

March 13, 2009

Dear Mum,

I thought you would enjoy some of the photos we took during our time in the Netherlands. Most of them are about Charlie, of course, since that's where most of the action took place. He certainly is an active little guy – actually not so little – at least for his age. I'll give you a bit of a day-by-day account and point to the photos where appropriate.

February 20

We arrived early in the morning since we took an overnight flight and we were racing against the sun. We landed in Schiphol airport just outside of Amsterdam so had to take a train to Weert. The train service and organization is very good in the Netherlands so it was just a matter of figuring out which train to take, buying a ticket, and hopping the train. The station was right in the airport!

We transferred at Utrecht and then on to Weert through the Dutch countryside. It's quite a change from both BC and Québec – with canals, flat land, small farms, and the occasional windmill. Everything looks so well kept with the gardens organized and even many of the trees pruned to meet exacting standards.

JP, Lies, and Charlie were at the station in Weert when we arrived and we all walked back to their apartment – just a few short blocks away. They are living in a 3-floor concrete tenement building (on the 2nd floor) with their doorway opening to a long balcony-entranceway that they share with others in the building. Many of those others turned out to be fellow volleyball or basketball players, so there are often impromptu meetings and parties taking place all the time.

The whole town was gearing up for Carnival so after we had a little nap we headed off to 'downtown' Weert to pick up some hats for the festivities. Lies had a practice. It seems that everyone dresses up for Carnival – young, old, and in between – so we thought we had better get in the party mood. Charlie and JP bought some hats that you can see in one of the photos



I sent. When we got back to the apartment JP's friend Steve turned up to have a visit and play a game before our salmon supper.

February 21

We got up to a lazy morning – enjoying Charlie as he worked out who these strange people were in his house and showed off for us how he could walk and sign. Just after lunch we headed back downtown to pick up some more costume stuff and do some shopping – this time with Lies. It was market day in Weert so we enjoyed browsing the stalls set up for the event – of course with plenty of flowers and cheese.



On our way back home we ran into a parade with floats and bands – not the 'real' parade, but just a section of the city getting wound up for the real thing which was to take place on Sunday. Lies went off to practice and Fran prepared some tarragon chicken for dinner.

February 22 – Carnival day – or was it my birthday celebration!!

I got up to birthday trimmings and Charlie. We sat down for a conversation and he joined me for some porridge. I have a couple of pictures of our breakfast – one, where you can see him reaching out in his 'give me that' pose – pointing with one finger and rubbing the others to make sure we know it is important. This is usually preceded by his 'please' gesture – brushing his hand across his chest.



We then went to check my e-mail. You can see how eager he is to help out – but JP and Lies have trained him to leave the computer alone, so he usually just points, looks at us, then waves his finger back and forth in the ‘no’ motion that he was taught. In most cases he can resist the temptation to press some keys.

We finished off our time together reading some books.



About 12:30 some of Lies’ relatives came over to visit. It was Marleen, her parents, and sister. You might remember Marleen from the time she came over to see you and Dad at the hospice. She had come out to Vancouver as part of her visit to Canada and we showed her around town. Her parents wanted to see us when we were in the Netherlands and invited us to go with them to Maarstricht so they could show us around the town.

Marleen and her parents joined us for cake “dutch style” (really a flan) and then we all got dressed up in our Carnival clothes and headed off for the main event – a parade through town. I have included a few photos of us by the parade to give you an idea how jolly we all looked – even Charlie. I got to wear the monkey hat that Fran and I picked up for JP in the Montréal airport while waiting for our flight to Amsterdam.

Just as we were getting chilly (at about the 50th float out of a total of 91!) we were invited across the street to have snacks and warm up in the house of a friend of Lies'. It was a wonderful way to see the parade and meet some of JP & Lies' friends in the process.



After we got back home, JP & Lies rearranged their costumes and headed off to their friend Caroline's for supper while Fran and I babysat Charlie. He went right to bed since he had spent such a lot of time walking around the town, but he woke up crying with sore teeth. He was busy cutting some of his final teeth – a number of them at the same time, so he was having a difficult time with it all. We were all in bed before JP & Lies got back home.

What a full and exciting birthday!

February 23

JP & Lies had arranged to borrow one of the team's cars, so we headed off to Gent to visit a medieval castle that JP had his eye on. It is indeed a nice town – and the castle was worth the trip. Its history is full of major events affecting all of Europe during the periods of its heydays. I was particularly intrigued with



Gent's position as a centre of the development of capitalism and the role of the castle in that history. I learned that torture became established as an elaborate technique during the period where criminal acts could only be established by confession. It was a 'natural' consequence of the requirement for confession under such a system. Yikes!

We got back home in time for JP and Lies to put on different costumes and head off to another party with their friend Steve. Fran and I settled in to put Charlie down, check our e-mail, and look at a movie before bed.



February 24

This was the day of Carnival that the town hosted a series of bands in the town square. It was a wild time! The streets were full of bandstands, eating stalls, and most of all colourful costumes all packed into the middle. Fran particularly enjoyed a group of children all decked out in medieval garb dancing their own little square dance in one of the side streets – mouths full of suckers.



Charlie spent his time checking out the festivities and practicing his walking over bricks and manhole covers. We had our first taste of the Dutch version of a donut (with no hole) – Olie Bollen (absolutely delicious but translated it means 'oil balls'!!!!) – and some sort of bratwurst with curry sauce.

