

Cassie & Selwyn Tillet

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Dearest friends

There's last-minute, and then there's just plain silly... As some folks already know, the past few weeks have exceeded themselves, even by our standards, in intensive activity and rollercoaster emotions. That being the case, the 'list of priorities' meant that the first opportunity to write a Christmas update is, in fact, The Day itself. So we are here, blissfully comfortable in our new home (if that comes as a surprise, apologies and more explanations in a moment), in front of a **positively idyllic wood-burning stove**, working our way down a very superior bottle of fizz (a gift to me as director of a production of Private Lives two years ago), and pausing for breath for the first time in what seems like years but is in fact a couple of months.



We have known for some time that the back end of 2023 would be a bit daft, to say the least, with Selwyn's retirement from the ministry (planned for some considerable time) and our consequent purchase of the first home we've ever owned together. My flat in Surbiton – bought in 1993, and rented out ever since – went on the market in December 2022, and eventually sold (short lease, yada yada) in September. Way back in April we had found exactly the property we wanted and could (just about) afford: a row of three 1837 cottages, converted into one dwelling some 40 years ago, just 1.5 miles north of our previous home. (We had thought Cassie's flat was ready to be sold at that point, hence looking to purchase at that time!) After various machinations and panics, with which we won't bore you, we finally completed the purchase: not (as we'd thought and hoped) around 6-8 weeks before moving in, but due to some very silly delays further up the chain, just one week.

Hence our recent timeline: Cassie's mother Peggy passed away (12 November), Selwyn's final service and retirement (26 November), complete house purchase (30 November), move into new house (7 December), Peggy's funeral (11 December), new kitchen units are delivered (14 December), new kitchen is completed enough for contents to be loaded (23 December)...

Clearly more explanation is required. Back in early July, Cassie's mum – who had been comfortably and mostly contentedly resident in a local care home since March 2019 – moved into a downhill phase, eating minimally, refusing medication (and later pretty much all food) and remaining in bed. The breast cancer started to move on (in the absence of previous medication), the dementia wandered further downhill, and we knew that she would not be with us long. At that point, she was placed formally on 'end of life care' – although, as anyone who has been through this will know, that could mean anything from hours to months of life remaining. In mum's case, it was the latter; for most of that time, she was either asleep or passably happy, glad to see us, and still asking after various family and friends (although many of those were long passed on). Only in the final ten days did she lose all knowledge of who we were, and there were the briefest moments of recognition.



Mum eventually slipped away peacefully on 12 November – holding the hand of one of the care home staff, as she went too fast for Cassie (who had seen her the day before) to be summoned. Her funeral was an appropriate and happy celebration with family and friends of a life that was, for the most part, active, social and full of sharing. (**Mum** is seen here during a family visit on Christmas Eve, 2022.) We can't sufficiently thank the lovely staff of MHA Cromwell House, whose care right to the end was exemplary; three of them attended mum's funeral, with one of them reading the 23rd Psalm.

Our final days at St Mary Magdalene were full of happiness and tears. It had been a truly wonderful place in which to conclude Selwyn's more-than-four-decades of formal church ministry, full of splendid people (including folks from his very first Eucharist!) and lovely times. **The last service**, and the party that followed, was full of delights: our favourite hymns and music, fizz and cake and a hot lunch, music and laughter and many hugs.



Our new house simply felt like home on the very first occasion we walked in, way back in April, and now that the boxes are almost all unpacked and the entire house is more than live-able, even more so. It is in beautiful condition (the previous owner, Trevor, was a craftsman with an eye for detail and perfectionism that Cassie's father would have appreciated); a quiet location, but still within easy reach of Norwich and all that makes up our lives locally; with more character and eccentricity than we ever thought we'd be in a position to own, and the perfect little garden; and with every opportunity for our own stamp and personality. We could not be happier with it. **(This photo is actually taken by Starkings & Watson, the estate agent – I don't have a good one of my own just yet, having moved in December!)**

The new kitchen is a triumph of design and build, achieved by our wonderful and talented friend Myles (set-builder and buildings manager extraordinaire at the Sewell Barn), who has worked his little socks off to get us a functional kitchen in advance of the festive season. (It was necessary as the previous inhabitant had several free-standing units which he not unreasonably took with him.) We couldn't be more pleased with the results. Myles will be back in a few days' time to do various bits of cosmetic tivating, but already it's just fabulous.

