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Boy have I dropped the ball. It suddenly occurred to me that I haven't written in months, not since January it appears. I'm sorry about that, but for those of you who haven't heard, How began new employment in February. It's a little manufacturing company of various products and he is the manager of program management for the company.

It's a lousy salary, embarrassingly low but in these economic times, it's a job and we're grateful for the opportunity. It barely covers our monthly bills. I haven't bought any clothes or whatnot for myself in a couple of years or so. I suppose that's good, but once in awhile a girl has to splurge, right? Well, not now.

The weather has been the most trying to me. The cold has stayed with us longer than usual. In fact, they say it has been colder than at any time in fifty years. Today, however, was humid and sunny. Finally, a little summer has cropped up. But you can tell the weather has wrecked havoc on our plants and trees. It's as though their time clocks have been messed up and they don't know whether to bloom or not.

My hydrangea tree is half blooming, half bare; so is a red maple tree we planted when we first moved here. The two willows we planted are doing just great and I think in two years they will be decent size trees to provide some shade in the spacious backyard. It's so expansive that we hire a lawn company to manage it because it spares How about 3 hours cutting it on his own. These guys come with their sit down tractors and mow it in less time than he could. The cost per month could fetch me a new pair of shoes, but I figure it's better spent on relieving How of managing the damn lawn. When we return to California (yeah, right) we'll be sure to pay attention to details like how much lawn you have to deal with. I have to say that when we bought this house, we were delighted at how much land we had in the backyard, not realizing how arduous it is to take care of.

One of the first things we did, however, was to install a sprinkler system. Most of our other neighbors move a sprinkler around by hand and I knew that due to senior moments, one portion of our lawn would be drowned while others would remain parched. Not very efficient, so we did at least that much for ourselves.

I'm on vacation from both of my singing groups (temple and church on Sundays) you know, my normal routine as before and it's fortunate that I do that because it gets me out of the house. One other thing that I do is that I am part of a group attached to the central state Area Agency on Aging. I attend the main group meetings and participate on a sub-committee of that group having to do with transportation and physical infrastructure for the city of Buffalo, population of over 10,000.

Right now that committee is submerged with community development issues in the downtown area and the subject on the table at present has to do with signage left dangling on vacated buildings which slum lord owners won't remove. Since I co-chair that committee, I studied the sign ordinance and discovered that no provision was available about removal of signs so I suggested that a recommendation come from the chamber of commerce to add a provision to the sign ordinance about removal. That's now before the city council.

Next, once we've added some teeth to the ordinance about removal, we're going to take one of the buildings and do a makeover of the façade with volunteer help and materials. The downtown area looks like a ghost town. Too many for sale signs or for lease. But that gives a false impression that the whole city is depressed like that, which it isn't. Too complicated to explain, but part of what we also do is deal with walk ability surveys, for example, to see if seniors can shop conveniently from one place to another. We deal with a lot of issues and all of that gets me out of the house –twenty-six miles away each way, but away from the house.

We've established some wonderful relationships with special people, mostly from temple and the church choir and we're very tight with our next door Afghani neighbors. Imagine...a Moslem and Jewish family living side by side in absolute harmony, while the rest of the neighborhood we barely know. Very weird. However, one thing you can count on is if you drive past someone, they will wave to you. They may not talk to you or come visit you, but they will wave to you as you drive by –a common Minnesotan trait.

The closer you get to the Twin Cities, the more engaged people are and diverse. Out here in Howard Lake and beyond, it's farm country. Ah, the smell of manure wafts through the air along with the invariable run-over skunk. Beer drinking and country music are cultural icons around here. You see a lot of ads on TV for hard liquor and beer, which you don't see in California. Yet, everybody closes down –the liquor stores, car dealerships and most small businesses on Sunday, observing “blue” laws so people can go to church. That makes it hard on observant Jews who have one weekend day (Sunday) to do their shopping and restocking for the week. For us, we put off shopping errands to the very end because we have to travel so far even to buy groceries.

Everyone tells us “move closer.” Yeah, right. For our current house it would cost us 4 times what we paid for it to move closer to Minneapolis. You think prices are bad in California? You should see it in and around the Twin Cities. Added to that, Minnesota is a high property tax state and don't let anyone tell you, you can live inexpensively in Minnesota. It costs just as much to live here as in California, except they don't pay you as well. The excuse you always hear is, “But we're not California. It's cheaper to live here.” Trust me, it's a myth. You do the same job, but getting paid 30% less than your California counterpart.

I finished my first real commission for a kitchen cabinet company recently and quoted on a 28-window commission for a Catholic church. I'm on the wire for another commission, a Hospice facility not built yet because fundraising will start in November to raise the million dollars they need to build it, but the powers that be want me to do the windows, whatever and whenever that will be. Meanwhile, since my back is nearly 100% I'm back in the studio doing some painting and firing. I designed a new window for an art exhibit our temple is having celebrating its 125th anniversary. It's one of the oldest temples in the Midwest and we feel fortunate to be members. They have over 1200 families and they do a great job staying connected with everyone. They were wonderful to Howard when his mother died.

For those of you who haven't heard, How's mother died suddenly and unexpectedly in her sleep this past April. My father-in-law was devastated. Imagine waking up next to your spouse and finding them not breathing. In fact, this will go down as a bad year because we've had some deaths in the family, among friends and acquaintances. My father-in-law just turned 85 and he recently buried his only living relative of his generation. How hard and lonely he must feel approaching the end of his life and being the only one left standing?

And because of my mother-in-law's passing, my eldest Moana decided to leave San Francisco and live with her grandfather in LA. She transferred from her old job at Starbucks and took her counterpart's job in Burbank supporting the regional vice president. She celebrates her 34th birthday today.

Lily was one week away from moving kit and kittle to the island of Maui, but decided at the last minute that it wasn't such a hot idea after all so she is still in Santa Cruz working for Verizon. It's a big company, but turnover is very high. Lily will have been there 4 years this coming January. They treat their employees (mostly kids) terribly making them meet these impossible quotas to sell new phones and upgrades while threatening them with firing if they don't meet it. The stress is unimaginable and cruel, I think, not to mention abusive and exploitive.

Asher is selling real estate and getting married this coming April. It will be a big “chuppah” (Jewish) wedding and I'm making the chuppah for them. We like the girl Jennifer, very sweet and family oriented. She has a two-year old son which means we get a grandson in the bargain. He's very cute and a bit of a terror...well, he's two-years old, what do you expect? But we love him already.

Asher's daughter Destiny, our granddaughter just turned 8 years old. We know...we can't believe it either. She's in third grade and loves school. She's a prodigious reader, reading 2-3 grades above her level and she knows it. She's quite proud of that feat as are we.

That's about it for now. I'll try to write sooner instead of eight months later. Oh, one other thing. I finished writing a book and I'm planning on self-publishing through a company in Canada. They do professional work and the final product will end up looking like any newly released book you see in Borders or Barnes & Noble.

Needless to say we miss everyone. I can't wait to get back living closer to our friends and relatives. We never realized how much we would miss the people we saw everyday of our lives in Santa Cruz. Sometimes I'll be walking somewhere and I'll see someone I think I know and then suddenly realize in a heart sick second that

it's not the person I thought it was. It happens to me all the time and I hate it. Here's wishing you all a wonderful fall and happy holidays that is to follow. Hopefully I will have written before then...Love, Maria

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