Just to finish the day off properly, we had a Dutch meal for supper – prepared by JP – mashed seasoned potatoes with sausage called 'bourkol'. Lies' friend Caroline joined us and her partner Nils came over after his practice.

February 25

Leenderd and Christina (Marleen's parents) came by to take us to Maastricht – the oldest city in the Netherlands. We had a wonderful special tour when Christina dropped in to the Liberal Studies Building at the university there and

asked if we could see the old medieval walls. A woman working in the office was thrilled – and took us on a tour of the building. It turned out that this program has an exchange agreement with the Université de Montréal so she was very happy to show visiting Montréalers around.



We got back around dinner time so Fran got busy making stir fry and we invited Steve over and had a nice evening playing board games. Fran even made a second stir fry when Lies got back from practice.

February 26

We all took the train to Tilberg to meet with Martijn and check out the textile museum. It was a wonderful time – and reminded us of the Asselstine woolen mill in Upper Canada Village since the equipment on display was from about the same period. The museum also has a part where they experiment with artistic aspects of textiles, so there are plenty of computer-driven machines producing all sorts of textile-related items.



On our way back, JP had to take in a portable playpen for exchange at Eindhoven. It was here that I took some photos of the bicycles in the parking lot at the station. As you can see, there is more

space devoted to bicycles than cars.

February 27

Today was a lazy day at home with a short walking trip into town to do some shopping. Charlie made the most of the time – walking ‘all over’ the streets of Weert, and charming all the passers-by, of course.



February 28

This was also a day at home for the most part. Fran got into teaching Charlie his favorite song – Koombala Vista. She gets a lot of his 'more' sign and 'more – please' signs out of him with that one.



The sun came out for a while so we headed off for a nice walk by a nearby lake and a look at the swimming pool. It was closed so we couldn't go in, but the walk was wonderful anyway. Lies went to an away game so she couldn't come with us.



Fran made a stir fry supper then JP & I went to see Steve's basketball game in Weert. The local home team beat Amsterdam (the top team in the league) so there was a lot of celebrating going on. Steve was a hero of the game. Fran stayed home to babysit so she missed out on all the noise, but she seemed to appreciate the slow time on her own. (Note Charlie's leg warmers. Fran got tired of seeing his bare ankles—especially when he was in the backpack—so she made him this pair leg warmers out of a pair of socks that she bought.)

After we got back from the game, the local gang showed up and went out to celebrate. I joined Fran on the babysitting team while the others partied.

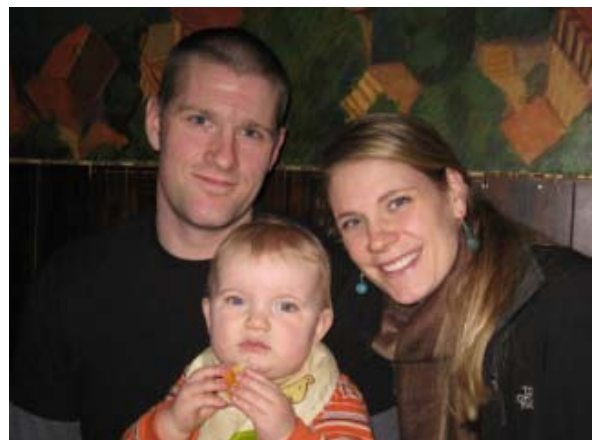
March 1

JP made arrangements to borrow one of the team cars so that we could take a trip to Amsterdam. We mostly hung out in the university and red-light district since we had to accommodate Charlie's insistence that he walk a good part of the way.



He got fascinated with the pigeons in Dam Square and when a man offered him some rice to throw to the birds, he decided to taste it himself.

Lies and JP headed off looking for a fondue restaurant that they remembered and we finally found it in the Nieuwmarkt. We made reservations then followed Charlie around the square as he checked out all the walking surfaces he could find. I searched out good photos of the hoists on the buildings (for hoisting up furniture on the outside of the houses) and more of the many bicycles that are found everywhere in the city. Apparently they pull about 30,000 bicycles from the canals per year (and plenty of cars as well).



We enjoyed a lovely dinner of cheese and beef fondue before heading back to Weert.

March 2

This was our last full day in Weert, so we made it a relaxing one. JP went off to work out in the gym then we headed in to town for a late lunch at the paneoken restaurant, did some shopping, and visited the post office. On the way in to town I took some photos of the arrangement the Dutch make at the stop lights – a place for bicycles to accumulate at the head of the waiting traffic. This means that the bike riders get to be the first off the mark when the light changes – just another example of the priority they give to cyclists.

The other photo here is of the 'singing stairs' in the place where JP & Lies are living. When you walk on them, they make lovely 'singing' sound – that lasts for a few minutes after the walkers leave.

We took some photos of various groups of people for the record. Lies was at practice, so she missed out in this photo session.



That evening Jolene, Jeff, and Noel return from France and Ireland. They had been staying at JP & Lies' just before we arrived and since we were there, they are now staying with Steve for a few days. Noel is the little girl that Charlie played with for many days before they left. JP made spaghetti dinner for us all and Steve joined us after his practice.

March 3

Fran and I spent the morning packing and having a final visit with Lies before we had to pile in the car for the trip to Schiphol airport. On the way, JP took us for a

detour to see the parking lot where he proposed to Lies. We had a lovely visit in the airport before we had to head off to the boarding gate and security.



Well that is the story of our February break with Lies, JP, and Charlie. It was a wonderful time and we are left with many happy memories.

Hope this letter (that I put together and Fran edited) gave you lots of pleasure.