

A different kind of letter this year. Out with the half page of all the boring details of each kids life. They are all doing great, they all have their ups and downs, and are maturing into tremendous people. You know you are doing a good job raising children when they don't answer the phone "WASSAAAAP".



And what about that posed family photo? The one moment in the year when the whole family is facing the same direction and grinning. "Smile or you get a pointed stick up the bum". We took one this year but the out-takes where much more representative of the family.



Yes, Christine really does spend most of her time laughing, and to think she was referred to as grumpy before she met me.

It's been a busy year for the Browns, so no change in that respect. February brought the family trip to Washington DC. We did all the sights, monuments and brew pubs, something for everyone. What was the family highlight? The White House tour? The Air and Space Museum? Nope, it was dinner at ESPN SportsZone, a restaurant with a wall of dozens of TVs tuned into different sporting events and a whole floor devoted to sporting arcade games. If it was football season we would still be there.

On the way to Washington we stopped by the University of Delaware for a look-see, it was one of Andrew's college choices. Choosing a college was an interesting process, but I'm still somewhat bewildered by the whole thing. We checked out a few close colleges, but he was set on moving far enough away to be away. Oh, I know exactly how he feels. So on to the preferred list, Penn State, Syracuse, and the aforementioned Delaware, all between 5 and 8 hours drive away. It was a close choice and I think it finally came down to the place with the best football team name; Penn State Nittany Lions beat out the Syracuse Orangemen and the Delaware Blue Hens (not a hope!). The Lions are named after a famous pub, The Nittany Inn, where the footballers drink at half time.

Penn State University is in the middle of Pennsylvania, 8 hours from here. Forty thousand students in a town of forty thousand inhabitants. It must be quite pleasant when schools out. It's in the middle of nowhere, many hours from the nearest city and yet they sell out their 109,000 seater stadium for all home football games. Andrew went to one game with his buddies without his shirt and his body painted blue. At least I think it was painted, it snowed during the game.

The family seems so small with Andrew away, only the five of us. The volume hasn't changed much but the amount of food left over after most meals is huge. He is missed by everyone, but mostly by Christine, who still fills with tears every now and then. I hate to think what she will be like when the last one leaves, especially if it's me.



Another aspect of his leaving was the loss of a third driver in the family. Luckily Ellie passed her test soon after. Well, luckily for me, not for the other road users in Salem. I don't know if its anything to do with that highly underrated Y chromosome but she is the opposite to Andrew "Audi Wrecker" Brown. Turn up the radio, start chatting, the occasional glance at the road, and keep the speed down to a

very comfortable 25 mph., maybe a bit slower off the highways. Kids don't leave home when they go away to college; they leave the day they pass their driving test. I see Ellie just a little more than Andrew. She works three nights a week as a receptionist at an old fogies home, "Greystone Farms, this is Ellie speaking, how may I direct your call?", "Wasaaaap Ellie, is my dad still alive?". The rest of the week is filled with various instrument lessons. The weekend consists of power sleeping until its time to head out for the evening. The rule of the house is that if they arrive home after we are in bed, they have to come and give their mummy a kiss so she knows they are back. This usually results in Christine springing bolt upright and screaming "WHAAAT", waking up everyone else in the house. The worst part is that she then forgets it happened so she gets up in the middle of the night and wakes up the kids to give them grief for not telling her they are home. It's a sweet trait when viewed through a certain light.

In April Christine went on her school trip to a Montessori conference in Chicago. This school lark is an excuse for Christine and her drinking buddies to jet around the country on expenses. I know, I've been to conferences too. In fact I'm thinking of starting a competing school, all I need is a bunch of drinking buddies and an expense account. I'm halfway there already.

Being the good father that I am, I decided to take all my children to any place they wish for their 18th birthday, a way of saying "here is the world, now bugger off into it". Andrew chose the cultural capitol of Europe, Cardiff. Yes, the one in Wales. As luck would have it the FA Cup final was being played that weekend, so it lived up to its cultural heritage. A man and his son, footy and beer. Life is good. Especially when you have tickets in the Liverpool end.

We had our annual "Northern Campaign", the trek into the wilds of Maine in August. Mosquitoes the size of small horses and holes in the ground in which to . . . well . . . you know what. Christine and Stephen extended their sentence to two weeks, the rest of us are just too damn civilized. We think the Holiday Inn is roughing it.



Another family transition happened in September, Stephen moved up to High School. He has always been somewhat military orientated so instead of choosing music he picked ROTC. I told him it

was all "You are a 'orrible little man, what are you?", "I`m an 'orrible little man, Sergeant". Well at least it's better than being in the band. Thursdays are turning traumatic, its uniform day. His mother thinks he looks just lovely. His buddies at school have a different opinion. Stephen had this impression of the military as all fun stuff like shooting people and dropping cluster bombs. He now sees the other 99% of polishing shoes and obeying cretins issuing random orders.

A whole letter without mentioning the irrepressible Gregory. "Dad, dad, look, all the bruises on my body are in a straight line!" Not for long though. I asked him his highlight of the year. It`s being able to perform a stop on his ice skates. His previous method made a mess of the linear bruising patterns. Trailing second is his trip to see the Red Sox with his dad. A man and his son, baseball and beer. Yes, life is good.

Have a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.