

Dear Friends

(Alan 9 December 2003)

In continuing the tradition of announcing new arrivals, I am pleased to announce the newest addition: Buttercup. Yes, another rabbit to keep Rosie happy. Buttercup was a stray rabbit picked up by some kind “friends” of ours. I didn’t kill them; well, not yet, anyway (our friends, not the rabbit). All was well however, as Madam pronounced that Buttercup, too, was female like Rosie, and we wouldn’t have to deal with a Bunny Explosion.

Buttercup soon began behaving in a manner suggesting that our name choice might need modifying to something a little more masculine. A *lot* more masculine, in fact. Rosie did all the right things, plucking her fur, lining the nest, etc, etc. Madam kept checking, and checking. . . Soooo, we have a bunch of lesbian rabbits in our aviary. Charming.

This was the year that we finally replaced our finches (with Genuine Decent Stock, nogal) and brought in two female canaries to accompany the two remaining widowers. Great fun was had and we’re now up to 15 finches. These things are incredible. I’m doing a Special on finch-tongue soup. . .

Canaries were less successful, with their lot dying before fledging. Seems to happen that way for young hens. Both our Red Factor and our Gloucester are sitting on hatchlings now—we’ll see what happens this time. The males (Very and Cranium) are just a *lad* less pedigreed so it will be interesting to see what the mixture of green, red, and yellow is going to produce!

In the first half of the year, I had the privilege of attempting to teach my nephew, Wayne, and it was quite a fun experience (if not a little wierd), but he survived my eccentric teaching style :-) and excelled despite my methods.

Following rapidly on the heels of the Engineering Council review last year, which consumed seven trees and some considerable hair pigmentation (The documentation was a two foot pile of A4 paper); we now had the Quinquennial Review from the University’s top brass. (That’s 5-yearly for the plebs). Naturally, since the format was different etc, more trees and pigmentation vanished (On the pigmentation front, the beard is the forerunner, followed by the temples, sigh. . . :-). And it was all done in blasted MicroSquish, whose use added some colour to the Electromagnetics Laboratory. I survived that, and as of 1 July I took a Sabbatnic.

It has been wonderful to watch as my colleagues set tests, exams, mark them, exchange snide remarks about students; and I, on the other hand, only notice the study break by the sudden absence of cars in the car park :-)

A Sabbatical is a truly essential thing. After six years of teaching, you inevitably become jaded, are not able to explore interests for lack of time, and are under immense student and administrative stress. The admin kills you, and I’ve certainly had my fair share in the last few years. Coping with 160 students in a class is also not for the timid-at-heart. I have been able to digress, spend a week on this aspect, a month re-skilling on that aspect (in elec eng, you’re out of date before your next breath—its scary), and (finally) getting some private work in. . . It has been marvellous, even though it is still hard work. As of Feb, I will devote the rest of the Sabbatnic to pure research, for which I have many ideas, and it’ll be back to the grind on 1 July. God truly did know what He was talking about in Leviticus 25:4.

We had a wonderfully magical early start to the Summer this year, and we noted with enormous thankful relief as all three

Fever trees, all the roses and the Paperbark thorn re-sprouted magnificently and voluptuously now that the cold of winter was *finally* over. . . We had a black frost. Minus Three. One night. One blasted night. One Granadilla, three Fever trees, one Paperbark, one Pandorea, two Fuschias, three jasmines, one Soe-Soe and four roses—Ex.

The fuschias have recovered after chopping them back to a quarter of their size, one fever tree has sprouted fairly well, but huge parts of it are dead, and we keep getting bits of it dropping off (its a good 6m high); one other fever tree, the one damaged by last year’s black frost, has put out some feeble shoots, and the other one, is now finally RIP. The paperbark is merrily shooting out new stuff in the midst of its dead wood, some jasmine is sprouting (one is definitely RIP), and every else is still Ex. Global Warming indeed.

The kids are absolutely fantastic. Kathleen turned two in June, and Robert four in October. They are only about two inches different in height, two kilograms different in weight, and about half a word different in vocab. Its truly amazing how number two picks things up from number one. We are truly enjoying them, when they’re not actively killing each other.

One highlight, if you’ll excuse the pun, was to finally raise the trampoline to its full height by inserting the extender legs, and although Kathleen was nervous at first, they are both going crazy on the thing, as much as they did when it was at crawl-on height. Dad has, after a long period of intense training, stopped the nervous tic and associated insane wail at each of their jumps. Mom is also enjoying being able to jump on the trampoline. She says: “It is a wonderful cardio-vascular workout and kills the thighs too.” I say: “My calves, my calves”

We had a week camping at Ballito, and, after intense negotiation, Robert conceded to sit on the beach just next to the last concrete step, convinced he was about to be washed away. After he softened up, the kids loved the beach, but “we don’t do the sea, we’re British”. I had some great swims, and felt something less than nearly 40 (Cometh June). Until the next day, when I felt something less than nearly 80. Spent a lovely day at the aquarium. The kids really enjoyed this outing.

Popped in at the Pilanesberg (Bakgatla) for four nights to see the vast swarming herds of Elephant. Pitched the tent amongst high-pitched squeals (not the Elephant). Looked down at ground. Ground was moving, seething, magical. The African Ant is not small. It is not comfortable unless it is in intimate company with 14 million of its friends in one square metre. It also has highly effective pincers, hence the squeals (the kids, not the Elephant). It made for an interesting camping experience. Robert now refers to the Pilanesburg as “that place with the ants” (not the Elephant).

For four days, we drove around the entire Pilanesberg, exploring even the distant places: not a sausage. Elephant Turd, yes; Elephant, no. Last time we saw herd after herd after herd after herd. . .

