visit 7 castles (including an overnight visit at Barberstown Castle), 10 monastic settlements and 8 megalithic sites. We'd love for you to join us. You can see the complete itinerary at [www.thinplacestour.com](http://www.thinplacestour.com) — shameless plug.

An Irish friend told me that he missed the days when Christmas was celebrated with only food, friends and the Christmas candle in the window. The current commercialism clutters his Christmas experience. I told him I loved the glitz, the lights, the trees, the carols, the decorations, the cards, the parties --- and yes, the presents. Sure some people make Christmas all about things but those folks would have difficulty with any kind of Christmas because their hearts empty. But for me the lights and decorations create an anticipation of

something great to come, they frame a meaningful experience. And there's something about seeing a wrapped gift with your name on it. What's more personal than your name, handwritten on a tag attached to a gift someone chose for you - a gift they wrapped in pretty paper to make it a surprise? Exchanging gifts gives us joy. Presents are the physical manifestation of love, like a wedding ring or a sliver cup for a new baby or new bike for 7 year old.

The Christmas glitz provides a backdrop for an experience of remembering - remembering our blessings, remembering that there is value in this crazy life as long as we cling to love, remembering that there's always hope no matter how bad things seem, remembering a little boy who was born away from home to frightened young parents who had to run for their lives shortly after his birth, who didn't even have a shirt to clothe him in - the same little boy who grew up and told the world to welcome the stranger, include the marginalized, liberate the oppressed, feed the hungry, comfort those who mourn, to stop judging and start loving.

Christmas is the road we follow back home every year. It's the place we stop to remember the good things when time circles around us. Christmas is about connection and knowing every good thing in life comes through connection...that we don't accomplish or gain without doing so through being connected to others. No one rises from the ashes of despair without relying on a friend. It's what we hunger for - connection to our ancestors, to the land, to those we love, to nature, to our Creator. And sadly it's a time of despair for those who can't grab onto anything because their disconnection is magnified by a world of people seemingly fixated on remembering

everything they ever loved.

Here's to being connected to you, our friends and family. Though we may not see you often, you matter to us. Nothing is ever lost to the heart, which is why we can pick up where we left off the next time we're together and know our affection for each other has not changed even though our hair continues to grey and our faces have a few more lines. May your new year be blessed with connections that fill your life with joy and love and laughter. May your road be easy, may you find new friends and may all your Christmas wishes come true. May God bless you and those you love.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Maudie".

*December 16, 2014*

Merry Christmas from east side of the Chesapeake Bay, the largest estuary in North America and the most studied estuary in the world. That big ol' bay has 48 rivers and 102 branches and tributaries that stretch from Pennsylvania to Virginia, and 1750 miles of navigable waters. If you started at our home in Marion Station and laid all of the Chesapeake waterways end to end in a straight line, it would stretch as far west as the Rocky Mountains. Every morning when I look across this Chesapeake landscape I am inspired. Though Dan and I love to travel ... this rare place with its endless of shorelines, vast marshes and big skies – this place that we call home - is always on our minds. It's a magical landscape with a heart and a soul, and the lifeblood that courses through its veins is its people – past and present. It will always be home to us, and we are grateful to rest in the peace of its blessing.

Our family is well. Albert was promoted to Chief Petty Officer in the US Navy this year. It's big step for him, and we're so proud of his service. Dominic's doing great and has a new job doing marketing for his cousin Preston's company. It's allowed him to travel a bit. Our eldest grandchild, Benjamin became an Eagle Scout, graduated from high school, and enlisted in the US Army. Dan joined Becky, Harry and Connor to be at Ben's boot camp graduation in Georgia. Al and Ruthie came too. We know Becky will be crazy missing her son these next few years as he begins his assignment with the Army, but we also know it will be such an adventure for Ben. We're so proud of him.

Danny and Amber are still living on top of that mountain in Virginia raising their beautiful girls, Mia and Gracie.





*May the spirit of the Christ child be born in you this Christmas.  
Wishing you love, joy and blessings.*

*Dan and Mindie Burgoyne*



*Remembering you this Christmas  
with love and prayers.*

Amber is sticking it out through Pharmacology School with one more year to go. Mia told me she was a country girl at heart and I figure she is. While other little girls are singing, “Let it Go” from *Frozen* and pirouetting like proper princesses; our twin granddaughters sing *Rain is a Good Thing* and dancing to a country beat. (I’d never heard this song.) Imagine our surprise when these two 9-year-old sweethearts stood on the stage at the KOA Campground in Harpers Ferry, WV (it was karaoke night) and sang with spirit and confidence “Rain makes corn. Corn makes whiskey. Whiskey makes my baby feel a little frisky.” Yes they ARE country girls. And we love everything about them.

