

What, Christmastime again? Wasn't it just last week we were worried about Y2K? Bloody hell I'm getting old. But luckily I'm also getting thinner, taller, less gray, and younger looking. And I drink less! Ho ho ho, happy Christmas! So I guess I should stick to the old Christmas letter format and bore everyone stupid with exaggerated tales and made up stories about a bunch of kids few of you will every see. I love artistic freedom.

Andrew - quiet, fluffy goatee, easy going, 12 year old at heart, what a nice kid. He was voted the Most Valuable Player for the high school soccer team and hasn't stopped smiling since. The only time he shows confidence and self-assurance is when he is running around on grass kicking someone. He limps off the field and reverts to the quiet kid hiding in the background.

He is still 6'1" (that's about 4851 milligrams for you metric Europeans) and as thin as a rake. A male trait that has run for almost a single generation in the Brown family. He's driving, oh is he driving! I promised I wouldn't mention the incident with Audi, the stone wall, and the high speed reversing maneuver, so I won't. Like a good parent I let the matter rest and rarely bring it up, definitely not more than once an hour. Someone asked if he was injured, I replied "not yet". He puts up with his dad very well, just smiles his angelic smile and takes the Audi out for a quick spin.

Last Christmas he asked for an electric guitar from Santa, a 10 day wonder I thought. No such luck, he has taken to it like a duck to water. He's forever strumming through some melodic heavy metal ditty, amazingly I can even recognize some tunes. It's not unusual to hear Nirvana from underneath the toilet door, perfect music to oblute to.

This led to the genesis of the heavy metal band Liquid Fetus. Yep, you read it right, they wanted the name to be shocking - good job guys. LF practice in our basement several times a week, Christine and I have taken to heavy drinking at the local bar on these nights. Well it's a good excuse, and we can still hear the bass line from the bar. Songs about how life sucks, teenage angst, how no-one understands them (I certainly don't understand their bloody music - boy, I'm turning into my dad, "turn off that damn racket . . . and get your hair cut!"). I told them to write about real events in their lives, but "mom gave me shit for being late", or "the dog ate my homework" aren't traditional heavy metal themes.

Andrew leaves home next summer, he will be well missed. He has the perfect easy going personality for the eldest kid. He sets the tone perfectly for the others who all adore him. If Gregory was first life would be very different; would we still have had four? College in September, but which one "I dunno", what to study "I dunno". Who does know at 17, but it still doesn't make the situation any less stressful.

Sometimes I reflect on the stress of raising teenagers, we worry about them getting home 10 minutes late, about a 'C+' in calculus, arguing with their siblings and so on. We don't worry about drugs, drinking, fighting, bullying, pregnancies, AIDS, failing school, or bad health. We are very lucky people. But we still worry.

And now for something completely different - Ellie, queen of the Brown house. Yes, we are all satellites orbiting around Ellie's shining star. We decided to vote for president of the family

and Ellie won by many votes, luckily I used my executive privilege to veto the results and restore the current benign dictatorship (no not me, Christine).

So you ask the boys "How was your day?", lots of one word answers, OK, fine, boring, same-ole. You ask Ellie, "Well . . . you will never guess what Susan said to Stephanie about Chrissie's lobotomy . . .". Forty minutes later as she is winding down Christine will walk into the room and ask Ellie how her day was, "Well . . . you will never guess what Susan etc.". I've learned my lesson, I always ask if she's had a good day and after she says yes I conclude the exchange with a quick "good". I can always get the concise summary later from Christine.

She is still her father's girl, the most beautiful, intelligent, witty, girl in the world. This is not just me speaking as a father, it is a well known fact and all you other fathers are just plain mistaken. She has even perfected the great suck-up techniques required of all perfect daughters. When arguing she always says "I'm never wrong unless I'm arguing with dad", - I told you, a perfect daughter.

She is sweet 16 but acts closer to 26 - more mature than I will ever be (I know, not a good comparison). She has the dreaded Christine syndrome, the desire to be involved. Student Council, New Hampshire Youth Orchestra, High School Marching Band, High School Soccer Team, and so on. A constant stream of driving her somewhere.

I try to avoid the standard Christmas letter format that lists all the activities of the goodie-two-shoes kids but this is Ellie's life, one activity after another. "Dad can you get up at 5:30 and take me to Concorde for band then pick me up at 9:00 and take me to Keene for a soccer game and then take me to flute lessons and blah blah blah", There is only one answer, "Andrew, give Ellie a ride but on no account reverse the Audi".

The big event in Ellie's life at the moment is the Salem High School Marching Band has been invited to participate in the Rose Bowl parade in Pasadena on January 1st. A very big honor, it's the most famous of parades and is nationally televised. Marching bands tend to have more than their fair share of weirdoes (known to High School kids as 'bandoes') and Ellie is traveling with 250 of them to California for a week. Ellie plus 250 gormless spotty oiks, and she is looking forward to it!

There are life-changing events that happen over the years, going to school, leaving home, buying a house, having kids. None can compare to the biggest of them all, the time your older kids are old enough to baby-sit the younger ones. That, plus the invention of the cell phone equals parental freedom (and increased alcohol consumption). Ellie reached the stage before Andrew, "Ellie, make sure the kids finish their homework, clean their teeth, got to bed on time. Andrew, stay out of Ellie's way". I told Gregory not to mess with Ellie when she is baby-sitting. "I never mess with Ellie, she might hurt me", "Has she ever hurt you?", "No, but I know she would". I wish I had that sort of authority.

