

Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! No, I haven't included a photograph this year. No one was looking much different from last year, although I do appear to be getting even shorter! Both Stephen and Gregory are far too close to eye level for comfort. It really is the weirdest sensation, suddenly finding yourself living with "real" people, after so many years of being surrounded by little children! Even Mick seems so grown up these days!!

Welcome to an early Christmas letter from the land of the greatest soap opera ever to hit the airwaves (who would ever name their child Bill or Monica after that fiasco?). And of course here in New Hampshire we are being treated to plenty of appearances and adverts from our latest presidential election campaign. Unbelievably, the first candidates announced their intentions and started spending money in February of this year and Election Day is not until November of the year 2000! It certainly is a little difficult to own up to being an American at times like these, but I live in hope that one day we will elect a sensible and well-qualified person as our president. Where is Hilary when you need her? Why waste her in New York?

The nights are getting dark and cold and Thanksgiving is coming up, so it must be time to write the annual update from the Brown household. It doesn't seem long since I was sitting here typing the last one. I'm using Mick's fancy-shmancy laptop from work and it's correcting all my mistakes as I type, which I find amazing. Hmmm. It does not appear to be impressed with the word "shmancy". But it is lovely to be curled up in a comfy chair, instead of hunched over the desk in the dining room.

Now, tell me. How many people noticed that I forgot to mention myself in my own Christmas letter last year? I only realized when I reread the thing months later. So I'm going to be first up this time, just to make sure I'm included! I think the phrase "the spirit is willing but the body is weak" kind of sums me up just now. 44 year-old bodies do not shake things off as well as they used to do. I am trying to treat it as a lesson in how to grow old gracefully! I'm still prone to stuffing too much into every day, but I have so much fun, it is hard to decide what to give up. So, I chose house cleaning, that I pay someone else to do, and a selection of chores that I donated to my unwilling children! Feels fine and gives me time to quilt, read, socialize under the pretense of volunteering and run off every day to work at the Montessori school! I sealed my Montessori fate for the next few years by taking up the offer of a partnership in the school from my friend, Lee, so I can now describe myself as a CEO and American businesswoman. I still dress appallingly, though, and drink too much beer. Reassuring in many ways!

The house is in an unusual state of calm tonight. Andrew is off bowling with friends, who show up driving an alarmingly elegant selection of cars. Someone who gives their 16 year-old a BMW to drive to the local burger joint wants their head looked at. Thankfully, Andrew himself is finding driving to school every day, with his mother harassing him from the passenger seat, enough to cope with for now. Driver's Education lessons at the High School come soon, then 3 months of still driving with an adult and then he's away. I won't dwell on what that will be like! Life is getting rather grown up for him at school, too. The work is hard and everyone keeps asking him what he wants to do at college, which will arrive in a short year and a half! Do you remember those days, when the only thing you knew was what you didn't want to do? So, he smiles his beautiful smile and shrugs his shoulders, then leans down from his ridiculous height and tells me not to worry!! Doesn't he know that that's a mother's job description? He is gorgeous, if scruffy, and leaves a big hole whenever he is away.

Gregory is sat on the other end of the settee, watching the Sunday night football game, as I

type. My baby is already 11 years old and as big a Patriots fan as I am. He's still soccer-mad, too. Mick has stopped playing with him, as it is too embarrassing to be left in the dust time and time again. Enthusiastic and emotional, he keeps us on our toes all the time. The joy of bringing up so many kids is that each one teaches you something you didn't know before and Gregory has taught us more than most! Like how to resist nailing a child's head to the wall! I love to spend time with him: life through the eyes of a vivacious 11 year-old is delightful.

I'm jumping around, so I'll update you on my beloved husband next. The adjective "beloved" is not because he has just bought me a gorgeous new wedding ring, to replace the original that got stolen from my sister's "knicker" drawer in Birmingham earlier this year! After 20 years of marriage, we both thought that we deserved a medal for lasting that long with each other. Admit it! When we got married, there were any number of friends (and relatives!) that thought we wouldn't make 20 months!! To celebrate, we ran away for a week in Bermuda. There is nothing better than going somewhere warm and glamorous at the end of a long New England winter. Could become habit-forming. We are lucky enough to have a very good friend that moves into the house and takes care of everything while we are away. I ask the children if they mind and they tell us that we can go any time, as life with Helen in charge is great fun! Perfect!

