

the Famlet monthly

August 25, 2013

Volume 16, Number 8

Dear Family,

No one was more surprised than I when Grace's name was called during the Willis family reunion talent show. I didn't know she had a number prepared, and when I heard her name I naturally assumed that she would pound out "Little Indian Lance" or one of her other favorite ditties on the piano. Instead, she calmly walked to the center of the room and, without accompaniment or music, sang every word of "Castle on a Cloud" from *Les Misérables*. It was very sweet and very cute—and very surprising, in that I did not know she was familiar with the song. As I'm sure you know, "Castle on a Cloud" synthesizes young Cosette's desire to escape her cruel life of unending, abusive labor. The funny (and perhaps fitting) thing is that this is exactly how Grace perceives her life a lot of the time. Virtually any request, from something as benign as "you should put on a pair of socks" to the truly arduous, "it's time to clean your room," is liable to be met with a histrionic fit that almost invariably includes the phrase, "this is the worst day ever." But knowing that she knows this song changes everything. Now, every time she blows up at a request, I just sing to her:

*There is a castle on a cloud
I like to go there in my sleep
Nobody makes me put on socks
Not in my castle on a cloud*

It doesn't rhyme, but who cares? Obviously, the third line changes with the context. Sometimes it's "I never have to feed the dog," or "I can watch Netflix all day long." The possibilities are endless, really. And you wouldn't believe how well this works. I can hardly believe it myself.

And all this because Aunt Andra organized a talent show at the family reunion. Andra was the driving force behind much of this month's reunion, including its change of venue. After five consecutive stagings, dating back to 2002, at West Virginia's Oglebay resort, the once-triennial, now-biennial gathering moved to [Buehler's Idlewild Inn](#) in the [Poconos](#) of northeastern Pennsylvania. Andra discovered Buehler's while planning her family's reunion a year ago and liked it enough to suggest that we give it a try.

I was not opposed to trying something new, but I can't say that I brought sky-high expectations to this remote place that boasts of having neither TV nor WiFi. I was concerned about the lack of a golf course (even though I hadn't picked up a club all year) or other things to do nearby. Matt's otherwise unqualified endorsement of the place (based on having attended Andra's family's reunion) included the caveat that the accommodations were rather tired and dated, which concerned me. I also suspected that Andra might have oversold the quality of the food and the friendliness of the proprietors.

None of my concerns materialized, and, apart from having to share a double bed for the first time in as long as I can remember, the place was great. The proprietors—Mark and Mary are their names—are gracious and capable hosts and fascinating people. They both have culinary training, and it shows. The food was good and abundant. The place is like a B&B, except that they also provide lunch and dinner (which I guess makes it a B&B,L&D). The accommodations are what they are—an old farm house, a less-old (but still old) "spring house"

and an equally old freestanding "game room" that someone noted was reminiscent of the old George J. Cannon Emigration cabin. Nothing about the place is luxurious, nor does it purport to be. But everybody seemed to like it, and the kids had a great time. Mealtime prayers, offered almost exclusively by the grandchildren, invariably included expressions of gratitude for being able to come to "this awesome place." The property's small lake (more of a pond, really), which was allegedly stocked with bass, yielded just three fish all week (which, by my estimate, worked out to about 25 hours of fishing per fish) but nobody seemed to mind.

There wasn't a whole lot else to do nearby, but the kids were mainly content to just stay on the farm. I found an inexpensive golf course 14 miles away, so that worked out okay, and Grant and I did two 30-mile bike rides around Lake Wallenpaupack. (Hilly! Check out the climb right after mile 20 on [this one](#).) Crystal joined us on the first of these rides, which ended up being 38 miles after we took a wrong turn. We took one day-trip to Scranton (45 minutes away) where we spent just enough time to take the [Lackawanna County coal mine tour](#) and track down a few landmarks from "The Office."

Last month's letter promised a report on my first youth conference as a grown-up. (My advisory responsibilities on the high council include youth and seminary.) It went fine; thanks for asking. We stayed local this year, which simplified matters. Next year we go to Kirtland. I've already reserved the temple for the afternoon (tours) and evening (sacrament/testimony meeting) on July 25th, and so I hope you weren't planning on going then.

School starts tomorrow for everybody except Hannah, for whom it starts Tuesday. There was a note of wistfulness in Crystal's voice when she observed last week that, for the first time in 12 years, none of our back-to-school shopping lists (provided by the schools) included crayons. I guess that's what happens when your youngest kid hits third grade—you're out of the crayon business.

Indeed, Grace is our last remaining elementary schooler. Sophie has moved on to Silver Spring International Middle School, which Hannah attended, and Lucy is now at [Blair](#)—the largest of Montgomery County's 30 public high schools—where Hannah is beginning life as a senior. To our knowledge, of the school's 2,800 students, Hannah and Lucy are the only Mormons.

Last month's letter contained a passing reference to Sophie's then-forthcoming week at Girl Scout sleep-away camp. (More to the point, it referenced my intense dislike of driving on I-95 anywhere in northern Virginia at any time other than 2:30 a.m.) Well, I am happy to report that Sophie's friend's parents brought them home at the end of the week, and Sophie seems to have had a very nice time, as she writes here:

I went to a 5-day sleep-away camp. It was Harry Potter themed, which made it all the better. We played Quidditch in kayaks, and I made lots of friends. We also had a tournament that included a scavenger hunt and Harry Potter Jeopardy. I'm glad I was able to go and it was fun.

Have a great month.

Welcome home, Roland! (Commander/Doctor Roland has been treating soldiers in Afghanistan since the start of the year. He's back now.)

Love, Tim *et al*



WILLIS REUNION — POCONOS — 12-17 AUGUST 2013



Clockwise from top left: Cousins prepare to ride down into the coal mine; Sophie, Hannah and Grace in front of a Scranton building familiar to fans of "The Office"; Andra proudly displays a fish she caught (I'm told it was a bass); Alex waits for Grace to get off the tire so he can have a turn.



Grace, Lucy, Crystal and Sophie on the field at the Naval Academy's football stadium.



THREE HOURS IN ANNAPOLIS — 24 AUGUST 2013



Lucy, Grace and Sophie start work on a six-pound chocolate milkshake at [Chick & Ruth's Delly](#)



Crystal helps Sophie get to the bottom of it.



Grace and Sophie proudly display the empty glass. (By the time we left, the tables on either side of us were filled with Mids.)