Stephen, Stephen, Stephen I think that just about sums him up. I should just stop right now while we are on a positive. Stephen, the most happy, smiley, laughing, carefree kid in the world is now an ax murderer. No, not really, he is actually much worse, he is a teenager. The

first two slid through the early teenage phase with only brief spells of rebellion. Boy, did we think we were perfect parents, when kids do good its all down to perfect parenting, when they mess up its the dormant genes from distant generation (on their mothers side). I know I was never a miserable surly stubborn jerk as a teenager; I perfected these attributes much earlier in life.

"Stephen stop smashing that hammer into the breakfast bar", "Why, I'm being careful, I won't hurt it!". "Aaarrgggghhhhh". Stephen's teenage moods are exaggerated by this previous happy demeanor. We keep telling ourselves it's only a phase and he will return to his true adorable personality. Yes he will, yes he will, yes he will

Stephen still plays the Baritone, a tuba-like instrument. He views making music as a sport, he always finishes his piece several bars before the rest of the orchestra, "Yes, won again!". It's amazing how all the other kids have trouble keeping the correct beat. Luckily it seems to make no difference to the overall noise.

Stephen's career goals are focused on joining the Police and becoming a member of the SWAT team. A truly American child. He wanted a paint-ball gun for Christmas, I was afraid to say "over my dead body". Can you imagine, "Stephen, go to your room NOW!", Splat! Splat! Multi-colored dad.

His took up karate and has found an activity that is his alone and he is getting a lot out of it. I have a suspicion his real goal is to be able to beat the crap out of his brothers. Karate also teaches self discipline and inner peace, but luckily SWAT training will remove these useless traits.

"Gregory, stop jumping on the furniture" seems to sum up G-man. The bugger never slows down always running around the house throwing and catching rolled up clothing (we have a no-balls-in-the-house rule; the no-rolled-up-clothing-in-the-house rule didn't work). His philosophy is that furniture resembles NFL linebackers and should be dodged, hit, leaped over and jumped on at any opportunity.

Irrepressible, noisy, enthusiastic but drives the other kids up the wall. Andrew just lets it ride over him, Ellie freezes him with a glassy stare, so unfortunately Stephen takes a lot of the high energy output.

"Dad, can I have Cherrios for breakfast", "OK", "YEEESSSS, whoa baby, whhoooo", punch the air, end-zone victory dance, spike the rolled up socks, leap over a linebacker. I can't wait for him to ask for the car keys.

The only natural athlete in the family he lives for sport, if he has to write a book reports it's a baseball book, for art he draws footballers and so on. He plays soccer for Salem's U14 team and has just started organized hockey. Hockey is a big sport around here, ice time is at a premium - his league plays at 6:10 on a Sunday morning. This works great for Christine, you won't believe the number of chores I will trade to sleep in past 5:00am on a Sunday.

He hardly ever ice skated before the hockey but is an avid roller-blader. The techniques are very similar so he picked it up OK except stopping is completely different. During games he looks like a regular hockey player until he approaches the boards at 25 mph and can't stop. His technique is to assume the spread eagle position and rely on his body armor to soften the blow. It's amusing until you realize it's your kid. He scored his first goal last week and has been replaying it with broom handles and rolled up socks all week.

Gregory's big dilemma at the moment is wondering if he plays football for the Patriots and hockey for the USA will this make him ineligible for playing soccer for England. I assured him by that time USA will be far better than England anyway and there is no point in playing for these third world countries in decline since 1966.

So that sums up the family, as for me, I've had a really good year. I became a true American this year, no I didn't learn the words to the Star Spangled Banner; nope, I didn't join the National Rifle Association; I did something even more American - I bought a pickup truck. A Ford F150 full sized truck with extended cab. Its so big it won't fit in the garage - isn't that awesome! I got the smallest available engine the 4.8 liter. I can go to the local hardware store without people sneering at me for pulling in with a minivan. I love my truck.

Another high point of my year was a long weekend in Barcelona with Dave, Nige and Del, old college friends. That was the weekend the Spanish breweries reported record earnings. It also explains the kid's shirts in the picture. What a great place, its got everything, perfect weather, good food, first class footie team, excellent outdoor bars and topless beaches - is this what heaven is like?

Christine is still Christine and I think that sums it up pretty well. She still embarrasses the kids at concerts by always being the last one to stop clapping, no one seems to notice except one kid on stage bright red and hiding behind a friend. Now she is a true American she has taken up "Whooooooing", you know the sound. The kids thinks she only does it to embarrass them, I thinks it's to embarrass me, but really it's only her inner personality shining through.

Christine went to the Million Mom March in Washington DC this year (total attendance 126) all by herself, and had a great time. I think just being in a posh hotel in Washington without the family was the best part. The march was to support women's issues and rally for stricter hand gun control (I told her to pack some heat in case it got ugly). She came back with a bumper sticker "I'm a Mom, and I vote!". How embarrassing driving around in her car. Thank God I didn't have the truck then, although I could hide it behind the gun rack.

She is now joint owner and Chief Executive Officer of the Merrimack Valley Montessori School. Pretty damn impressive eh? Her job is still the same, instilling leftist pinko Montessori philosophy in the minds of America's future leaders. Actually I don't think the school takes kids anymore. Its an extension of her quilt group, a bunch of women having a whale of a time, sitting round drinking coffee, eating donuts and discussing men's flaws (isn't that an oxymoron?).

Well that's about it for another year. The Browns are cruising along doing fine, outside lane in overdrive in a big truck. Hope you all have a great Christmas and New Year, and avoid the potholes and traffic jams.