The twins spent a month with us this summer. We did ghost walks, met a lot of old friends, stayed endless hours on the beach, and even spent a night in an old haunted Victorian Inn with a tower. But, as always, the best memories were the simple conversations, the story telling, the wondering, the night walks, the bike rides. Every hour with them is a gift. They are deep thinkers with old souls, and Grampa and I miss them so when they go home.

Lara and David are enjoying their new home in Westminster. Tristan (aka Muffin Man) is constant entertainment. He’s in preschool now and just turned four. I asked him what he needed before he could become a man. He said, “A car .....a woman .... money.....and beer.” The biggest milestone of 2014 was the birth of his sister - grandchild #10 – Rosie. Primrose Serra English was born on January 14<sup>th</sup>, and I was fortunate to be able to watch her come into the world. Lara and David and I were in the hospital room talking, when the doctor came in, examined Lara and said, “Whoa. We’re ready. Get the

cart. We're having a baby." Five minutes later Rosie emerged with a clenched fist held up to her cheek as if to be warning the world not to mess with her. And she was a very serious baby, unwilling to smile on demand. She's more relaxed now and smiles often. She's starting to stand on her own, getting ready to take her first steps.

It seems that we spend our whole lives teaching them how to stand on their own. And we're so happy with every little milestone until suddenly, we realize that they made it. They grew up. The first steps, first day of school, first prom, first love, first car... they're all in the past and your baby's childlike innocence has faded into memory. While memories are great, it still stings a little to know that those special moments are over – gone – forever.

But grandchildren help take that sting away for us. The milestone experiences return, only they are magnified because we get to share them with the very ones who were once our little children. And we're all in this big love fest together and life is new again. I still marvel when I look at Lara's hands and remember how little they were, and how tight she'd hold onto my hand when she was scared. How she trusted me to keep her world in order. And now those little hands have morphed into big hands that are repeating the process with another generation. Today the little hands belong to Rosie and Tristan. Gosh, I don't feel old enough for this to be happening, but it's a joy just the same to see the traces of our own children woven into the bodies and spirits of our grandchildren. It helps us know who we are. Who we belong to. To recognize what matters. To look hopefully into the future.

I'm in my eleventh year of working for the State of Mary-

land, and we're still growing the new businesses we've established – Chesapeake Ghost Walks. In 2013 we did 29 ghost walks, and I wrote and guided them all. In 2014 we trained six guides, hired Lara to do the customer service and put on 130 ghost walks. We were even featured in the Washington Post's Travel section. I also got a 3-book deal with The History Press still featuring haunted sites on the Eastern Shore. Book #1 - *Haunted Ocean City & Berlin* was released in October. Books 2 and 3 will be released in 2015 and 2016. So we are blessed and thrilled with the success and looking hopefully to the new year.

2014 was also the first year we led two tours to Ireland. I led the May tour to Northern Ireland, and the highlight for me was visiting Tory Island – an inhabited island in the north Atlantic nine miles off the coast of Donegal. Like many of Ireland's offshore islands, Tory's landscape has been beaten by the elements into a stark, flat, rocky, yet enchanting island where there are sweeping views of the sea from almost every perspective. The island has 93 people living full time, and the landscape has inspired local (and non-local) artists to form the Tory Island Art School and gallery there. The artists say that the island has a spirit that moves them - inspires them to create. Almost all of the artists' renderings are of island landscapes, island life or island culture.

But Tory Island also has a king. Yes. No joke. There really is a king. It's a long-standing tradition modeling the days of the old clans. Patsy Dan Rodgers is the King of Tory Island, elected by the islanders to serve until his death. He met our boat at the port, and led our group on a private tour of the island telling stories about island life, flirting with the ladies

and giving us a chance to engage and “plug into” the island culture. After the tour the King popped into the pub, grabbed a drink and his button box, and joined other musicians outside in a set of traditional Irish music. And there in the street, the locals - one-by-one - began to dance ... just because there was music. Their entire heritage seemed to gather around them in those moments. It was such a rich experience. There are no pretenses with these people.

Dan went with me on the September Ireland tour, and there – on the tour - we celebrated our 15<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. On the anniversary day we took the group to Tintern Abbey in County Wexford. It is a restored ruin of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian abbey. In 1200, William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke (Wales) set sail for Ireland to assume his position as Lord of Leinster. But Marshall’s ship was wrecked and while he struggled not to drown, he made a promise to God, that if his life were spared, he would found an abbey wherever he safely landed. Marshall survived and established this abbey near where he washed up. He named it “Tintern” in honor of a famous abbey in his homeland –Tintern Abbey in Wales.