Mick is still at 3Com. Took us round their fabulous building last weekend, equipped with glorious views, on-site health club and thousands of little cubicles for all those engineers. I suppose each of us is lucky to find a job that we love, but I find it hard to imagine loving work in a computer company. Mind, his blood runs cold at the thought of spending his days with 3-6 year olds! Life in a big company has never been his style and it seems that another start-up is raising its head, just in time to fill in those long, dark winter evenings. Never so happy as when he has a new project on the go! And he is coping with life with a bunch of teenagers in his usual quiet and tolerant style! Actually, it is all going relatively smoothly, considering that we were prepared for much worse. He is teaching his style of humor to his eldest son, who is proving to be quite the apt student, and I now have to cope with both of them!!

Stephen is in 7th grade, which means he is 12, going on 17, at least in his mind. We have a rule that Stephen's eyes need to stay on a horizontal plane whenever a parent is speaking! His teachers are loud in their praise of his hard work and organizational skills, while we all stand outside the laundry room berating him for not washing whatever it is we need to wear that day. Use of hair gel is a requirement of his morning ablutions, although he assures me that he is much less obsessed with his appearance than most of his classmates! Still as together as ever, he is the one child in this place that I never seem to worry over. His latest craze is any kind of strategy game and he wanders the house asking if anyone wants to play a board game. Most of us are too savvy to say yes, although Mick is teaching him the subtleties of backgammon and still maintaining an advantage for now. I refuse to ever play Connect Four with him again!

Last, but never to be thought of as least, is Ellie. Now 15 and up at the High School, she still looks and acts older than any of us. As the only girl, she studiously avoids any attempt by the family to teach her the fine womanly arts of domestic engineering. She refuses to cook and even Gregory can clean a better toilet than her. Her room still sets the standard as the one most likely to drive her mother to distraction, although I've discovered that storming in now and then and actually tidying it up myself drives her insane and makes me feel much better! The flute is still to be heard endlessly, but thankfully more melodically. She is a well-

established "band-ie" or "band-o" or something that denotes membership in the High School Marching Band and is therefore overjoyed that they have been chosen to march in the Rose Bowl Parade in January of 2001. Spending a whole year trying to raise \$1000, just so you can march in formation for 5½ miles while playing the piccolo, all on New Year's Day, is not my idea of fun, but I'm not Ellie! And she doesn't celebrate the start of a new year in quite the same way I do!! We are now quite accustomed to her many successes and work hardest at not taking all her skills and awards for granted. Where did she come from?

For all our resolutions to see America, we both ended up in England this year, albeit briefly. I flew over for the weekend, no less, for Mum's 75th birthday in March. It was so lovely to be part of one of the Milligans' infamous family get-togethers and a great way to touch base with all the family. And Mick got to experience the delight of Cambridge on a week-long business trip in the fall. Enjoyed it much more than the many days and weeks he got to spend at Microsoft in Seattle this year. He tells me that he is not young enough and not arrogant enough to work there full-time!

So you can see that life is kind. I sometimes wonder if I would write these letters if Andrew dropped out of school, Ellie got pregnant and Stephen and Gregory turned into juvenile delinquents. I'd like to think that I would, and it would certainly make for a different style of Christmas communication, don't you think?? But for the time being you're stuck with these. Hope it keeps you up to date with us and makes it easier to call and ask to come and stay. One of my friends from Newcastle did just that last year and was delighted that I even had the same accent as I did those many (22!) years ago. So, don't worry that we haven't been in touch much, just give us a ring (603-893-2420). The house is plenty big and the area is pleasant and relatively cheap. We love visitors. Make it a millennium resolution.

And until then, have a lovely holiday season and stay well.