

THE FAMLET MONTHLY



Dear Family,

A long and distinguished life of swimming pool horseplay has conditioned me to react defensively to every lifeguard's whistle—always believing it to be directed at me. I've come to react to car horns in the same way when I'm on my bike. It may just be two cars annoyed with each other, but I get honked at enough to assume it's always meant for me. Unlike on my bike, however, where people usually honk simply because they're angry I'm there, my history of being reprimanded by lifeguards is well deserved.

It happens less often now that my beard is graying and my children have aged, but it doesn't take much time with one or more of my little brothers for me to revert back to my inner 15 year old.

I'm reminded of this because I'm writing this month's letter from the back seat of our car as Sophie drives us home from Matthew's and Andra's house in Raleigh, where we've been since Thursday. Crystal is in the other front seat, and I'm trying not to pay attention. The trip is taking somewhat longer than it would if Crystal or I were driving because of Sophie's strict observance of the posted speed limit. At this moment, we are inching northward through southern Virginia in the right lane of I-85 as a near-constant stream of cars and trucks zooms past us on the left. Sophie seems completely unperturbed by this. And it's been too delightful a weekend for me to really care.



Nationals Park on the Fourth of July:
Matthew, me and about 25,000 Red Sox fans.

Matthew—who at times has made a point of telling me that he never reads these letters—is generally understood to be my smartest brother. This is not a matter of significant debate among the five of us. I think we all just accept it as truth.

Though less frequently acknowledged, I have the distinction of being the most intellectually challenged Willis brother (at least among the four of us with only 46 chromosomes). But it's hard to think of three guys I'd rather trail, and they are all incredibly patient with me. Their wives and children are also far kinder to me than I deserve. It's a pretty great family, really.

I don't get to see Matt as much as I see my other brothers, and this weekend with his family has been a lot of fun for me. For all we did, I probably had the best time just hanging around with them at home. I'm not sure which thing their house has more of—musical instruments or fishing rods—but it has double digits of both. This is only remarkable because while everyone in the house is a musician, Andra appears to be the only fisherman. My second-favorite place was their local swim club, which, it turns out, is staffed by a team of fabulously permissive lifeguards who let all of us get away with lots of childish shenanigans.

The Raleigh trip caps off a month that started with Matt coming north to see us. My preference on the Fourth of July is typically to do as little as Crystal will let me get away with doing. It's usually so hot that I prefer not to leave the house at all. But Crystal feels that the birthday of our country is an occasion that should be marked with as many outdoor activities as possible, irrespective of the weather, and so we do stuff. This year's Fourth was hotter than most, but we still managed to fill it with wall-to-wall stuff.

It began with what has become the traditional White Oak Ward July 4th pancake breakfast, preceded by the less traditional (but now-second-annual) White Oak Ward July 4th 5K race. I finished second—behind an 18-year-old varsity cross country boy and ahead of several women pushing strollers.

We went almost directly from the breakfast to Nationals Park where we joined all of my brothers (except Grant and his family, who apparently hate America and opted instead to spend the Fourth of July in Italy) to watch this year's very disappointing home team get shut out by the visiting Red Sox. The stadium seemed to have at least as many Boston fans as Nats supporters, which would have been annoying enough



Above: Four brothers (Matt, me, Andrew, and Pete) on the highest possible row at Nats park on the 4th of July (Nephew Luke between Andrew and Pete.)

Below: Grace and Crystal—hot and sweaty—Metroing home from Nats Park on the 4th of July.



under any circumstances but was made doubly so because 1) Boston fans are insufferable even in the best of times, and 2) they were the only ones who had anything to cheer for on this day.

We went from the game to Grandma's house for some good old-fashioned Fourth of July meat eating. After that, Matt joined my family on the roof of the 20-story Rosslyn office building where I work (overlooking the river and the monuments) to watch the fireworks over the National Mall. There was an event up there for which we did not have tickets, but we managed to get in anyway. We ate some of the "free" food but did not drink any of the "free" alcohol (because you have to draw the line somewhere). The fireworks, as always, were pretty spectacular. We were in perpetual motion from before 7 a.m. until after 10 p.m., and it may have been the most exhausting July 4th of my life, but in hindsight it was kind of fun.

The next day, Matt and Mom came with us to Ocean City. We spent almost the entire day in the water because 1) it was hot, and 2) I can't think of any other reason to go to the beach. I don't understand why some people go to the beach—go to all the trouble of being right next to the ocean—and then don't go in (or, equally lame, just stick their feet in the water). Going to the beach and not swimming is like going to a restaurant, paying for a steak, and just looking at it.