Being that this was a milestone anniversary, Dan and I gathered our tour guests on the grounds below the abbey and had a “handfasting” ceremony - an old Celtic marriage ritual. One of our guests, Kathy Sweeney presided over the ceremony while other guests tied the ribbons on our hands – one ribbon for each of our promises. Our very talented coach driver and dear friend, John O’Keeffe (from Cork) sang a beautiful Irish song. And there in the shadow of Tintern Abbey, Dan and I choose each other again, and vowed to walk through this crazy life together. The service was short, the weather was fine, and

the experience marked a new beginning for us – a new cycle of years. Here’s to another 15, and may we all meet again at Tintern in 2029.

The image on the front of our Christmas card is one that I shot of Tintern Abbey on that lovely anniversary day.

I’ll happily admit that there is no better partner for me than Dan Burgoyne. He is my soulmate and my inspiration, and his gentle support keeps me from spinning out of control. I know I’ll choose him again and again as these circles of life spin. Though we’ve weathered hardships and had to reinvent ourselves a few times, our spirits have been constant and are knitted tightly together. I can’t imagine life without him.

And it doesn’t seem like 15 years – or more than 15 – or less than 15. It seems like we’ve always been together. I suspect that we’ve got the wrong idea about time. Einstein said that time is an illusion – that we perceive time to be past, present and future because we live in aging bodies. But in reality there is no time... there just “is.” Our existence is circular, not linear. We follow spiral paths that ascend and descend as our trials and joys ebb and flow. All living things mirror that circle of time – the seasons, the sun, birth, life and death. And as one life passes out of this earthly existence, another life come in ... like Rosie, with so much promise. So much hope.

For me, Christmas also has timelessness about it. Even though it comes every year, it’s always a part of my existence. Every time I moved into a new home I imagined where the Christmas tree would go. I’d see things I thought the boys or Lara would throughout the year and tuck them away for Christmas. Christmas is something we’re always imagining – looking forward to. For the pagans, the solstice was the longest

night. It marked the shift in the year when the light started to come back again – when it began to outlast the darkness. It celebrated new life, a new year, and new beginnings. Christ’s birth mirrored the solstice – only Christ WAS the light, the promise incarnate – proclaiming that death wasn’t forever, and we could all be reborn. Life could be new again in him. And every year, on every Christmas that truth is restated. We can be reborn, no matter how old we get. Christmas reminds us that there is always a way to start again, to bury grievances, to shake bad energy, to become something new. It’s the lesson that all the songs and stories impart. Time stands still at Christmas, and we’re moved to consider new choices and promises for when the circles start to spin again.

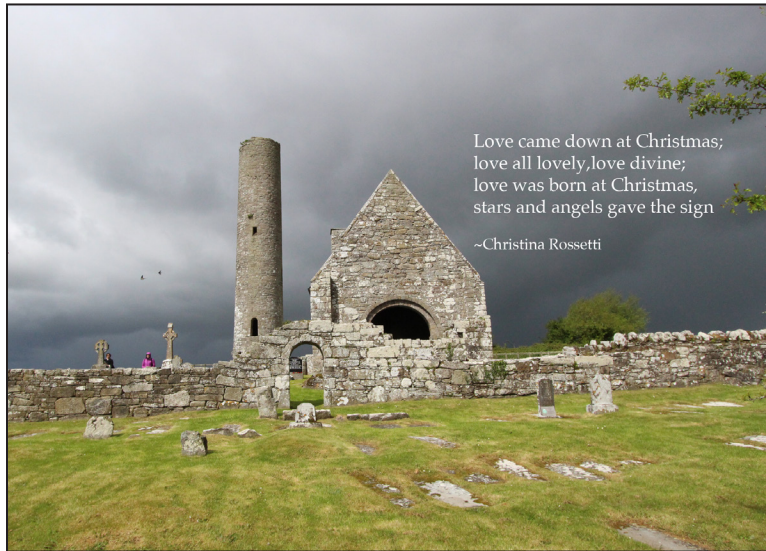
Last summer Gracie and I tried to count the stars one night. Once we discovered this was impossible she said, “If God made all the stars and all the people, and there might even be people on other planets ... how can he keep track of everything? How does he remember me?” I said, “I don’t know, Gracie. I just know that he does.” After a few seconds of silence, Gracie said, “There has to be a whole lot of stuff about God that we’ll never know.”