So this has covered the biggest events in 2023. However, there was (of course) more to it than that... Due to all this intensive activity, the holidays have been far less than usual (although we fully intend to make up for that in coming months and years). A delightful visit to Ireland – a few days spent with our good friend Sarah, who had moved over to County Galway (to the dismay of the Norwich theatre family) followed by a lovely self-catering break down in Killarney, was our post-Easter break. It was full of the beautiful **views**, historical sites, *craic* and welcome that we know from similar holidays of old. Beyond that, our only travels during the year were short forays down to London. However, as we write this, we look forward to a short trip to Inverness (by train) to celebrate Hogmanay with a pantomime cast (what better way?!); and Selwyn sits beside me researching ideas for a citybreak over the weekend of my birthday on 6 January, followed by our long-promised, oft-deferred 'bit of winter sun' – likely in Malta in February. Of course, Selwyn's now-retired status means that we fully intend to travel more, and future plans include a return to his beloved Egypt for a Nile cruise.



Regulars will note the absence of theatre mentions so far. Mercifully, last year's directorial outing took place long before the world started to go too mad: March feels like a very long time ago. Cassie directed a double-bill of Noel Coward: *Still Life* and *Red Peppers*, from Coward's *Tonight at 8.30* sequence of plays. Some double-casting and a glorious amount of fun and hard work from **a dedicated and delightful cast**. During the back half of the year, Cassie is very grateful to her fellow Joint Artistic Director at the Sewell Barn, Sabrina, whose extraordinary energy and ability has kept the wheels rolling almost single-handedly.

The Sewell Barn shows have continued to delight during the year. *Queers* was a magnificent and beautifully directed and performed sequence of monologues tracing the history of the LGBTQ+ community across the last hundred years: moving, powerful, hilarious and important. (We're so proud of Michelle and her team who have been asked to reprise the show next year in the Norwich QueerFest, and who also won an award in the prestigious local theatre awards.) *Di and Viv and Rose* was a tour de force three-hander for women, following the lives and relationship of three college friends; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a worthy swan-song for my colleague Clare as she stepped down as Joint Artistic Director, full of hilarity and creative excellence. *The Welkin* returned as planned, after it was knocked out by a COVID outbreak last year, and played to exceptional audiences and reviews; and *The Cemetery Club* showcased the talents of some of Norwich's finest performers, set in the New York Jewish community, with plenty of hilarity and food for thought. The new season began with the terrifying *1984*, which broke all our box office records and simply blew us all away with its professionalism; and *Immaculate* was a hysterical, irreverent, quirky and fabulous modern take on the Virgin Birth. As you can see, we still pride ourselves on variety!

We attended a wide variety of other quality theatre presentations at the Maddermarket, Norwich Theatre Royal, Wymondham Players and the Common Lot; however, a recent stand-out was the splendid Brian Bilston, whose understated, dead-pan delivery, intelligent and thought-provoking poetry, and irresistible personality was a real gem. (If his tour takes him near you, do yourselves a favour and go along.) Oddly enough, another highlight was in related vein: the irrepressible Alan Gray of East Ruston Old Vicarage Gardens, in 1:1 conversation on the stage at Sheringham. We managed a couple of highly enjoyable cinema visits: the startling and affecting *Allelujah!* by Alan Bennett; much to our surprise, we loved the *Barbie* movie; and the remarkable *The Great Escaper*, well known as the swan-song of its two extraordinary stars, Glenda Jackson and Michael Caine. Not forgetting a remarkable music-and-words evening by *Saltlines*, inspired and performed by the remarkable Raynor Winn (if you didn't read any of her books yet, do).

