

Cassie & Selwyn Tillett

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Dear friends

How was it for you? Whenever we compose these daft missives, we cast our thoughts out to all those we communicate with. We might not have seen you for six months, or six years, or thirty years, but our affectionate memories of whatever jigsaw pieces we've shared still make up our lives today.

For us, 2013 has been rather more of a mixed bag than most. There have been fabulous highs and deeply sad lows, continuing good health and inconvenient injuries, wonderful serendipity and annoying mistakes. Like most years, we suppose – only more so.

Well, we'll start with Christmas 2012. It was a complete joy to have Cassie's sister Jenny, with her lovely fella Carl and children Jack and Samantha, spending the whole of the festive season with us for the first time in, ooh, about 17 years. We shared cookery and domesticity, gift-shopping, family and friend meetings, photography and outings.



And, of course, there was That Birthday. Cassie knew that there was to be a 'do' of some kind – after all, she was asked to provide her ideal guest list – but not who would actually be there, and what would be happening. In the event, it was an ecstatically happy evening. With the stalwart support of Kim (who was staying with us while her new house was built) and dear friends Dorothy & Milton – mostly doing the preparatory work while the Rev was on sabbatical – a great gang of folks ate, drank, entertained and were entertained, from all corners of our lives. There were theatrical friends and parishioners from London and Norfolk, clients-become-friends, and many more. There was amazing music and comedy – some from very unexpected contributors... and (much to the kid sister's embarrassment) the birthday girl was invited to the stage to give a rendition of *Broadway Baby* at the end of the evening. **The Cake** – created by the talented Angela Rowe – was a triumph of death-by-chocolate and topped with a buxom lady in a vivid dress (can't imagine why). It was gleeful, riotous, special, emotional and wonderful.

It was just as well that the **snow** didn't start for another week or so. From mid to end January, we had spectacular scenery and photographs to make up for being snowed in – no doubt many friends had much of the same.



There were several celebrations among our friends this year in which we were delighted to share. Our ridiculously lovely & talented friend **Rachel** reached forty, and almost every gift fed her bling habit; we managed at last to attend a reunion of the choir from Peterhouse (35 years) with a beautiful Evensong followed by a magnificent meal in the college; our lovely local retired priest, Peter, who helps Selwyn in so many ways, celebrated fifty years of marriage to Margaret; and in July we attended the most glorious, unusual, charming and beautiful wedding celebration ever, for our very dear friends Lou & Andy. Finally, Cassie felt all of her years when Kendra – who, with her two sisters, Cassie has been photographing since the girls were all babies – got married. Ouch.





The year's theatregoing was as enthusiastic as ever, and as enjoyable. It's startling to realise that 2013 saw us attending eight films, five professional shows, and twenty-two 'amateur' (for which read: done for love) events. Highlights included *Pulling Faces*, a splendid one-woman show starring **Louise Jameson** and directed by long-ago colleague at Bretton Hall, Nigel Fairs, in the lovely Granary Theatre in Wells; Derren Brown's visit (a gift from Kim) to the Theatre Royal (the man is a disturbing, entertaining, enthralling genius, and utterly terrifying); and *Gabriel* (think Purcell meets *The Canterbury Tales*) at Shakespeare's Globe, with long-standing friend & musical colleague, Stephen Brown, providing superb tenor solos.

At the Maddermarket and the Sewell Barn – our local theatre groups – we were treated to the usual wide range and generally high standards, but outstanding favourites were *God of Carnage*, *When the Rain Stops Falling*, *Airswimming*, *New Electric Ballroom* and *Festen*. You may well not have heard of any of these, but trust us – if you've the opportunity to see an unknown piece of theatre, take it. It may be an experience you'd regret missing. All of these shows demonstrated a quality of production and an intensity of performance that blew us away.

So what about our own performances? After all, nary a year goes by without a degree of Tillett show-offery. Well, there was less than usual in 2013. That which we did was under the guise of Vocal Score – our Norfolk reincarnation of Chimes Musical Theatre, creating concerts for charitable events and having a lot of musical fun doing so. In February we were thrilled by the hugely enthusiastic response to ***This Thing Called Love*** – a celebration of Valentine's Day, natch – and our cast (the two of us plus six gorgeous local performers) had a great time romping through the theme, from jazzy to comedic to cynical to (of course) sexy. In August, Rachel & Martyn joined Selwyn & Cassie again, and with special guests Leon Berger (baritone, London) and Robert Osborne (clarinet, Wales) we had a whale of a time recreating a celebration of the music of Flanders & Swann.



