

Dear Family,

It's probably time I did something about my \$450 monthly Verizon bill.

For that tidy sum, the company that I still remember as Bell Atlantic provides my household with two landlines (including one I don't really need), high-speed FIOS internet, FIOS TV (it's probably time to drop those premium channels), and three cell phones (including two BlackBerry accounts—though I'm reimbursed for one of these by my benevolent employer).

It does not, however, include unlimited texting, so please don't text me. I'm an adult. I communicate in complete sentences. (Like this.) And I don't text.

I only bring up my Verizon account because, after six solid years of angst-ridden persuasive writing assignments by Hannah on the subject of why the world would be a better place if she had a cell phone, not to mention her raft of GAO-quality studies purporting that she was, in fact, the only student at Silver Spring International Middle School without such a device, she finally got one for her 12th birthday this month. I reiterate that her line does not include unlimited texting (I want her to grow up knowing how to communicate in complete sentences) SO PLEASE DON'T TEXT HER. (Leave that to her illiterate friends.)

Having turned 12, Hannah has now made the rite of passage out of Primary and into the Young Women program, which she loves. It also marks the start of a grueling course of at-least-annual interviews with her bishop. (She's already had the first one. And even though my office is directly across the hall from her bedroom, I still made her put on a dress before coming over for it. She didn't seem to appreciate that.)

Her birthday also featured a "slumber" party, as a result of which, I am once again instituting a firm ban on all slumber parties (which invariably involve far more in the way of shrill laughter, You Tube videos of questionable taste, and unauthorized On-Demand movie ordering than of actual slumber) until I forget—again—how much I hate them. The party also featured a trip to the Temple Visitors' Center to look at the lights and all the other Christmas accouterments. This was actually a good idea that might even have been bearable if the 10-minute drive over there hadn't been filled with 12-year-old girls texting and telephoning other 12-year-old girls *in the same car!* Please, somebody, kill me.

Hannah's birthday eventually gave way to final Christmas preparations. These included cookie-delivering and caroling to a larger sphere of neighbors than we have included in past years. The expansion was driven in part by a series of ward goals geared toward becoming more neighborly and community-oriented and less insular. (Also by our desire to get to know the other adults in the neighborhood by their actual names instead of "Fern's parents"

and "Nicole's grandpa.")

Christmas morning brought the usual frenzy of wrapping paper, sugar highs, and sleep deprivation accompanying the arrival of countless dolls, cute little-girl clothes, books, and the promise of a family trip to Disney World at the end of January. It also brought a new BlackBerry Storm for Crystal, who, after six hours, had already become a full-blown CrackBerry addict. She used to make fun of me for reading and sending messages from bed. By Christmas night she'd joined the club, having recognized that reading e-mail in bed isn't indicative of an addiction as much as it is of laziness.

Christmas morning also brought Hannah a new bike on which she's already logged some 20 miles, mostly with me. We rode up to Grandma and Grandpa's house for dinner on Christmas afternoon, and spent a good chunk of the following day tooling around Silver Spring running various errands. I believe her line on the ride home yesterday was, "I love how exhilarating this feels."

I share her sentiment. My rapid conversion from the church of Bikes-Are-For-Losers to the church of Every-Major-Road Should-Be-Required-By-Law-To-Have-A-Bike-Lane is perhaps more surprising to me than anybody. I know from some experience that, when it comes to actual religion, overnight converts most often fall away as fast as they come in. But three months and 800 (or so) miles into my new faith, I'm still feelin' the love. I suppose the coming winter months will be the ultimate test of my newfound devotion. I actually like riding in the 40s; the 30s are borderline; colder than that, well....

One major bike-vs.-winter test will be on Jan. 20, when I'm hoping Hannah will join me on a little 15-mile ride to the National Mall to see how close we can get to the Inauguration. It's a fairly easy ride that I've done before, but it was almost certainly warmer on that late-September day than it promises to be in January and there weren't 3 million people down there then to navigate through. Still, I feel this odd itch to go. I may not have voted for the winning team, but I'm nevertheless delighted that, for the first time I can recall, so many people seem so genuinely excited about democracy, and I kind of want to see it up close. But there's no way I'm fighting the traffic or sardining myself into a Metro train that day, so it's either the bike or nothing. I guess I'll have to report on whether I actually went through with it in next month's letter.

My growing cyclophilia, however, has only fed my feelings of dereliction for allowing my two middle daughters to reach the ages of 9 and 6 without knowing (or even desiring to know) how to ride a bike. Fortunately, Grandma Carolyn (and Grandpa Pat) arrived yesterday, and if anyone can coerce children into acquiring physical skills, it's Grandma Carolyn—the loving matriarch who reportedly accelerated her children's water-skiing development by throwing them out of the boat and not allowing back in until they'd gotten up on skis.

Yeah, she's perfect for Lucy. Happy New Year.





Hannah's 12th Birthday —  
Talking, not Texting



With Santa at the Ward  
Christmas Party



Sophie's new moon shoes.



Grandma Carolyn and Grace  
(wearing something that  
Grandma gave her. I don't  
know what it is, but Grace  
loves it.)



Classic Lucy bed-head. Hold-  
ing "Kit's doll," Amelia Earhart  
(I love how American Girl dolls  
can have their own dolls. Woo-  
hoo! More stuff to buy!)