

# Ed & Sarah's Christmas Letter

(A Vanity Press Publication — Volume X)  
THAT'S VOLUME X, NOT RATED X!

We actually have nothing to report for the first few months of 2006 as both Edward and Sarah were so busy writing (see later section) that they cannot remember what happened. Thus our letter begins with late March.

In March, we had our nephew Eric over for a visit. In contrast, his sister Diane went to Europe to evangelize. Family? No. Godless European socialists? *Oui*. No accounting for taste. Which may explain how the French started eating snails, but that's another story.

In May, we took a vacation to Orlando to watch commercialization run amok. That's right; we went to Disneyworld's Magic Kingdom, Epcot Center, and Sea World. Ah, Disney, where you can eat Donald's Chicken McNuggets with Cinderella, drink Mickey O'Mouse's draft beer, and breathe Walt-O-Matic refreshed air for mere pennies a lungful. Fortunately all three theme parks sprawl within a few miles of each other, making it possible to cram visiting all of them into three days. Or, more accurately, cram three days into all these theme parks.

Faced with immediate sensory overload, the children were ready to go back home the day we arrived. Each day ended when the kids were too tired and cranky to go any further. Funny, though, once we left Disney World and made it back to the hotel, they were ready, willing, and able to spend hours (literally; from after dinner until bedtime) playing in the hotel swimming pool.

Kinda saps the "magic" out of the Magic Kingdom, doesn't it?

In July, we celebrated the fourth in the traditional Southern style by blowing stuff up. Specifically, the local teens filled 2-liter pop bottles with a concoction that released lots of gas (it was probably based on Mexican food), and the pressure increased until they exploded. It turned "pop bottles" into a misnomer; "wham bottles" would have been more accurate.

In August, we went to the beach at Hunter Island, South Carolina. Now, we have been to an Atlantic beach once before, heading out to Carolina Beach, North Carolina, where Hurricane Ophelia, a.k.a. "the vacation-disrupting hurricane," disrupted our vacation with heavy surf, high winds, a general cloudiness to the air, and just a dash of impending doom. This year we were safe from hurricanes as tropical depression Debbie, a.k.a. "the wavering windbag," decided whether or not to actually do anything and eventually just blew the whole thing off.

Anyway, we chose to reserve a campsite somewhat away from the beach to shield ourselves from the omnipresent ocean wind and potential blowing sand. Sarah and persistent wind just don't get along, nor do Ed and sand. This turned out to be somewhat of a mistake. You see, to get to Hunter Island, one must drive through endless inland coastal bayous. According to conventional wisdom, "wetlands are some of our most exciting ecosystems," because that's where you can see beavers, egrets, alligators, um, huge spiders... leeches... venomous snakes... and if you're noticing a rapid decline in the fun factor as we continue to list these creatures, you're still paying attention<sup>a</sup>. Most "exciting" of all, these selfsame wetlands—or as we old-fashioned folks call 'em, swamps—are where large populations of mosquitoes breed faster than rabbits (oops... despite the marketing claim at the top, it looks like we might get an X rating after all<sup>b</sup>). So what that means is that camping on the beach where the persistent ocean breeze keeps blowing the bugs back into the woods is probably a smarter idea than camping in the aforementioned woods where all the bugs get blown back into.

In stark contrast to camping trips taken in the Cascade Mountains, when going to the beach there's very little reason to pack along sleeping bags that are rated to -30°F. It is "The South," after all, which means that unless the word

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<sup>a</sup> Which is itself remarkable, considering how banal some of this humor is.

<sup>b</sup> With these jokes tying together across the letter, one might think that some planning had gone into this. But you overestimate your humble narrator; he just makes it up as he goes along and everything falls into place. Sort of like his life.

“Pole” immediately follows, temperatures below zero are only seen in malfunctioning freezers (and in your wife’s eyes when you make a cheap gender joke like this one).

Now the beaches in South Carolina are a little different than any other beach we’ve ever been to. They are just filled with billions of tiny, sharp pieces of broken seashells, or what scientists prefer to call “tiny, sharp pieces of broken seashells.” The only reason there’s any sand at all is that tourists like our family walk on these beaches and slowly grind the tiny, sharp pieces of broken seashells into sand.

Now if someone were to ask you where you wanted to store billions of tiny, sharp pieces of broken seashells, you’d most likely answer “on the beach” or “in a box out on the back porch” or even “in a malfunctioning freezer” long before you’d answer something like “in my shorts.” Unfortunately, Ed’s swimsuit has a liner (gads!—another X-rated section!) that acts like a little roach hotel for tiny, sharp pieces of broken seashells: they go in, but they don’t come out! Worse yet, these tiny, sharp pieces of broken seashells have tiny little claws that help them adhere to whatever place they find, like little inorganic ticks<sup>c</sup>, where they skulk and irritate your skin. Therefore we now recommend that the US military take all the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and ship them to Hunter Island. Have them play in the surf for an hour in a lined swimsuit, then take a nice, long walk along the seashore. If they still won’t talk, send them camping in the woods away from the beach.

