

It's the holiday season again, which for those of us who partake means it's time to put up the Christmas lights (except for those of you who put them up in August, and the neighbor who never gets around to taking them down). Last year we didn't get to have Christmas lights because we were on sabbatical in New Zealand, where Christmas comes in the summer. Everything in New Zealand is either backwards or upside-down, because they're in the Southern Hemisphere, which means that you always have to hang on to something or you might fall right off the face of the earth. That's why in New Zealand cities, instead of having sidewalks, monkey bars are installed along the roadways for pedestrians to swing from place to place while carrying shopping bags in their toes.

There are certain advantages to having gravity pull upwards, of course. For example, the first New Zealand airline was founded in 1883, when it was discovered that if you forgot to tie a rope to your wagon, it would fall into the sky and you could get from place to place without building roads. And you could get rid of your trash by tossing it out the window, where it became space debris that to this day is being tracked by NASA (who are concerned that some hapless American astronaut might get hit in the head by a piece of leftover lamb pizza).

One of the best things about New Zealand's reverse gravity is that it becomes very easy to hang your Christmas lights. You just plug them into the wall and then dangle them out the window, where they rise into the sky and sway in the wind. The local male birds, who think they are twinkling trees, traditionally build nests of mistletoe in them and then sit around waiting for some unsuspecting girl bird to kiss them.

When December finally came to Christchurch, we were quite excited to try this novel method of decorating. Even though New Zealand prices are out of this world (something to do with the fact that gold floats there, I think) we went to the hardware store and stocked up on boxes of Christmas lights. Unfortunately, when we got them home Geoff forgot where he was and set them down for a moment to try to find his keys, and of course they promptly fell up into the sky, where they eventually formed a new constellation that is now called Geoffus Stupidus, or The Clumsy Husband. Pat was quite annoyed at this point and wasn't willing to let him spend another NZ\$1,000 to replace them, so instead we had to make do by installing small mirrors in our windows to reflect the neighbor's lights so that people would think they were actually ours.

Anyway, that's all behind us (as is the house in Christchurch, which was tossed about so badly by the February 22<sup>nd</sup> earthquake that it eventually landed in Brazil—we wound up moving to Wellington for the rest of our year abroad). We're happily back in Claremont now, where gravity is normal, Xandie is starting high school, and Christmas lights do what you expect them to: drive your electric bill through the roof.



Geoff decided to make up for last year's fiasco by decorating the house properly this holiday season. As in most families, there is always one lucky member who gets the job of hanging lights, and in our house that has traditionally been Ditto, the smallest cat, who is an exceptional climber. But this year Ditto got an eye injury and had to wear a clown collar as a fashion accessory, so the job fell to the only human foolish enough to clamber up a ladder in the dark. (Hint: it wasn't Pat or Xandie.)

When we were kids, hanging the Christmas lights was a simple thing.

You ran a single string of lights around the eaves, plugged in, and that was it. One year a fellow down the block got fancy and put up blinking lights; Geoff's dad called the cops to complain and the neighbor was promptly arrested and his lights confiscated. But in recent years a new tradition has arisen, one involving the tasteful display of inflatable snowmen, animatronic reindeer, a rooftop motorcycling Santa in full biker gear, loudspeakers playing Christmas carols as performed by barking dogs, and enough lights for the house to be seen clearly from space.

After his epic failure in New Zealand, Geoff was eager to join the modern era. He drove around town, taking pictures of the gaudiest (er, most enthusiastically decorated) houses, and then drew up a shopping list that was sure to exceed any of them. It took him quite a bit of Web surfing to find all the ingredients, but in the end he purchased a Santa bowling alley, a Christmas tree that burst into flames every five minutes, a tipsy elf advertising Budweiser beer, and his personal favorite, an inflatable Ebenezer Scrooge carrying a giant bucket labeled



“Please donate to rescue Nigerian reindeer.” To make sure it was visible, he carefully coiled seventy-three strings of flashing lights into an enormous spiral arrow pointing at the display and finished it off with one of those giant stadium TVs running “Miracle on 34th Street” in a continuous loop.

When he finally finished setting it all up, Geoff gave Xandie the signal to plug it in and stood back to admire his handiwork. Everything worked flawlessly. The lights blazed like Times Square, Santa bowled strikes, the elf kept swallowing beer, Scrooge waved his bucket around the yard, and the lights made it impossible for anyone within a 42-mile radius to miss seeing it all. Even as he watched, three passing drivers distracted by the display collided with an excruciating crunch. It was absolutely perfect!

Then the Christmas tree burst into flames for the first time. The fire was a wee bit too close to the inflatable Scrooge, which rose into the air like a hot-air balloon. Scrooge bumped into the inebriated elf, who tipped over and spilled his beer onto the jumbo TV. The TV shorted out with an immense explosion of bursting light bulbs; the energy from the bulbs caused Santa to bowl his ball directly at Geoff, who had no choice except to flee down the street screaming “Duck the ball” (which the neighbors took to be a new Christmas carol).

Since he was running away from the excitement, he didn’t see Pat wearily dialing the fire department. “Hi, it’s the Kuenning residence. Sorry about all these calls, but he’s done it again. No, you won’t have any trouble finding us. Just follow the spiral arrow.”



**Drawing  
on the Beach**

Love,

*Geoff Pat Xandie*



**A Tasty Morsel**



**New Zealand Resident**



**Crunchy**



**Lots of Presents**



**Mt. Cook: The Old Man  
of the Mountain**



**Adventurous Couple**



**Native Australian**



**Just Gorgeous!**



**Inverted Colors**