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March 31, 2015

Dear Jeff,

Hello from the big W.

The three sisters garden/farm idea didn't take off last year as we'd hoped. The beans and peas did pretty well - you may never have liked them, but we ate a ton of edamame last summer and had a whole bunch of beans and split peas dried for using over the winter. They turned out to be our saving grace. The corn didn't do so hot - maybe we hadn't planted it in the right way, or too far away from the other two to benefit from the root nutrient interactions. Roger thinks that, whatever the other problems, we overplanted the corn, and he's very probably right about that. The squash almost all crapped out on us. We think there was some kind of parasite, but without any real way to properly test things we'll just have to wonder. We're pretty sure it wasn't fungal, as you can see and readily identify that. Anyway, we saved the seeds of those few squash that did live through the summer and torched the fields and brush last fall, hoping that fire would get rid of whatever the problem was. Dirty work.

So yeah, last winter was pretty lean. We had split pea soup pretty much every day from late November through mid-March. It's good stuff, and we were able to mooch / trade beans for some beef and ham bones and bacon from various neighbors to give it a little more richness. But four months of one type of soup accompanied by some cornbread is more than a little monotonous. Guess I shouldn't bitch — others elsewhere have been through so much worse. We did have a nice crop of apples from the trees surrounding the house, too — but don't we always — so there was a bit of sweetness to be had. The Jonathans turned out especially well this year, and we ate them quick as we could — they don't keep for anything, but we learned that long ago. Cider, too! Our "neighborhood" had a big community pressing and we came away with almost ten gallons of the stuff. Fermented virtually all of it, because, man, it's nice to have that keeping you warm through the cold months.

I guess, in light of the fact that we had cider, things weren't too bad at all. We holed up in early December. Roger had laid up a good supply of wood, played banjo and tinkered with the bikes and I cooked the soup and baked and mended clothes and fumbled around on the piano.

And we both slept a lot, and tripped out a bit (but I'll get to that). The weather was cold, but not overly so. Less snow than usual, but other than that, a pretty typical winter.

We haven't given up on the three sisters farm idea, though. We're hoping the plants that grow from the seeds we saved will also have some resistance to whatever the problem was.

Roger's been hanging out with some of the older farmers at the co-op, drinking some horrible coffee mixed with dandelion roots and talking shop. He got some ideas about rejiggering the size of the crop clusters, so hopefully our yield will improve this year.

Here's some of the best news, one of the things I really wanted to write to you about. We've got morels! YEE HAW! I'd really like to say we planned it, but you know the deal with morels. There's just no telling when or where they're going to show up. Well, so we were out surveying things just a couple weeks ago, trying to plot where each crop cluster would go. I was sketching the layout of the field, spacing and such, when I heard Roger start cackling.

Well, you know Roger's quick to laugh, so I didn't make much of it. But he walked around behind me, held my head between his hands and shifted my gaze up. I'd never seen so many morels in one place. It was the mother lode.

We knew we'd never be able to gather them all, so we biked all around to the different farms quick as we could and rounded people up. We had seven families come out to help with the picking. All told, we brought in over 250 pounds of morels! (We left quite a few in the field, in the hopes that they'll come back next year.) We took the lion's share, of course, but everyone else left more than satisfied with a couple dozen pounds of mushrooms to each family. We probably could have kept more and still had people go away happy, but those other folks had been so decent to us over the winter it felt like we should return the favor.

So now we're up to our eyeballs in morels. Roger has set up a few old, salvaged screen windows, trying to dry them that way. I've been breading them in cornmeal, a little salt and pepper and frying them in leftover bacon fat. Good god, they're just amazing. Roger almost ate

himself sick on them the other day. We've even been adding them to our soup — they make it a lot better, but I feel like the mushrooms should be on their own.