In any event, we ended up aborting our beach vacation one day early as we ran out of bug repellent. No, I’m not kidding; two nigh-full cans were not enough. So now we have to buy more bug repellent. And also look for some tiny-sharp-pieces-of-broken-seashells repellent.

In September, we got a wonderful present from Ed’s cousin Kari, who is stationed in Afghanistan with the Army Corps of Engineers. She sent us the flag that flew from the USACE headquarters... on September 11. Better than that, she chose to have it flown in honor of our family (as if we merit even the same honor as our fine military). Even better, the USACE is the former Iraqi embassy, where, presumably, Saddam Hussein and his entourage enacted at least part of their evil schemes in the UN Oil-for-Golden-Bathroom-Fixtures plan.

In November, Ed’s office got spun off from the parent corporation and sold to a group of private investors. Fortunately, this has had minimal impact on his daily operations. Such changes are so common in our life that they are considered part of the extended family. Consider this: from the time he originally joined FRPG in 1997 (coincidentally the year he married Sarah) until now, he has been a full-time employee for various companies for an average of 15 months before either leaving employment or experiencing a change in ownership. And this does not include contract work.

November also boasted our third annual get-sick-and-go-to-Seattle trip. Sinus infections for everyone! Woo-hoo! We had a good time visiting family and friends, only in part due to the fact that if we said otherwise, they wouldn’t invite us over next year.

While in Seattle we took a romantic evening at the Edgewater Hotel (note that for parents of young children, “romantic” is defined as “after dumping the kids off”). The Edgewater is the only waterfront hotel in Seattle, by the way, and it’s priced to match its exclusivity. Anyway, our shower abstinently refused to cough up the hot water. We called to complain, and they graciously offered to move us to a different room. This being The Beatles Suite. Where the Beatles had actually stayed, and fished out the window. A poster-sized photo of this in the suite proved the point. This was a stroke of good luck, in large part because the Beatles are perhaps the only band upon which Sarah and Ed share an opinion. Wait—I take that back. There are many bands on which they share an opinion. But the Beatles are the one that they share a *positive* opinion of. Anyway, we had a wonderful suite with a fireplace, king-size bed, claw-foot tub, dinette and coffee table, panoramic view of Puget Sound, music (guess who), and various Beatlemania accoutrements. ’Twas not the night before Christmas, but it was a wonderful present just the same.

And now, since we’ve reached the present (Christmas? Present? Get it? Okay, that was forced.), we’ll take a brief intermission of actual educational value. You may recall that last year we wrote a bit about NASCAR<sup>d</sup> and the

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<sup>c</sup> I kid you not. Ed found a tiny, sharp piece of broken seashell still clinging to his skin—on his arm, not elsewhere—two days and four showers after leaving the beach. We’re not sure what’s more amazing: that it was there, or that Ed took four showers in two days.

<sup>d</sup> And by the way, this summer Ed got to clamber into a NASCAR racer, fire it up, and rev the engine. Hoo boy!

“drive fast, turn left” rule, which is taught to youngsters even before the “look both ways” rule. After all, when on a NASCAR track, you only have to look one way before crossing<sup>e</sup>.

This year, we’ll talk about the Southern phenomenon known as “fish camps.” Fish camps are to seafood what greasy spoon diners are to steak. They are small, independently owned, not terribly high-class establishments that offer a selection of fresh fish and shrimp deep-fried any way you want it. They are an old tradition, and in small towns are also commonly a social hub. Which is kind of scary. Especially if you’re a fish.

And speaking of greasy spoons, the South is plagued with Waffle House restaurants. In places, they outnumber the cockroaches. These places make greasy spoon diners look good. Seriously. They put the “awful” in “waffle.”

And now a few words from our sponsors, which is to say our family. Of course, most of this letter has been about us, but what follows is presented in a more generic and less time-specific context.

Rachel turned six this August, and got her ~~nose~~ ~~navel~~ ears pierced as a special present. Why someone would want pins jabbed through their ear to celebrate their birth is beyond me; maybe it was Sarah’s way of getting revenge on Rachel for the back labor she endured bringing our daughter into the world. Rachel also joined our community swim team this summer and competed in several meets. She swam the 25-yard freestyle<sup>f</sup>, getting her time as low as 33 seconds and change. She did well, especially considering that she was in the 5-6 year bracket.

She is an avid reader (Ed is reading her *The Hobbit* to ensure she turns out a gamer), and a good artist. She even won a local coloring contest! As her parents, we fervently hope that she hasn’t peaked too early in her artistic career.