I agree with Gracie. And it seems the older I get, the less I understand. I figure the best we can do is clutch the common truths that we do understand and know that even though life may throw us hardships that can sometimes seem unbearable, there’s always hope – hope of reinvention, of shifting circumstances, of new love and new beginnings. As time circles around us, life will get better again. And the things that are always constant - love, hope and belief in something greater than ourselves – will sustain us.

Here’s to you and yours and to a new year of hope, health and peace. Dan and I wish you every blessing this Christmas and in the year to come. May your burdens be light. May your hopes be great. May love surround you, and joy fulfill you. And May God bless you and those you love. Merry Christmas, dear friends and family.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heidi". The script is cursive and fluid, with a prominent loop at the end of the name.

December 17, 2015



*Sending love and light from our family to yours. May peace and joy surround you this Christmas season, and may you have a happy and healthy new year.*

*Mindie and Dan Burgoyne*

Merry Christmas from Marion Station, our hometown on the east side of the Chesapeake where there are more chickens than people. Life is still good here, though very slow paced. We've been here for over 13 years now, and I know that I'll never return to the craziness of the Western Shore. Here on the Eastern Shore, people seem to live their lives rather than rush through them. There's time enough to experience each day, and savor it. That means something to Dan and me as we grow older. And though there may not be a lot of amenities and things to do, there are no lines to wait in, no traffic, no scathing headlines in our newspapers, and neighbors still reach out and help each other. It's a good life here.

This is the tenth year of my long Christmas missives. In my imagination I hear my mother saying, "These letters are too damn long. Who cares about all this boring crap?" I can't seem to help myself though. There are just so many things I want to say. But I will not bore you with the activities and happenings of every one of our six children and ten grandchildren. Instead I'll ask you to pray for our eldest grandson, Benjamin. He's stationed in Afghanistan this Christmas and naturally we worry about him. Such young people – most of them have only seen a little snippet of life and we're sending them halfway across the world to an unfriendly region and arming them to the teeth. Regardless of our opinions on the USA's military efforts, most of us can agree that it's damn worrisome to have these kids standing in harm's way so far away from home. And gosh ... we miss them at Christmas, when families are supposed to come together. God bless you and

keep you, Daniel Benjamin Coppage. We pray for you every day and look forward to your return.

This year Dan and I loaded up the camper and took our ten-year-old twin granddaughters, Mia and Grace on a road trip to Maine. If you haven't vacationed with ten-year-olds, I highly recommend it. They don't need much. They can take care of themselves. They're so easy to please and entertain, and they magnify all the good stuff that we take for granted. Everything is awesome when you're ten, and at this age they still think we're fun and wise. We didn't do anything extravagant – no amusement parks, museums, go carts, miniature golf, movies - none of that. We made do with what we found in our surroundings, and I wasn't exhausted when it was over. The simple joys of spending time with these two - talking, sharing, listening and watching them have fun –it was enough to fill our summer days and our memories.

We pitched camp in Stonington on Deer Isle and stayed there for six days. Deer Isle is just south of Mount Desert Island where Acadia National Park is situated along with Bar Harbor and thousands of tourists. Deer Isle is quieter with a thriving arts community and a strong working class. We found a great waterfront campground there years ago, and we were excited to return there with the girls. We never ventured too far. Our site was right at the water's edge on Stonington Harbor, which is one of the largest archipelagos in the eastern United States. We fell asleep to the call of loons and the sound of the water lapping at the shore beneath us. We awoke to foggy sunrises and the buzz of the lobster boats leaving the harbor. The twins loved fishing with Grandpa, cooking over the fire, eating lobster, swimming and kayaking, and riding their bikes

down to the camp store to buy candy and torment the staff. We visited Nervous Nellies and danced in the woods with life-size sculptures of knights, witches, giants and kings. We drove past E.B. White's house in Blue Hill and saw the reversing falls nearby. We found heart shaped stones on the beach, swam in an old quarry (the girls did anyway) and learned all about the pink granite that was mined in Stonington and Deer Isle and how it appears in many famous places such as the Statue of Liberty and the tomb of President John F. Kennedy. We also took time out to visit Dan's brothers in Carmel, ME, which is always so much fun. After that visit Mia told me that she was glad she got to meet "real" Maine people where they talk that different language because most of the ones in Stonington just sounded like us. Occasionally Grandpa would entertain them by slipping into the "Maineiac" dialect - just for fun.