The day after that (Friday—I guess I didn't do much work that week) I joined Matt and Andrew back at Mom's house to watch the World Cup quarterfinals. We first watched my mission country (France) defeat Uruguay and then watched Matt's and Andrew's (and Grant's) mission country (Brazil) lose to Belgium. In between the two matches we went to lunch with Dad at The Big Greek Café where I wore my French flag like a cape and got lots of congratulations. I engaged in some soccer commentary with a couple of strangers even though I had no idea what I was talking about and claimed to be a huge [Mbappé](#) fan even though I hadn't heard of him before the tournament.

I took my French flag home and flew it from our front porch for most of the rest of the month. One of our neighbors—a friendly South Asian fellow (I can't remember which country—but you can visit virtually every region of the world just by taking a lap of our *cul-de-sac*) whose elementary-school daughter has been getting help from Lucy with her summer homework packet—asked me if it was a French flag. I



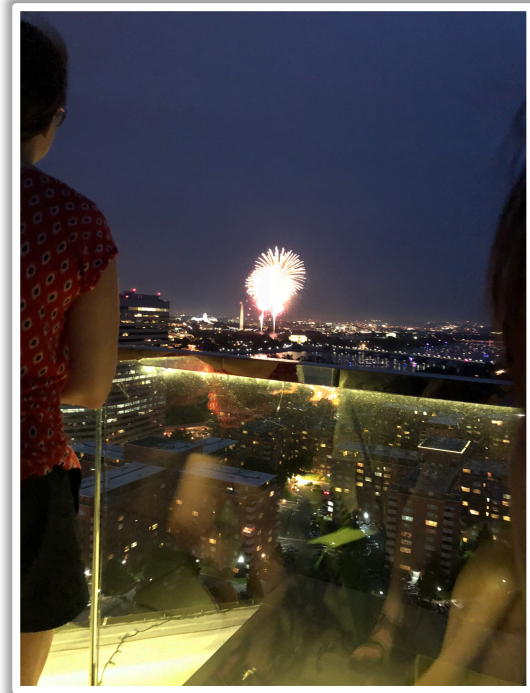
Lucy—camping at Assateague with girls from church.



told him it was, and he congratulated me on my team's winning the Super Bowl. Our neighborhood is the best.

Sophie missed all of the Fourth of July fun because she was gone that week attending something called Especially for Youth ("EFY") at Southern Virginia University. I've never really cared to understand what EFY is. I grew up with the idea that it was some sort of fancy youth conference at BYU for rich kids, and I don't recall ever having any particular inclination to go. But Sophie and a bunch of her friends wanted to go, and SVU (which didn't exist in my day) is considerably more accessible than BYU, and so they went. Whatever it was, they all seem to have had a great time.

Sophie and Lucy spent part of the following week camping with the wild ponies, horseflies, and a group of White Oak Ward young women on Assateague Island National Seashore. I can't imagine that being fun, but they tell me it was. You should ask them about it.



Finally, several months ago, when I learned that I would be getting released from my church position in June (because our beloved stake president and his even more beloved wife were finally succumbing to the great Utah gravitational megavortex from which so few manage to escape permanently) I told myself that if I didn't figure into the next stake presidency then I would register for Ironman Maryland again.

As reported in [last month's letter](#) I did not figure into the new presidency. In hindsight, it was not necessarily foolish of me to tell *myself* what I would do under these circumstances—the mistake I made was in telling *other people*. And a couple of those people have since held me to account.

Fact is, I've been toying with the idea of returning to Ironman Maryland ever since [2016's disaster](#) (when a massive storm surge wiped out the swim, I got two flat tires on the bike leg, and hundreds of meters of the marathon course were buried under calf-deep flood water).

This year's race is on September 29th, and I've actually had a hotel reservation in Cambridge since January. (Like most places that host big triathlons, Cambridge, Md., (pop. 12,000) is a lovely little town in the middle of nowhere and the accommodations go quickly during Ironman week—I think I'm paying somewhere around \$300 a night for a Days Inn—I can't imagine that rooms out there go for half that much the other 51 weeks of the year.) But I'd been holding off on registering for the race itself because of some nagging hamstring issues, which I think are gone now but have adversely impacted my running fitness. (And summer around here is a pretty awful time to be chasing running fitness.)

Still, I somehow managed to temporarily delude myself into believing that I'm in good enough swimming and biking shape that I should be able to drag myself through the marathon leg in any event. And so, with one final bit of cajoling from a (much faster) work colleague who is also doing it, I went ahead and plopped down the absurd registration fee. The amount would astonish you if you're not familiar with Ironman. Be advised that the price on the website does not include a \$70 "service fee" (which everyone must pay) or the \$30 bib mailing fee (which is the only way to avoid having to travel out to the race site on the *Thursday(!)* before the race).

Well, that's about the best I can do from the back seat of a slow-moving car surrounded by a bunch of girls (and their mother) loudly singing along to *My Fair Lady*, *Les Misérables*, and I don't know what else. There are worse things.