

# THE FAMLET

MONTHLY



## Dear Family,

Many years ago, I was asked during a job interview what I felt some of my weaknesses were, and I made the mistake of answering honestly. I think I mentioned my tendency to choke under pressure and to mentally “check out” of situations when they overwhelm me. I subsequently learned that (for some reason) the interviewer was not inclined to hire me. But through the intervention of someone at the company who knew me well (or thought she did), I got the job anyway.

When a surge of epinephrine triggers my fight-or-flight response, my natural inclination is almost always to flee. And when the perceived threat is non-physical, as it usually is, I’ve found that I can flee without leaving the room. While I suspect this tendency has done a lot to preserve my mental health, it is something I need to actively suppress when deadlines approach and I wish to continue drawing a salary. In an odd way, I think learning to manage the low-stakes stress inherent to piano performance has helped me with this.

When I was 9 or 10 years old, Grandpa Willis gave me some simple, common-sense advice that has served me well when I’ve remembered to do it. He and Grandma were visiting from Utah, and I was about to perform in my first [South Jersey Music Teachers’ Association spring piano recital](#). I don’t remember what I played that year, but I remember feeling very anxious about it and telling Grandpa so. He was a pianist and organist himself, and I think I was hoping to garner some sympathy from him. Instead, all I remember him saying



*Monday morning—28 degrees. Lucy heads north to the Appalachian Trail while I head south to work.*

in response was something very close to, “Well, you know what the scriptures say: ‘If you are prepared, you shall not fear.’” I actually did *not* know that the scriptures said that ([they do](#)), and I also did not find it especially comforting in that particular moment.

Over time, however, I came to understand that the more time I put into preparing for a piano performance (or any performance) the less likely I was to choke (or want to flee) at game time. It’s such an obvious principle that I’m a little embarrassed to admit that I needed help learning it. But it’s only through mortifying experience that I have learned that even when I manage to get troublesome passages right 60 percent of the time while practicing, I will nevertheless choke on them 99 percent of the time in performance unless I spend hours ironing them out.

I actually enjoy the work associated with this, but I don’t always have that kind of time (the TV’s not going to just watch itself!) and this month I felt especially constrained when Grace’s chorus teacher (a proficient pianist who ought to know better) dropped six pieces of music on me a week before two adjudicated festival performances at Walter Johnson High School. I guess I could have said no, but I didn’t, mostly because I genuinely like doing it. But I was a wreck and a grouch all week because I’d put myself in a position where I was both likely to choke and unable to flee. Pure torture. The only thing worse for me is the feeling I get at any large social gathering—a wedding reception, for example. But more on that later.

I somehow got through Grace’s performance without completely humiliating myself. Hopefully no one recorded it. I did not hear Grace, but I’m sure she sang well. (If you *can* hear your kid during a choral performance, that’s not usually a good thing.) I took a few photos from the piano bench and posted one to [Twitter](#). (p.s. If you love me, follow me on Twitter.)

The following night was the ward talent show. Grace sang something from *Les Misérables* and Lucy sang something from *Camelot*. As soloists sometimes do, both girls got me the music with very little notice and expected me to be able to play it well. I muddled through both songs and, again, hope no one was recording even though the girls sang great.

Incidentally, Grace turned 13 this month. More than 21 years into parenthood, we are now officially out of the pre-teen business.



*Lucy sings “The Simple Joys of Maidenhood” at the White Oak Ward talent show.*



*I bike past this sign almost every day. It drives me crazy. I get that the Waterfront is straight ahead. I don’t get why I need two signs to tell me that.*

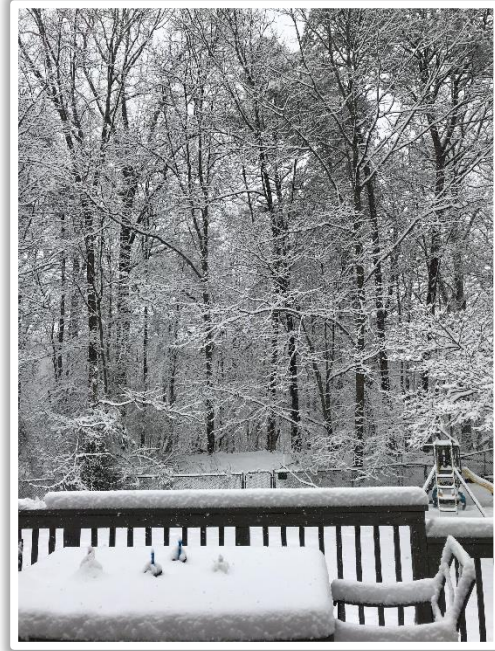
This week is spring break, an occasion Crystal, Grace, and I are marking in much the same way we mark it most years—by doing nothing special. Sophie spent five days visiting Hannah in Provo, and Lucy’s week-long Appalachian Trail adventure was cut short.