This was also the first year I've led three tours to Ireland. While many associate Ireland with Guinness, pubs, leprechauns, men with tweed hats, fields of sheep and children with red curly hair – a brand my friend Tony Kirby calls "Shamrockery" – I'm drawn to Ireland's ancient standing stones, holy wells and old ruins that cling to long lost memories. The land literally pulses with energy. The Irish people, past and present, have this innate sense of a world that exists just beyond our present world, and an understanding of those liminal spaces where the two worlds come together - where we walk in two worlds. We call these places "thin places." These are places like the Burren, Connemara, the Sperrin Mountains, the Hill of Uisneagh. I'm forever trying to put into words why I love that country so much and why I keep going back. It's not my home – Maryland is my home. But Ireland has some kind of pull or

draw with a mystical, subtle essence that has gotten under my skin. The landscape is ever changing. In minutes it can shift from gloomy drizzle to blue skies and cloud-filtered light that illuminates every element of the landscape. And even today, tokens of devotion litter the countryside. In every county you can find clooties and rags left on fairy trees; medals, coins and candles left behind at shrines. They are all signs of a people who come to particular places in Ireland to mark them as sacred - to reach through the veil and touch the other side with a prayer or an intention.

The image on the front of our card shows an 11<sup>th</sup> century church and round tower on Inis Caealtra – “Holy Island” in east Clare. This little island in the middle of Lough Derg has the ruins of seven churches and a holy well that were originally part of a monastic settlement founded by St. Caimin. It is a site we feature on our tours because it is surely one of those thin places. I shot this photo when our tour group visited there in May. Ten minutes before I took this picture, our guests were standing in the middle of a freezing rainstorm – getting pelted by hailstones. We had no place to run for shelter. We were totally exposed to the elements out on Inis Caeltra, and could do nothing but absorb the brunt of that storm. The storm ended as quickly as it began, and when the sun came out and lit up those old stones, I grabbed a quick shot just as the storm was moving away from the island. The raw beauty that became ours in the silence after that storm was worth all of the pelting. The exhilarations, the sense of wonder and the energy inside moments like that is why I keep returning to Ireland, and why I love bringing people with me.

We'll be going back again with two tours in 2016 – *Western*

*Edges* in May where we'll explore the western coast of Ireland from Donegal to Dingle, and *Discover the North* in September where we'll visit that unspoiled northern landscape that so few visitors ever get see. Consider joining us. We've taken a lot of our friends on past tours.

This year has also been a tough year for Dan and me – a year of losses. For eleven years we've had three big dogs – a Newfoundland and two yellow labs. Our old Newfy, Fergus lived well past the life expectancy of this giant breed, and he finally passed away in January. Two months later, one of our lab girls – the most faithful dog I've ever had - followed Fergus over that rainbow bridge. There was no sign of any illness or problems with her before Fergus died. She just faded away once Fergus left us. They are both buried together out by the barn. Dan planted a rose bush over their graves. Sometimes I forget they're gone and I expect to hear them barking and running for the car when I come down the drive. That's hard. We miss them so. For those who think animals don't have souls and don't go to heaven, I say “Nonsense!” What kind of heaven would it be if Fergus and Grainne weren't there to greet us?

There was more sadness in 2015. I lost my sister Peggy in January. She had just turned 66 and was so enjoying life in retirement with her husband, Lee and their children and grandchildren. Then one day, she was gone. She suffered a heart attack and died quickly. Peggy and I didn't grow up together. We didn't meet until I was in my thirties, but we conversed nearly every day on Facebook. Peggy opened the door to a wonderful family that I never knew I had. I am so blessed to know so many of my Corcoran relatives, though I miss the sister that brought them to me. And shortly after



Peggy passed, my dear friend Vickie lost her battle with cancer and left two young boys without their mother. The hardest part of this loss was not just losing my friend. It was knowing how badly Vickie fought to live to be there for her boys – and how worried she was about leaving them. There’s no way to make sense of things like this. Then in October, Dan was diagnosed with a brain aneurism and we’ve been working through the best treatment for that. It’s inoperable and it could be that he’s had it for a long time. So we are eating better and trying to get healthy and cherishing all the moments in between hoping that the aneurism will behave itself and allow Dan to live a good long life.