There was supposed to be another show. Cassie's last board-treading had been as Maria Helliwell in *When We Are Married* in the summer of 2011. She was thrilled to be cast back at the Maddermarket for *London Assurance* (an insane farce, early 19th century) as the superbly-named Lady Gay Spanker. Better still, she was to be 'married' to the lovely Rob Morris (director of *I Am A Camera* in 2009) and 'seduced' (unsuccessfully) by the irrepressible Noel Jones (George to her Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in the same year).

Unfortunately, it didn't work out that way. We were a bit over halfway through rehearsals when, on 3rd June, an innocent walk through the Norfolk countryside ended in disaster. Taking one of her usual photographs of the scenery, Cassie stepped back from the grass verge onto the road to continue the walk, failed to notice the pothole, and turned her ankle sharply (decking herself completely, and breaking her camera in the process). Completely unable to walk, she hailed a passing motorist, got back to the Rectory, and called every Weston Longville number stored in her phone (the Rev being out at a meeting) to go to Casualty. The first three were out of the house: but #4, Ruth, was magnificent and took care of her until Selwyn could get there. **The ankle was hugely swollen** and turned an interesting colour. It turned out to be a serious sprain, not a break; and it was very clear that walking – or acting – were off the agenda for the foreseeable future. Distraught calls to the director followed, and thankfully an experienced Maddermarket actress, Susan Seddon, was able to take over the part with just over two weeks to learn it.



The ankle has continued to be a pain – in every sense. For the first two weeks, no walking was possible; then a walking stick was used for another month or so; It took around 3-4 months before serious discomfort eased off, and even now – six months on – it's still annoying and occasionally painful. Ho-hum.



Well, that was a tricky one. Let's get back to some happier reports. Like holidays, for example. As ever, we descended on the aforementioned Dot & Milton – this time for our post-Easter crashout – and indulged in the familiar, delightful round of too much shopping, eating and drinking... Our summer break was spent in a wonderful self-catering cottage – **Beudy Bryn Celyn at Llanymynech** - which we'd long admired online but never been able to book, due to its popularity, on the Wales/Shropshire border near Oswestry. We were treated to some lovely weather in which to enjoy the stunning countryside, enjoyed the comfort and excellent design of the cottage, and spent happy evenings doing initial work on our Music Hall project for 2014 (more of that in a moment).

The Benefice continues to keep the Rev as busy as ever. He concluded his term as Rural Dean in March, but the usual demands of rural ministry leave little breathing space. Some delightful events, as ever: the bi-annual Swannington in Bloom event was favoured with stunning weather, and raised a staggering £8,000 in a single afternoon to be divided between the church and the village play-scheme; Weston Longville hosted a magical afternoon of **teddy-bear abseiling** from the church tower; and we welcomed the Cantilena Choir, the Taverham (Brass) Band, and the choir of Gresham's School, for excellent concerts in various of our churches. Oh, and of course there was the now annual visit from Dot & Milton to assist with our local Quiz Evening – for which they set the (sometimes fiendish) questions.



On a more sober note, we like to use this letter to commemorate some of those 'jigsaw pieces' who have passed on in the last twelve months. From our days in Beddington, we have lost two exceptional characters: Eileen England and Pat Kingsbury – redoubtable women both, whom we were privileged to know. Steph McMillan was responsible for dressing the sets for two of our Vocal Score concerts, which she did with the same professionalism and attention to detail as she brought to her Oscar-winning work on the sets of the Harry Potter films. Jim Hobson was the beloved husband of Sewell Barn director, actress and friend, Jenny. Finally, Ben Stillwell (aged 97) was one of Selwyn's extended Tillett family, discovered through genealogical research, who we were blessed to have known. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

It's difficult to talk about the next bit, but necessary. Last year's letter mentioned that Cassie's father, Nick, had continued to deteriorate with his senile dementia, and the practical and emotional difficulties this caused. In the summer, things started to get worse, with nocturnal wanderings, increasingly difficult moods, several falls, and the start of 'toileting problems'. When, in October, he was taken into hospital as a result of a fall which had caused swelling to the knee, Peggy finally was forced to accept that it was no longer possible to care for him at home. Two weeks after the fall, he was transferred to Dorrington House, a care home in Dereham, where he will remain. As this letter is written, he continues to recognise Cassie, her mother Peggy, and sister Jenny - and Selwyn, when he is with Cassie - but other people out of context start to defeat him. The condition still allows him, however, to remember events of many decades past, and even to correctly identify photographs; the longer ago something or somebody was part of his life, the more likely he is to remember it. Mercifully, he is mostly quite calm, accepts where he is, eats and sleeps well; but he has all but forgotten how to walk, is incontinent, and has little grasp of time or place. Occasionally there is still a glimpse of the humorous, intelligent gentleman that he was.