Sophie first. I don’t imagine Provo, Utah, ranks especially high on the list of places high school girls ask to visit during spring break, but Sophie really loves and misses her oldest sister. She flew alone for the first time, making her connection in Chicago and then getting from Salt Lake to Provo via a combination of transit options (TRAX and FrontRunner, I think) that I am not familiar with and that did not exist when I lived in Utah a generation ago. Sophie went to a couple of Hannah’s classes and seems to have enjoyed her time there but did not take any pictures.

It looks like Sophie is going to be in the school play after all. You may recall from [last month’s letter](#) that the drama teacher/school play director felt it appropriate to drop *Carrie* in favor of *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change*, a production I know next to nothing about and that Sophie did not feel comfortable participating in. She told the director she did not want to be in it and was quitting. In response, the director obtained permission from the playwright (or the licensing agency or whoever is empowered to grant such permission) to redact the elements that Sophie found objectionable. I think this may have caused Sophie to feel a sense of obligation to stay, and so she did. It’s hard for me to tell how excited she is about the whole thing, but she’s in it.

This story could be told in a way that portrays Sophie as a prima donna, but I really don’t think that’s what happened. Sophie didn’t approach the director with a list of demands and conditions for being in the show. She just said she was quitting. The director was concerned about being able to find a replacement, and Sophie does not like disappointing people. And so it appears to have boiled down to a high school student and her teacher each bending a little to accommodate one another, which is kind of a nice thing.

If you’d told me a year ago that part of the substantial REI dividend I was in the process of earning would be used to purchase dehydrated vegan meals, I might not have believed you. But that’s where it went, along helping subsidize a new pack, hammock underquilt and other essentials as Lucy prepared to spend spring break



*Sophie took this photo from our kitchen on the first day of spring. I think it looks like a postcard.*



*Grace – Age 13.*

hiking the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania with some friends from church.

By the time Monday's departure rolled around, the group of hikers had been whittled down to just Lucy and Allison Higgins. (For a quick refresher on why Sister Higgins is the best, read the last six paragraphs of [last April's letter](#).) Allison used to be Lucy's Young Women president (she still is Sophie's and Grace's Young Women president) and is now Lucy's visiting teaching companion.

The journey was to have lasted all week and covered in excess of 50 miles. I wasn't concerned about the fitness of either hiker—both are strong and somewhat experienced backpackers—but I worried about the weather. Winter around here has persisted right through the equinox—rare for us—dumping several inches of school-canceling snow on the first day of spring. Until yesterday, temperatures at night had been consistently in the 20s here and doubtless much colder on the Pennsylvania AT, which is higher in terms of both latitude and elevation. On day one, which covered 13 miles (including an accidental detour), they encountered snow on the trail that came halfway up their calves. They preferred this to the trail segments that were covered with ice. They then spent what must have been a miserable night together in the [Cove Mountain Shelter](#) before calling it a week and coming home on Tuesday morning. Nothing about that sounds remotely fun to me, and I'm just glad they're alive.

Lucy also made a solo journey to visit Hannah in Provo earlier this month. I'm told the trip included lots of Dungeons and Dragons with Hannah's nerdy friends and fiancé, but, again, no pictures, so I can't prove it.

Hannah's and JT's wedding is five weeks from tomorrow. (The reception is five weeks from Saturday.) Sophie spent part of her time in Provo helping Hannah address announcements and I'm told they are in the mail. I'm also given to understand that the couple is registered at Target and Amazon. Amazon did not exist when Crystal and I got married. Target had been around for 92 years, but I had not heard of it then. Instead, we registered at the fabulously named Zion's Cooperative Mercantile Institution—America's first (and now defunct) department store. I remember a very nice older lady walked us around the various departments and suggested things we should register for. We still have a few of those things. Based on what



*From the growing list of things that just anger me: I don't know what's actually in these containers, but there's no such thing as "fat free half and half."*

I'm told Hannah and JT have registered for, it sounds like they could use the guidance of a nice older lady. I may have overheard a conversation in which Crystal explained, "Just because you own two plates and JT owns two plates doesn't mean you have 'dishes.'"

We haven't figured out the catering yet. On Tuesday I suggested Chick-fil-A—which, amazingly, has not yet been entirely ruled out. I know I'm supposed to think that's too lowbrow for wedding reception fare. But honestly, I can think of nothing more dripping in awesome-sauce than being dragged to a wedding reception against my will (i.e., to any wedding reception) and being greeted by an endless spread of Chick-fil-A. Crystal's not sure how we'd keep everything warm. If we can't figure that out, my next suggestion will be Subway. I don't expect that will happen, either, but fortunately I'm pretty adept at fleeing situations that annoy me.

Pass the Chick-fil-A sauce!

Love,

Tim