Now that I’ve typed the two biggest “downer” paragraphs ever put into a Christmas letter, I will note that we are very happy. The losses have only helped Dan and me realize that all we ever have is now. No one is promised tomorrow, so living

in the moment is what we strive for and it makes us happy. Every day we tell each other how grateful we are for the presence of the other. So there amidst the bills, the house, the yard, the cars, the headaches with the day job, ups and downs with the kids and health issues we find peace in knowing that those things are mere decorations in our life. The real stuff of our life is a thread of love that connects us. And every day, that thread flexes and tightens as our emotions rise and fall. But it’s strong. And it’s giving us strength so long as we recognize that love - the tie that binds - is all that matters. When we hold on to this and try to live in the moment, all those “decorations” fade into the background of our life. We’re faring well with abundant blessings

I love the Christina Rossetti phrase printed on the front of this card because it links this same concept of living in the moment to understanding that some moments transcend time. The moment Christ was born – the world changed forever. Even non-Christians and non-believers can be inspired by the Christmas story. The birth of the Christ child. A gift from one world to the next manifested as a naked baby born in a barn with no possessions. There were no clothes for him, no home, no influential parents, and no trappings of the world - just complete humility enshrined in the most perfect symbol of hope, love and all that is good ... a newborn baby. This is the infant who became the threshold linking the two worlds forever. He is the reminder that we are loved and not forgotten by the loving Creator who made us. And every element of the Christmas story has meaning. All the characters get to visit the baby– the rich and the wise (Kings), and the poor and simple (shepherds) demonstrating that the “gift” is for all of us. No



*December 14, 2016*

one is left out. Then the eternal world blesses the birth with a great shining star and choirs of angels celebrate in song. And the story happens just after the darkest and longest night of the year – the winter solstice. The Christ child’s birth marks the end of the dark times and introduces a season of light.

There are so many messages and teachings that we can take away from the simple Christmas story, but the message we’re hearing loud and clear this year is that no matter how dark the days get, the light will come and there is always hope. And just on the other side of that veil separating this world from the eternal world is a Creator who is constantly reaching through with love, support and gifts of hope. If we look with our hearts, we’ll see the reaching. And if you, dear friends and family are receiving this Christmas letter, then we are recognizing you as being one of those gifts He gives to us. Please know how special you are to Dan and me, and how much better our lives are for having you in them.

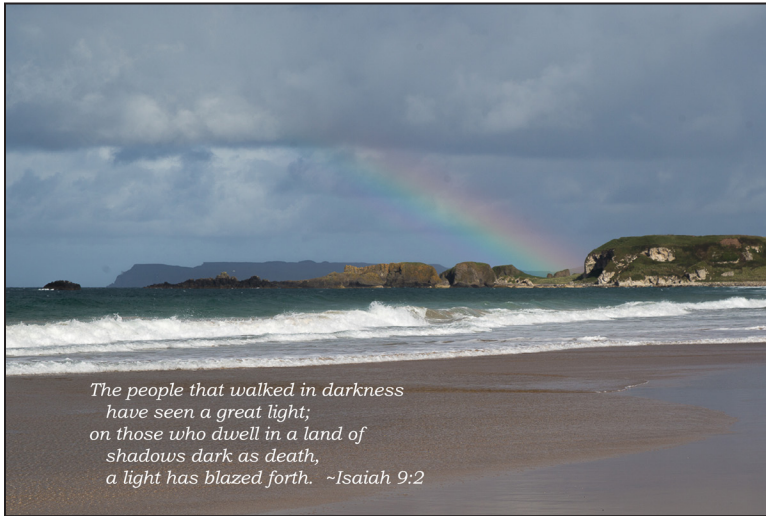
May God bless you and those you love this Christmas.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heidi". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small dot above the 'i'.

Merry Christmas from Marion Station, our little remnant of an old railroad town on the Eastern Shore. It’s quiet here, and now that the tourists have gone, I can sometimes drive the seven miles out to the highway without seeing a single car. The only sounds here after 8pm are barking dogs that neighbors have let out one last time before they go to bed. Living here still suits us. We love the quiet and the gentle waterways and the endless marshes and the trumpeter swans and our friends and this old haunted house.

A colleague asked me a few weeks ago, “What gives you joy.” I said, “Christmas.” She said, “But that’s only one day.” I said, “That’s true. But it still brings me joy.” No matter what our life situation, I always welcome Christmas. There’s something about the tree with white lights covered with decorations that chronicle my family’s existence. From the little ceramic Santa bell that my mother had before I was born, to the ornaments my grandmother gave me, to the tiny pinecones Dominic and Daniel decorated in nursery school, to each of my children’s “Baby’s First Christmas” ornaments ... and the ones we bought on vacation and the ones the grandchildren have made for us ...my whole life and everything good in it is represented on that tree. How could that not bring me joy? The music, the colors, Santa Claus and the kids screaming on his lap, the toys, the hopes, the anticipation, the Salvation Army volunteers ringing their bells outside of Acme... all of it brings me joy. I wish for that joy for you this season.