We're reasonably certain it was last fall's burn off that sprung them. I've been reading up a bit on them lately and a good scorching seems to be a fairly common precursor to a big fruiting. I don't think we ought to burn again this fall — I'm afraid we might damage the mycelia. But we're encouraging our other neighbors to burn, staggering them year to year. It's doubtful we'll get mother lode type fruitings, but hopefully we can get decent ones regularly, as heading out to pick wild morels is such a pain in the ass. (Not nearly as dangerous as it used to be, though.)

We've also been gathering and using some psychedelics. As the squash failed last year, I took to helping out at Rob and Heather Montgomery's farm. There's not a whole lot one can do when a crop just sputters like that, so I figured I'd make myself productive. By mid-November, after all our harvest tasks had been accomplished, I was working almost full-time out there. Feeding and watering the cattle, general

maintenance, stuff like that. (Built up some goodwill for us, which made mooching bones and a little bit of meat from them over the winter that much easier.) Anyway, I was out in their pasture to load up cow patties. Most of them I saw had clusters of little brown mushrooms poking out of them. I picked them out and kept them separate from the dung, and asked Rob whether I could keep them. He eyed me for a few seconds, then laughed and said to just be careful, as he knew for a fact they were pretty potent. Ended up with almost 2 lbs. of them, dry weight! I took a few ounces back to Rob; he was happy to have them. And he was right, they're phenomenal. It made me want to tie dye things again, but without a good source of dye we're probably out of luck. They're *psilocybe cubensis*, according to the couple guides we consulted (and we did consult them before consuming the shrooms.)

We tripped on them once in early January, and Roger went off on how civilization had fundamentally changed in the last four years. That we'd become like mushrooms themselves — growing out of the old, dead civilization. Of course, it was stoned rambling,

but he was sincere about it afterwards like he'd glimpsed something really basic about the world.

I have to say that I disagree with him. You and I both know that most mushrooms are saprophytes — years and years of hunting morels with grandma was a pretty good education fungus-wise — but that is emphatically not what this culture of ours is now. In fact, I'd argue that, as a cultural organism, we've shifted from being saprophytic to being somehow mycorrhizal or almost truly photosynthetic. For example, think about all the ways in which pop culture and fashion used to simply regenerate itself out of stuff that had fallen out of favor a decade or so prior — I have bell bottoms from both the 70s, early 90s and early 00s as evidence. Things now are so totally punk, not as in shitty music, but as in forging your own way and the do-it-yourself ethic. I guess there were always streaks of that originality in culture prior to everything going dark, but it was all so overshadowed by catty, horrible people trying to sell others on the repackaged, rehashed, rewarmed versions of the original stuff.

The irony is almost all gone now, and to be honest, we really like it that way. I guess I just muddled everything here, but of course, neither Roger and me are real biologists — naturalists, yes, but not trained scientists or cultural critics — so please don't hold us too accountable for the real appropriateness of the metaphor.

Finally, and this is the other main reason I'm writing you — other than the fact that I love you and want to keep you informed of the general state of affairs around here — we're pregnant! Well, I am. Hee hee.

The long winter, coupled with the fairly meager harvest and relatively plentiful intoxicants meant lots of cuddling was virtually a necessity. Probably too much information for you, but there it is. So yeah, it's underway. We're excited, eager, gut-bustingly nervous and all sorts of other emotions all at once right now. Doc says I'm about two months along, so you can expect to be an uncle in late November or early December.

I know you're worried about the risks we're taking with this. We know, and we know they're even greater than the

last time we tried. But we're at a point now where we feel that we can chance this again. Hope springs eternal, right? If not, well, at least we've got mushrooms to put in the soup.

Hope you, Pat and little Jeff and Joan weathered the winter well. Best wishes to all of you for a happy, peaceful and productive year.

Love,
Roger & Megan

P.S. The spore print is taken from one of the cubies I gathered last fall. Chances are very good that the spores are viable. Just tear off the print, slip it in a well-watered compost or shit pile and I bet you'll get a decent crop this fall. (Wash them off before you eat them, of course.) Have fun.

P.P.S. - Hi! - R.