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There are many wonderful things about this time of year. Not the least of them is that, with any kind of luck, we can design exactly the balance of life that we desire! It's like standing in front of an excellent smorgasbord, and saying -- "I think I'll have a good helping of that very festive looking family-time, and a large spoonful of that tasty lying-around-recovering-time. And perhaps a garnish of surprise visitors. And a good pile of long-promised reading. And there's still room on my plate for a serving of hunter-gathering...."

It has indeed been like that for us. We've also made sure there's been some time for counting of blessings. I much prefer that activity to making new year's resolutions: you can revisit the happenings which you can be grateful for in retrospect, but would never have imagined to put into resolutions for the year ahead!

We know we have lots of blessings, but every now and then we get reminded in stark ways. Mani came back from his stone-carving course covered in dust with a part-carved sculpture, and a wonderful story. One of the group learning to carve was blind! Working just with his sense of touch, he hammered and chiselled away with the rest of them, creating a shapely stone bowl.

Mani has since worked a little more on his figure of a kneeling girl holding a basin that he'll line with paua. He now looks the part too - I've sewn him a sculptor's smock and apron so he can make as much dust as he pleases.

The 'friends and family' part of the holiday season has had many delights. On Christmas day we took *Feierabend* into Wellington City and parked outside a friend's house so that we could simply fall into bed once we were exhausted from the eating and drinking and talking. A very fine solution!

I've also had the joy of discovering that my younger nephews have emerged as most interesting

young men! Well, of course I would never suggest to my family that it was in any way a surprise, but you know how boys can appear during those awkward years... And now here they are as intelligent conversationalists, and one of them has started reading the very books which have most excited me over the last couple of decades.

Which leads me to another delight. Our editor Trudi brought her friend Isabel to visit, and I told them this story about my nephew and the books. We swapped favourite titles, and then cleared our minds with a walk on Paraparaumu Beach, where a very high tide made the walking exciting, and the collection of fascinating bits of driftwood inevitable.

Trudi had urged Mani and me to visit Isabel in Sevelen last year, but we'd not managed it. I think we absolutely must do that this year!



Now what recipe will catch a girl...?

Still on friends and family (well it is that time of year) we had Mani's youngest son, Daniel, to stay before Christmas. He's the one who has changed life as a chef in Switzerland for life as a roofing contractor in Nelson. Less stress, and more time for hunting and fishing! Only problem is, you don't get to meet many girls that way ... so if anyone knows a nice Swiss/Kiwi girl down Nelson way, you could tell her about Daniel. He's a VERY good cook!

On clever kids.. we visited Heinz Jäggi (Trix was off being a new grandmother!) and he showed us the high quality pho-

tos of Nadine's *Ornitho Maia* costume which was the supreme winner of the World of Wearable Arts last year. The newspaper photos which I'm sure we all saw simply couldn't do justice to the extraordinary work that she has done. It is such a superb combination of high imagination and meticulous crafting. Perhaps you get a hint of where she gets her talent from - though on a very different scale - when you see what Heinz can do with a chainsaw!

I can't finish the "families" theme without reporting on the bird families. The paradise ducklings are now in adult plumage and doing daily flying practice - all ten in formation. The pukeko babies are fully fledged too, but they still don't think they're too old to beg their parents for food - and the parents still feed them (as do we). The latest bird family to appear are the California Quails, little bundles of fluff scurrying along behind their head-bobbing parents.

The swallows are now back in numbers too, swooping over the water. Despite being right by the lake, we are never bitten by mosquitos or sandflies. Thank you birds!

Our smorgasbord of pleasures has had some hunter-gathering too. The blueberry pick-your-own place in Pauatahanui is in full swing; the Johanneskraut has flowered well in our secret spots on the Akatarawas and Manor Park; we've found "pick your own" beans and snow-peas at Paekakariki - and our self-sown cherry tomatoes are ripening nicely (a shame the pukekos are fond of them too!)

The only blight on life has been a bit of a saga with someone in the village who has taken exception to the manuka smoke from Mani's cold-smoker. As Isabel said darkly - "*Füdlbürger!*"

Wellington readers might even have seen the glorious photo of Mani in the newspaper report about it! It's a great story which perhaps I'll make space for in the next episode.