The children are doing well and the grandchildren brighten our lives when we get to see them. Danny and Amber and



*May the promise of Christmas fill your days,  
and the joy of Christmas fill your hearts.  
We wish you every blessing this holiday season  
and throughout the new year.*

*May God bless you and those you love,*

*Dan and Mindie Burgoyne*

the twins moved to Florida this year. We miss them terribly, but they're all very happy and that's what's important. Dan still struggles with his health issues, but he pushes himself and is happy to do what he can. He's a trooper. He wanted to go to Ireland so I booked him on our September tour of the north. After the tour was over we hopped on a plane to Paris and celebrated our anniversary there – just the two of us. We ate dinner on the left bank, and as we walked back to our hotel this skinny kid on one of those bicycle-rickshaws stopped us and asked if we wanted a moonlight tour of the city personally guided by him. His bicycle connected to a 2-seater, red velvet cushioned bench with a fringed roof looked fragile, and he looked like he weighed about 100 lbs. I looked his little puny self and thought, “Buddy, there is no way you'll be able to pull our fat bodies around town in that thing.” He must have read my mind because he quickly said, “I am strong. Get in.”

We piled in to his little horseless surrey with the fringe on top, and he proceeded to give us a comprehensive tour of old Paris. As promised – in the moonlight saw Notre Dame Cathedral, the Conciergerie where Marie Antoinette was imprisoned, the Champs Elysées, the Louvre and finally the Eiffel Tower, which was so bright under that black Paris sky. What a magical time that was – unforgettable. We were so lucky to share those moments on our anniversary. And that kid driving the rickshaw! His commentary was remarkable, and the way he maneuvered that thing in and out of traffic...he never lost speed or even seemed tired. Of course, about ten minutes into the ride I realized that there was a motor on the bike that he could switch on when needed – which was most of time.

The next day we boarded a train and headed for Brittany

– the part of France known for its Celtic influence. The most impressive site for us was the Stones of Carnac. 3000 standing stones erected 5000 years ago - positioned in long parallel lines resembling a marching army. An old legend states the stones were once pagan soldiers chasing a pope. But the pope got tired of running and was about to reach the sea, so he turned all of the soldiers into stone right where they stood. And they're still there frozen in that moment - 5000 years later waiting for the curse to be broken. After we saw the Carnac stones we took a ride along the coast. There's a particular spot on that drive where the water violently swirls around the cliffs. This spot is known as La Cote Sauvage – The Savage Coast. The photo of Dan and me on the inside of the Christmas card was taken there ... another great memory of 2016.

This year has been a tough one for us. Dan struggles with constant pain, but he plods through. He does what he can and enjoys reading and beekeeping. He can laugh at himself, and he makes me laugh every single day. I'm still working for the State of Maryland but also trying to grow the Ireland tour business and Ghost Tour business and write one book a year. Lara does all the administrative work for the ghost tours and is a great help, but the schedule is tough and I'm tired. Hopefully we'll be able to hire some help this year and I can relax a bit. I dream of the time when I get less than 100 emails a day. If I haven't answered your text, your phone call, your email, your Facebook or Twitter message --- please keep trying. I'm drowning here.

The photo on our card this year is of Whitepark Bay in County Antrim, Northern Ireland. I took the photo shortly after walking down the cliff face with our guests on tour this



past September. This isn't just any beach. They say that the sand sings at Whitepark Bay – and I've heard it a few times ... but not every time. This little enchanted beach on the Antrim Coast is strange like that. You never know what little miracle you'll get when you visit there. The stones you see on the right side of the photo are the beginning of a cliff face that winds around in a semicircle creating this sweet little sheltered bay along the wild Atlantic coastline. Scotland is just a few miles out to sea. That ring of cliffs that rise up from the beach are said to have ancient tombs embedded in them. There is also a dolmen –a megalithic tomb -on a hill above the cliffs across the road. The ancients believed Whitepark Bay was a sacred place. They had rituals there and perhaps buried important people there. Those cliffs bordering the beach have a high chalk content, which also appears in the fine sand below.

Sometimes when the wind whips around that horseshoe of cliffs, it disturbs the chalky sand and causes the sand to vibrate. The vibration makes a soft noise, and if you listen closely you can hear the subtle hum of the sand singing in the wind.

On the day this photo was taken we didn't hear the sand sing. Once we reached the beach, my group of guests fell into a natural rhythm of walking meditation. It wasn't anything I asked them to do. Whitepark Bay brings out a kind of reverence in walkers. Few of them spoke. Several wandered off. All seemed to be inspired... to be filled with wonder. Then the rainbow appeared. It seemed so close. Everyone was snapping photos. I just stared for a minute and the rainbow seemed to pulse, like it was talking.

