

Bloody 'ell it's nearly Christmas again and we should have sent the cards 3 weeks ago! As you may have guessed Christine has left the task of the Christmas letter to me this year, but I will try my best to make it as painfully boring as usual. I suppose I had better get the tedious details of the kids out of the way first.

Andrew is 12 and is an inch smaller than his mother. This has no effect on discipline, as grown men have been known to cower in fear of an enraged Christine. He is showing signs of being a teenager, but is a real nice kid most of the time. He is doing very good at school and plays for the Salem U13 soccer team (I promised not to mention he missed a penalty, so I won't). He is playing the trombone, either that or he has a severe flatulence problem. He wants to be a football player when he grows up, but he has shown no sign of turning black yet.

Ellie has just turned 11 and has been a teenager for a couple of years now. She is growing up quickly and always has her nose in a book. Ellie has this weird problem - she likes doing school work. She certainly doesn't get it from either parent. Her basic personality is to be a lazy bugger (I do know where she gets that trait). I call her "luzock". I'm not sure what it means, but it sums her up. The state of her room drives Christine to distraction, but it looks fine to me. Must be genetic. She has taken up the flute, which at first seems a much better choice than the trombone, but the problem is that she likes practicing. There are some tunes she has practiced several thousand times and they just don't seem to get any better. Her most redeeming feature is that she is the only one that laughs at my stupid jokes.

Stephen is 8 and still remains the character of the family. His two front teeth have grown before the two on either side, giving him a definite beaver-like quality. Unlike most other children, Stephen learns by touching. "Stephen, put that knife/gun/syringe/axe down" must be the most used phrase in the Brown house. He has an amazingly happy outlook on life and an infectious sense of humor - we rent comedy movies just so we can watch Stephen laugh at them. He is doing well at school, he is easily distracted (probably off touching something) but seems to be concentrating much better lately. He adores Andrew, which Andrew likes most of the time and drives him nuts every now and then. Luckily he doesn't play an instrument yet, but I see him playing a banjo some day.

Gregory just turned 7 and now rides the big yellow school bus every day. He spent all his life watching the big kids get on the school bus and now he is one. No, I mean he is a big kid, not a school bus. He is as tall as Stephen and the most athletic of kids. He loves playing soccer and football with Andrew and gives him a good run around. He had his first organized soccer practice this summer with a bunch of kids who were surprised you couldn't pick up the ball. He woke us all up at 5:30 in his soccer kit asking how long before his game - "only ten and a half hours, you beautiful child, thank you for waking me in time" was all I could utter. In his first ever game he scored 5 goals by the half, so they switched him to the other team, where he ended up scoring all 11 goals in a 6-5 game. Takes after his dad (whoever that is).

Well, that's the kids out of the way. Who else? Oh yes, Christine. She is still the quiet charming little housewife that obeys my every command. Hah! She is sitting in front of me, guzzling beer, watching football and yelling at the commentators. I guess you could say she is maturing with age.

Christine is now working as a Montessori pre-school teacher. She is really into the whole

Montessori philosophy, beatings, electro-shock treatment etc. Sometimes she even does this to the kids. She was born to mother and has always been great with kids, so she is taking to teaching like a fish to water. She is also into community activities, president of the PTA, on school committees, and always getting suckered into organizing something. Everywhere we go around town there are harried women with chubby kids leaping out of doorways and greating Christine like long-lost relatives. Even she doesn't recognize all of them. It's worse when I am by myself and an accosted by some complete stranger wanting to know if Christine has an opinion on something (she always does). I am invariably polite and usually respond "Who are you and why are you bothering me?". Those of you who know me well will be able to translate that phrase.

I'm still the same adorable creature of old; a bit older, grayer and heavier, but there again I always thought I was too young, dark and thin. I'm still working for a living, it's a man's life tonking on a keyboard. I still enjoy the computer stuff and people still pay me, so I can't complain. I have an affinity for startup companies. I use to believe that I would make millions from a successful one, but now I just do it for the excitement and fun.

I am still playing soccer. It's something about being the one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind. Now that I've turned 40 I've graduated to the "Over-40" team. I have gone from being a slow old 39-year fogie to the young gazelle of the team. I know, never has my name appeared in the same paragraph as the phrase "young gazelle" before, and I doubt it ever will again.

What else has been going on in 1995? My father died in January. He became ill over Christmas and luckily passed away without any pain. My mother came over during the spring with an urge to spoil her grandchildren. Christine took the brood to England during the summer and Gregory came back with a snotty English accent. That's 1995 in a nutshell.

Most of the dramatic changes in life are too gradual to be noticed. It seems only a short time ago that we were arguing about who changed the next nappy and now Andrew and Ellie have started baby-sitting the young ones. We are in the mellow second trimester of raising a family, snuggled between wiping bottoms and dealing with adolescents. Life is good.....so far.

As for 1996, our biggest plans involve building a new house. When I say 'building' I won't actually be swinging any hammers, I'll just be doing the hard part - paying for it. I would invite you all over here, but no-one ever pays any heed of what I say. If you want to come to America - go to Florida, I hear they like tourists down there.