The emotional fallout for Peggy, who is now living alone for the first time in her eighty years and after 57 years of marriage, is very difficult. It was wonderful and encouraging to have a visit from Jenny (all the way from southern Spain) in November, and she was a tower of strength. It's a horrible situation, and we are learning the hard way that the families of dementia sufferers are bereaved many times over. We'll be visiting him at the home at Christmas, but it would be bewildering (and physically impossible) for him to leave the place, even for a few hours; so the empty chair will be a feature of this Christmas. We're sorry that it makes for such sad reading; but it's been such a huge part of our lives in the last few months that it wouldn't be right to leave it out.

Returning to happier matters: a few words about a very special friend. Kim shared an great day with Cassie: **sailing with Cassie's uncle Bob**. We'd experienced this two years previously, and were so glad to have the chance to do it again. This time, we met Bob at Brightlingsea (Essex), sailed far further out, learned more about the handling of the *Wild Maid*, had amazing weather (strong winds – about a force 6, we're told), and a great time was had by all.



You might remember from last year's letter that Kim moved into the Rectory in November as Selwyn disappeared to France for the latter part of his sabbatical. In return for use of the downstairs bedroom and various hidey-holes around the house, for what turned out to be the next seven months until her new-build home was ready, she amply repaid us in companionship, shared cooking and shopping, and general house-elfery. Her new little home – which is extraordinarily lovely – was finally ready for her to move into in July, and she was able to gradually sift through her belongings, taking things to the new house, the tip, the charity shop or the car boot sales, as appropriate. It's fabulous to see her so happy there.



Cassie's business – helping her clients with organisation, decluttering, computer skills and websites – continues to peak and trough in the usual manner of the freelancer. However, this rather challenging year has forced one major change: it's become necessary for her presidency of apdo-uk (the Association of Professional Declutterers & Organisers – yes, there is such a thing!), which she created with two colleagues in 2004, to cease. She'll still provide her services as treasurer and membership secretary, but the reins of leadership will pass elsewhere. One major event this year was the **2013 Member Conference**, to which we were thrilled to welcome Jasmine Harman as our keynote speaker; her talk about her experiences helping her hoarder mother, and others like her, was exceptionally moving and enlightening.

We've mentioned the Music Hall project, and this is our main theatrical focus at the moment. We were delighted to be asked to provide an entertainment at the Sewell Barn – not as part of the regular season, but as a 'half-show' – four performances instead of eight – immediately after the March show has ended. We've designed it based on our long-standing enthusiasm for, and interest in, the real world of the Halls – not least because Selwyn's fabulous father, Ben, was there with his sisters and his father from the 1920s to the outbreak of WW2. We've called it *Down Among the Wines & Spirits* – this being the phrase for those who (like Ben) were at the bottom of the bill, listed next to the refreshments. It includes many performers you'd never have heard of, as well as a great many that you would; there are performances as they would have been, as authentically as we can create them, but framed by small scenes depicting the (real or imaginary) relationships between the performers, illustrating the realities of their world and the society they entertained.

We've cast nine wonderful local performers – a glorious (not to say eccentric) mixture of age, vocal range, appearance and style; we've allocated their characters and the songs they will sing, and we're now working hard on the dialogue that will tie it all together. Rehearsals begin in early January, and the show will play on the 8th-10th March 2014.

We said it was a mixed bag, right? This is where we do our best to avoid self-pity and Pollyanna in equal measure – which ain't easy! What it boils down to is that we're still deeply happy and fortunate, in our friends, our family, our activities and in each other. The image we've used to illustrate this year's card and web page is taken from the day we created, and Selwyn blessed, our Nativity scene – for the twentieth time since we were together. That small ceremony is so important to us (you might recall that he performed his part by Skype last year...).

We look forward to 2014, whatever it brings. We hope that your own lives have brought you joyous times, laughter, music and love – just as ours have. We wish you all peace and happiness, for this Christmastide and for the new year to come.

With all our love –

Selwyn & Cassie