Rainbows always capture our imaginations and get us thinking. They are symbolic in every culture. When a rainbow appears, we wonder, "Is it a sign? A promise?" Maybe rainbows are just rainbows and have no deeper meaning. None of us really knows. But it's okay not to be sure. It's the not knowing but still wondering that fosters faith. I don't think faith comes to us because someone tells us that there is a God and that we should believe certain things. I think faith comes in the "not being sure"... in the imagining... in considering the possibilities. It's during that process of wondering that we use our intuition. Then one thought leads to another, and a kind of emotional poetry is born. Revelations occur, and suddenly...we understand one new thing.

To me, rainbows are symbolic of a mystical place beyond this world – yet still in this world. I developed that association during a crazy, unexpected life-changing five minutes at a Christian Booksellers Association trade show in 1995. It was

lunchtime, and the tradeshow floor was deserted. I was manning our booth, and a tall priest walked into our space. He didn't speak to me or look at me. I walked over to him to see if he needed help. He picked up the book "Sacraments of Life" and then looked up at me as I approached him. I never saw such sad eyes... big round brown eyes. I thought he might cry. I tried to break the tension of the moment by saying, "Great book, Father." He nodded, then gently put the book down and left. It was so strange. He had such an energy about him – a good energy, almost loving... but so sad.

About an hour later, I went over to where they were serving lunch. There was a speaker who was talking about rainbows. He said that he'd been kidnapped and held hostage and tortured. He said that he was held in a kitchen for a while, and that sometimes he would cry out of sheer loneliness. Then he would look out the window of his kitchen prison and see the birds in their freedom swooping and diving about, and he would sing to himself "Somewhere over rainbow..." and dream of home and being free ... like those birds. The speaker was Fr. Martin Jenco, a Catholic priest who was kidnapped by terrorists in Beirut in 1985. He was tortured in unspeakable ways and held for 19 months before he was released and sent home. He had just published his book, "Bound to Forgive" and was a featured speaker at the conference. He was also the priest that was in my booth – the one with the sad eyes. And even though it was a small part of the story, I never forgot what he said about rainbows. His vision became my vision in that moment and I can't undo it. I wanted to follow up with him after the conference and tell him how much his speech moved me. But I put it off and he died the following year.

Fr. Jenco and his little comment about rainbows reminded me that not everyone is joyful at Christmas. Some people don't have the big families or the traditions to celebrate. Some are broke or addicted or missing loved ones or living with pain and illness or the frustration of not having time to get things done. Christmas always magnifies the drama in our lives – good and bad. Sometimes I look around at Christmastime and wonder where the time went. When did I lose these kids? They're all grown up busy with their own lives, but somehow in my mind part of them is still little...yet they're gone. When did that happen, and how did I NOT notice?

It's just Dan and me on Christmas morning now, and while we are so fortunate to have each other, sometimes I miss the kids and it's a bit lonely. I struggle to get things done and fail. And I get a little melancholy too. But the symbols give me comfort, as do the memories. And though the rainbow isn't a symbol of Christmas, for me it represents that realm just beyond this one where time doesn't exist and no one grows old or struggles with pain, and love sustains us and connects us even though the miles separate us. And that is why I chose this photo of Whitepark Bay and its rainbow for this year's card. Please see this gift of the rainbow as a blessing from us to you, for you are either a special friend or part of our family.

When we think about it, the Christmas story is packed with everything we dread - angst, pain, poverty, abandonment... the homeless baby with no clothes, the unwed mother who has to leave her home town, the foster father who knows the baby isn't his and is worried about keeping his family safe, being refused when you're desperate for help, being turned out in the cold, running from persecutors who want to kill your

child. What could be worse? But there is a joyful side – a much more hopeful side, and the story ends with a great promise. The joy and hope are in the symbols woven into the story – the angels singing, the lowly shepherds being the first to hear the good news, the bright star in the night sky that cannot be overcome by the darkness, and the wise men bringing gifts. But no symbol is as powerful as the new baby... the baby, who like the rainbow is simultaneously of two worlds – this one and the one just beyond this one. He brings the promise that our suffering will be lifted by love – his love. It's always present and always greater than the burdens we shoulder. His love will connect us to all of the good things that never fade away - that are constant in this life and in the next. We're never too old or too flawed to be reborn into that love. This is our wish for you this Christmas, special friend or loved one.

Dan and I wish you every blessing and much happiness in the coming weeks. May all of your prayers be answered May your new year be happy, healthy and prosperous, and may God bless you and those you love this Christmas.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nindie". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small dot above the 'i'.