Performances of our own haven't really come into it this year. The only exceptions were a reprise of our favourite poetry and prose evening – *Violets in the Lane* – as a fund-raiser at St Mary Magdalene, with our dear friends Janie, Michael and Margaret; and Cassie was delighted to be asked to provide the voice of the narrator for two performances in our church of *Visions* – a stunning work for orchestra, soprano and speaker celebrating the life and work of Julian of Norwich, written and conducted by our talented friend Ian Hytch.

One of the most colourful events of the year is, of course, Pride. The Norwich parade has been full of joy and love for many years, and this time, Cassie was honoured to be included in the **social media team** – capturing group and individual moments on the phone, sending them back to the co-ordinator, and delighting in seeing her work appearing on Facebook and Instagram throughout the day.



Somehow Cassie has managed to keep up the health-and-fitness achievements this year, and is proud to be finishing 2023 at the exact same weight as she started it. During that year, two special excursions stand out, both with dear hiking buddy James: one climbing **Yewbarrow** in the Lake District (including a serious bit of scrambling) on an utterly glorious day; and the other a long-planned marathon walk, but this time overnight! Marriotts Way – which traces the path of a redundant railway line – is in fact 24 miles, not 26, but is a very pleasing hike from Norwich to Aylsham. Cassie and James started from Norwich at about 8pm, finishing in

Aylsham at around 7am, including stops for food and coffee at various points along the way. The experience of hiking with a headtorch through silence and nature was remarkable and unforgettable – a proud achievement.

Another highly unusual – also nocturnal – excursion was made with Selwyn: not a long walk (just a couple of miles) but a magical one. The lovely Reveal Nature hold guided walks in local beauty spots, issuing walkers with UV torches, which show nature in (literally) an entirely new light. Lichen, caterpillars and woodlice will never be the same again!

We always reflect on the passing of folks near and far who have been part of our lives. Besides Peggy, there was also Alan Coleman (an irrepressible member of the Siddons pantomime team that Cassie performed with in the 1990s); 'Aunty' Heather Cosgrove, dear friend and all-things-useful during our time at St Mary's Beddington; Pam Gower, a truly remarkable and unique individual from Richmond Shakespeare Society (and the definitive Granny Weatherwax); Alex Brown and Wendy Brown, members of Selwyn's family; Jack Burton, father of our good friend Trevor, and well known locally as 'the bus-driving Methodist minister'; and Paul Illingworth, Selwyn's predecessor at our first Norfolk family of churches centred on Weston Longville. May they all rest in peace and rise in glory.

So (as they say) what happens now? We have barely had time to breathe, much less reflect; but as we move into 2024, Selwyn will be able to realise that this is not, in fact, a prolonged sabbatical but a true release from formal church duties. (We know quite well that he will find himself deputising and assisting on occasion – but only when he wants to.) Meanwhile, he aims to complete his rewriting of his book about Robert Hay (Victorian Egyptologist) for publication in the summer, while Cassie returns to her neglected clients (admin, computer and decluttering services); we will take up our posts at the Sewell Barn with renewed enthusiasm, and Cassie looks towards her next production (*The Memory of Water*, auditioning in March and performing in July) – as well as creating the new 2023/24 season, with fellow AD Sabrina, early in the new year. In April, we plan to return to Paris, celebrating 30 years since our first visit together; and a year after that, God willing, will see our 30th wedding anniversary (hopefully without the social limitations that disrupted celebrations for our 25th). We will worship at Norwich Cathedral and will visit local churches to find our ongoing spiritual home. And, as the splendid anthem that was sung at our wedding puts it, "We'll build our house / and chop our wood / and make our garden grow".

We are feeling incredibly fortunate, and hope that we are able to 'pay it forward' whenever we are blessed and privileged in various ways. In the strains and sadnesses of the last year, there has been so very much to be delighted by and thankful for; we hope it has, and will be in the future, the same for you.



With our love -

Cassie
Selwyn