We had yet another change in the neighbour to our right, the fourth change since we moved in seven years ago! There *must* be something wrong with us :-)

Madam has forced my hand, and finally got me to admit that after 3 years of teaching myself to play the piano (once every six months or so for five minutes before breakfast), I needed weekly lessons. Weekly lessons indeed. Weekly Blitzkrieg more like. So the 5 minutes has increased to at least half-an-hour, and the six months has decreased to once-a-day. Wonderful Stuff. By the end of next year, “Silent Night” might just be discernable

amongst the oaths.

After half-an-hour of Hanon's exercise Number One ("for the Virtuoso Pianist", circa 1604), my left arm fell off. I simply didn't know I had muscles in that particular part of my arm that was now on fire. Did **You** know that the tendon that serves your last two (weakest) fingers runs over the top of your wrist just in front of the knobby bit at the back?? He is sounding great (Les:-)

All the best for 2004

't Clarks.

(Les:)

An interesting year. I haven't yet worked out whether I am "Arthur" or "Martha". Hope to have a better focus next year as the kids and I settle into a more structured day and hence lifestyle. I am thoroughly enjoying relating to the new friends I have made in the homeschooling arena. The moms (often joined by some of if not all of the dads) meet for coffee once a month to exchange ideas, concerns and highlights. I can seldom sleep after these meetings as I am so revved up by them. Kathleen enjoys going to the Maternity section at the hospital to "see the babies". It was here that I bumped into an old acquaintance who asked me whether I was working. (Funny how people don't see being a full-time mom and home-maker as "working"). I told her I was at home with the kids.

Her response... you should get a part time job as it will stimulate your brain. Lady!!!! my brain has never been more stimulated!!! Both our kids seem to be very bright and this makes me want to forge ahead with teaching them to read etc. In fact, Robert was well on his way to learning to read a few months ago. However, I was advised to slow down on the academics. This I have done. Our current focus is teaching the kids obedience, about God, respect for others etc. We go on numerous fun-filled family "educational" outings. Some of this year's highlights:-

- A trip to the Jhb railway station. Standing on the platform watching the trains coming in and out
- A bus trip through town to dad's work for a picnic on Wits lawns.
- A visit to a bakery to see bread rolls being made.
- A trip to the Rand airport and into the control tower to watch the controllers controlling the planes.
- A walk around the botanical gardens rose garden. We brought home 30 tadpoles:-) Much to dad's disgust. We already have a croaking frog in our fish pond. (Our gold fish have multiplied greatly.) We have had a hammerkop dining on our fish.
- A visit to a working farmyard out North.
- A visit to Irene Dairy Farm to see the hundreds of cows being milked mechanically.

One of our "couple highlights" was a bring-and-share dinner with our homeschooling friends. This was an evening filled with fun and laughter with like minded parents. (The kids were all in bed:-)

We have a fairly strict routine with Kathleen and Robert. Rest time is between 13h00 and 15h00. We try not to make an exception to this one as it gives us all a break from each other. Bedtime is between 19h00 and 20h00 as this allows for some spouse time.

I haven't been very diligent about going to "Mommy Land" (no children, no chores) this year and will have to schedule this time in next year. A time to recharge and hence have a larger capacity for kid things.

We are enjoying the freedom our back garden allows us. Alan is thinking of raising the front and side walls so that we will have the freedom to allow the kids to play unsupervised there too.

On the church front: I have become a regular member of the women's group which meets once a week. I have enjoyed re-connecting with and being challenged by the ladies. Next year Alan and I are thinking about getting involved in a home group again after a break of four and a half years.

The end of 2003 is bringing to the end a few things that have been a regular part of my life during the past four years. MOPS - basically a mom's support group that meets once a month - has had its last meeting. The lady whose play group Robert has attended once a week since he was 18 months (Kathleen joined him when she was 17 months) has called it a day :- ( This is going to be an adjustment for us but I am hoping that this development will assist me in my efforts to get into a routine which will help me to manage my randomness. The Scott family who we have been friends with for about 16 years have relocated to Natal, other family friends are waiting to immigrate to the USA, our church is moving premises and; finally, our family GP is heading out of town for a year. Quite a lot of adjustment for our family who doesn't like change:-)

It will be interesting to see what 2004 will bring.

Blessings for the new year. Lesley

(Final Word—Al, as always :-)

Budgerigar, also known as "Budgie" (since, as a Kitten and beyond, he made the most wierd sounds, as though a bird), has, after 16 years of his dominance (I mean presence) around the Clark Household, been ferried, via painless means to the land of other budgerigar's, (I mean, cats)..., this very day 17th December 2003. He certainly has been a mainstay of the Household, moving from Hillbrow (where he was nastily bullied by our home-group members, especially the Scotts, mentioned above; and who waited till the *entire* homegroup was in prayer, quiet like, before tearing around *all* laps at high speed, interspersed with a quick bite at olde Bill (middle of room, Rest In Peace) and dissapearing before I could do anything) to Crosby, where lie portions of both his ears, and of his nose, surrendered in mortal conquest to other (lesser) feline combatants (collateral damage ?), to Kensington, where Budge finally became a little more mellow, and less inclined to kill all and sundry. The lesser inclination has of course continued, and the "BIG CAT" has neglected himself in terms of grooming, forgotten where his food was, and finally, this morning, lost the ability to co-ordinate his feet. He was not in pain, but just at the end of it all. 'Tis 't end of an era. 16 years is a long time...

(So is this letter! I have given up the attempt to fit it onto an A4 page. In addition, a majority of you are receiving this elecronically now, so save the trees and read it online :-)

(Last touch) Alan