Rachel wants to grow up to be a cowboy, a dancer, a veterinarian, a florist, a farmer, a pilot, a soldier, a policeman, a fireman, a librarian, an astronaut, a Spanish princess, and several other careers that didn’t last in her Dad’s memory long enough to be transcribed.

Talon has much more simple goals. Quoth he: “I’m going to be a cow. And eat grass and hay.”

He turned four this May. He’s reading quite well, and has discovered that fake crying does well to counteract her sister’s dominating personality. Not because Rachel has any compassion for the anguish of her younger sibling; rather because whining attracts parental attention.

His favorite summer game is to go to the pool and have Dad throw him as high in the air as he can, then catch him on the way down. Talon’s endurance for this high-flying escapade is far greater than the endurance of Ed’s back and arms combined<sup>g</sup>.

And he is as unpredictably candid as any young child. For example, while we were visiting our cousins in Hampton, Cousin Karen leaned over and stage-whispered, “Talon! I love you!”

Talon looked at her. “Why?” he asked.

“Because you make my heart smile, honey.”

“Oh,” said Talon. He considered this. “My heart just goes ‘bullop bullop bullop.’”

Sarah’s third book saw print this year: *Your Guide to Marketing Books in the Christian Marketplace*. That’s right, Sarah’s book titles are as brief as her conversations. The book is just what its name suggests. Sarah has already received several excellent endorsements as well as a great foreword by Sally E. Stuart, whose *Christian Writers Market Guide* has been in print for high-on twenty years.

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<sup>e</sup> Just make sure it’s the right direction, which is the left direction.

<sup>f</sup> A *very* apt description of the stroke in this age group, let me tell you!

<sup>g</sup> This footnote is nothing more than a gratuitous space-waster. That is, it makes the empty space appear fuller, without adding any content of actual value. Sort of like our cat, except it doesn’t eat as much.

She continues to administer the Christian Small Publishers Association, as well as home-school the kids, lead a Girl Scout troop, and this Fall she even began co-teaching a Sunday School class with Ed. And she says she doesn't have to work...

She also turned **40** this year, and immediately cut her hair short, much to Ed's dismay. At least she didn't pack on 40 pounds.

Ed continues to be a standard gaming geek (excepting the fact that he does, at times, bathe). His latest short story, "The Weight of Water," saw print this year. His next project is the tersely titled *Bound by Iron*, a murder mystery set in the same shared universe. It launches in April, by which time Ed hopes to be well into writing a trilogy.

As we close this missive, your humble narrator is reminded that there is one thing that (ahem) one of us insists on remembering from the start of the year: Edward got a new bigger better computer with a mega-screen so he can no longer "brag" that his wife has the best computer in the house. Of course this means that his books are going to be getting bigger and better too, right? Yeah, sure. Don't hold your breath.

Finally, to show you how truly strange and backwards things are down South, to the right → we present an actual non-retouched screen grab from weather.com. Enjoy.

So Merry Christmas to all. We pray for your health and happiness. And y'all are invited to come visit us in Charlotte. We'll even speak French if it will make a difference in whether or not you show up. *Mais oui!*



Love to all,

Ed, Sarah, Rachel, Talon, Chanter (the cat), and Soldier (the dog). And Ko (Rachel's new betta fish)

### **Annual Christmas Recipe!**

This year, we give you a good Southern stew recipe. This comes from the Mallard Creek Presbyterian Church, which, on the fourth Thursday of October, holds an annual barbecue that has turned into a major event. With this barbecue they fund their annual missions budgets, and all the local politicians come out. The church serves tons—literally, two tons—of pork barbecue, plus assorted fixin's. The politicians serve lots of baloney.

Here a somewhat smaller rendition of the stew recipe (sans baloney). It's good stuff. Guaranteed to warm you up. Even if you're in Edmonton, Alberta. Which, frankly, we're glad we're not. No offense.

#### **Mallard Creek Brunswick Stew**

1 hen, 5 or 6 lb.  
4 lb. chuck roast  
1½ lb. pork  
1 c. uncooked rice, long grain  
1 can cream-style white corn  
2 qt. canned tomatoes  
1 Tbsp. butter  
black pepper, cayenne pepper, liquid smoke to taste

Cook hen, beef, and pork until tender (like, say, barbecuing or smoking). Remove any bones and grind meat on coarse blade of food chopper. Strain broth. Cook rice in broth for 30 minutes, stirring constantly. Add corn, tomatoes, and butter. Cook for 30 more minutes. Add ground meat and seasonings and cook for 30 minutes more. Makes a lot.

*P.S.: If you need a gift for an infant, come visit [www.BabyBibleBoardBooks.com](http://www.BabyBibleBoardBooks.com) and support your local Bolme clan!*