

Christmas letters, don'tcha hate 'em? Who really gives a rat's ass how smart little Johnny has been and how many swimming races he's won, and oh, you wouldn't believe how he starred in the clarinet recital. Street riots and car crashes are much more interesting, but more about them later. First I hope you all have a very pleasant Christmas and a jolly New Year.



Alright, car crashes - yes, it had to be Stephen. He was the passenger in two cars that hit stationary objects (telephone pole and brick post) completely writing off both vehicles. No injuries apart from a couple of size 10 footprints on the backside. We thought if he learnt to drive it would improve the situation. Ha! Eight days after passing his test he drives to the local mall and attempts to mount a parked SUV in his mother's minivan. Embarrassingly he couldn't actually separate the vehicles and had to get his mother to drive over and help. Verbal abuse is a form of help. "Thirty three years of driving and I've never had one scratch", Days later Christine went to a pool party and as she was leaving reversed the Audi into a stationary tree. Yes Stephen, there is a God. Remnants of the smile are still on Stephen's face today.

The accidents don't seem to have affected his confidence one bit. "Dad can I take the Audi", "No take the van", "But dad, why can't I drive the Audi, Andrew drives the Audi, why can't I drive the Audi?", "Because you crash cars, take the van", "but dad, why can't I take the Audi, blah blah blah " and so on until we start shouting at each other and I tell him he can't take any car. "Fine, I stay here and annoy you!" There, problem solved.

Seriously, Stephen is a fine outstanding young man who will be leaving home in six months and driving someone else's car.

As you can probably tell from the tree episode, Christine's faculties are fading fast. I make jokes about her being blind as a bat and deaf as a post, but obviously she can't hear me. The

day she gets a hearing aid we are all in deep do do. I think she has a competition with Gregory on who dares wear their hair the shortest and she is easily winning. No matter how ridiculous it looks I would never tell her, that's how good husbands behave.

Christine is now the sole owner and CEO of the world-renowned Merrimack Valley Montessori School in Salem NH. She used all her business acumen to maneuver a leverage buyout of fixed and tangible assets associated with the ongoing business concern. That, and paying a vast amount of money. But the deal is done, the old guard banished to the annals of history never to drink tea and chat all day while dozens of kids run riot around their feet.

The presidential elections were a big deal in the Brown house this year, Christine being a rabid democrat. Rabid and proud of it! Kerry placards adorned the lawn, windows and cars - a bummer he lost. Still look on the bright side - it makes my Christmas shopping easier for the next four years - everyone loves the Bushisms desktop calendars full of the eloquence of Dubya. That and the world will continue to be a safer place from Iraqi weapons of mass destruction for another four years.

Only Gregory and Stephen at home these days which seems like a very small family. Gregory is 7 feet tall, weights 80 pounds and plays or watches sport during all his waking hours. He just turned 16 and to celebrate joined another few dozen sports teams all of which require a taxi service. I get more tired driving him around than he does playing. I can't wait for that bugger to drive; telephone poles and brick posts are a minor concern.

It's a great time to be a sports fan in this part of the world. As you may have heard we are home to the WORLD CHAMPION New England Patriots AND the WORLD CHAMPION Boston Red Sox. It's hard to be modest when you support the best teams in the world's greatest sports; so what's the point of even trying. The Patriots won another Superbowl, but hey, no biggie, they win it all the time. But the Red Sox had their first World Series win in 86 years. The victory parade around Boston drew 3.5 million people, beating the previous record set by Pope John Paul II (a mere 2 million). In your face Vatican!

We have two kids at college now. Andrew is in his 2nd year at the University of New Hampshire, about an hour north of here. From what I can gather he is studying alcohol abuse and fornication. So at least one of his interests is genetic. And yes, he riots when the brave and true Red Sox beat those nasty New York Yankees. The papers call it rioting but it's really just the police taking an excuse to strut up and down in their Darth Vader gear and SWAT jackets while the kids stand around drinking beer. Anyway, I know from experience that you can't have a real riot unless you burn an effigy of Maggie Thatcher and they are hard to come by these days.

Ellie is now 20 and spent her gap year as a nanny in England and working at a sailing resort in Turkey. Apparently she had to censor the photographs she brought back from Turkey before showing the family - I can only image. She is at George Washington University in Washington DC (how American!) and loving it. She was back for Thanksgiving recently and I forgot how big a part of the family she is. Her bedroom light is left on 24 hours a day (don't get me started!), and there are what Christine calls Ellie-droppings all over the house. She leave trails of clothing, books, bags, shoes around the house, presumably so she can find her way out when home life become intolerable.

One thing I did notice was the music content of the house went way up. Piano, guitar and her inability to walk around the house without singing were a constant backdrop. Well not in the morning obviously, kids that age rise at the crack of noon. Was the house really full of singing or did I only think that because Ellie was back?

With Ellie leaving home, Christine decided to even up the odds by hosting an exchange student. Natalie from Ukraine came over in August and fits into the family very well. The boys tease the hell out of her, especially Gregory, "yo playa, we don't hablo no freaky deaky Ukrainian here, talk 'merican y'all". I think I've noticed her English getting worse since she arrived. It's quite a culture shock, one day you are eating beetroot soup in Ukraine the next it's conspicuous consumption, Big Macs, rap music, SUVs and 24 hour Red Sox coverage. What a great country. At least she can relate to crooked elections.

Well that's about it for the Browns in 2004. I'm looking forward to 2005, especially Gregory's turn to learn how to dent cars. Have a great Christmas and New Year. By the way, I apologize if you have a son called Johnny who likes swimming and plays the clarinet.