

# THE FAMLET

MONTHLY



Dear Family,

Our home is situated at the end of a small *cul-de-sac*<sup>1</sup> on a block with ten or so other houses. Each year for the past decade or so, at Crystal's direction, we have gone Christmas caroling and delivered plates of cookies (made by Crystal) to most if not all of these neighbors, along with a few other people in the neighborhood and some other friends,<sup>2</sup> in and out of the neighborhood, who bring us stuff at Christmastime. If you're reading this, you probably know the drill.

Our neighborhood is probably about as culturally diverse as is mathematically possible. I haven't seen data, but I suspect there's nothing close to a majority of anything, and while this isn't something we necessarily sought out in a neighborhood, it's become one of the things we like most about ours.

Diversity is fun, but it also complicates certain public holiday traditions. Our neighborhood, for example, is not the best for trick-or-treating on Halloween. I'd say our hit rate is well south of 50%, suggesting that there are just some segments of the population that haven't gotten the memo that, for whatever silly reason, distributing candy to children who knock on your door that night is simply what's done. In the Moorestown New Jersey neighborhood where I grew up (roughly 102% white) everyone understood the social contract: either you had candy (good candy—no Smarties/other cheap junk) or your house got vandalized (usually by



Downtown Silver Spring on Christmas Eve

<sup>1</sup> Every English speaker I know uses the term *cul-de-sac* to refer to a residential street that dead ends in a kind of bulbous shape (like the bottom of a bag). Even though the term consists of three French words, I don't believe I've ever heard a French speaker assemble them in this particular way. *Sac* means what it sounds like, but *cul* is a naughty way of referring to one's backside. And so, when someone says they live in a "cul-de-sac," they're literally saying they live in a "bag's ass." Which is why I love telling people we live in a cul-de-sac.

<sup>2</sup> At least we think they're our friends. We discovered four of them hosting holiday gatherings to which we had not been invited. It's okay. For personal mental health reasons (discussed below), I wouldn't have wanted to go anyway.

egging). There was no animus or hard feelings associated with it. It's just the way it was. A majority of people in our current neighborhood seem unaware of this contract—probably because local children seem unaware of their duty to enforce it—a clear failing of the public schools.

Similarly, many of our neighbors also seem unfamiliar with the tradition of Christmas caroling and don't know quite how to respond to people who appear uninvited at their door and start singing at them. (You don't have to do anything, of course. You just stand there and pretend to enjoy it. That's the social contract. When people start singing at you around Christmastime, you just smile and endure it. You might even get a plate of cookies for your trouble. It's like reverse trick-or-treating, if you're familiar with that tradition.)

And so this year, Crystal decided that instead of caroling and delivering cookies to the neighbors on our block, we would invite all of them to *our* house between 5 and 7 p.m. on the Sunday before Christmas for cookies, hot chocolate, and light hors d'oeuvres. We don't know all of our neighbors' names (this being only our 20<sup>th</sup> Christmas in this house, you can't expect us to know *everybody*) and suspect we're not the only ones. And so, if nothing else, this would give everyone a chance to learn what to say when we encounter one another leaving for work in the morning.

Crystal created flyers and we delivered them about a week in advance. We tried to invite everyone personally, but not everyone answered the door. Most of the people who did answer said they thought it sounded like a nice idea, but few committed to coming.

When 5:00 rolled around on Sunday—the house clean, the cookies and other food arranged on tables in the kitchen and dining room, the stickers and Sharpies inside the front door so people could make nametags—Crystal and the girls put on their nametags and we all sat in the living room to wait.

We sat and looked at each other as 5 o'clock became 5:10, then 5:15. By 5:20, things were starting to feel awkward.

Then, a few minutes after 5:20, the first neighbor arrived. It was Frank, the kind, elderly widower from four houses down who let our dog live with him while we were at the beach last summer. Within 20 minutes, Frank had been joined by roughly half the block—more people than can comfortably fit in our small living room, but we fanned out into the kitchen and dining room and it worked out okay. Several came bearing gifts, and we might have finished the night with more food than we started with.



Grace on Christmas morning

Grace wearing a Christmas present



The evening was a voyage well outside our comfort zone, but we really had a nice time getting to know our neighbors better. As 7 o'clock passed and people began to leave, Crystal, the girls, and I sang a few Christmas songs around the piano (we can put on a decent show standing around a piano), thus officially transforming the evening into something out of Norman Rockwell.

I'm really glad Crystal decided to do it (and even more glad our neighbors chose to come). Maybe we'll try it again next year—see if we can get the rest of the block.

Christmas itself was pleasant, even though December has wound up being far more expensive than we budgeted for. Part of this had to do with Lucy's trip to the dentist that unexpectedly resulted in *four* crowns. I was tempted to tell her that the dental work was her Christmas present, but we'd already bought her presents.

More expensive than Lucy's teeth was learning on December 23<sup>rd</sup> that we needed a new upstairs furnace. Our house isn't very big, but it does have two separate HVAC systems—one for the main floor and basement and a second one for upstairs. The upside to having two furnaces and two air conditioners is that when the furnace that heats your bedroom goes out in December, you still benefit (somewhat) from the warmth coming up from downstairs. The downside of having four units is that it seems like you have to fix or replace something almost every year.

The upstairs furnace lives in the attic, and I have no earthly idea how our guy got the old furnace down through that small hole in the ceiling (and the new one up through it) but he did it. I have no idea how people do lots of things, but I found this feat particularly impressive. I have a hard enough time getting our boxes of Christmas crap up and down through that hole—how anyone could get a furnace through it (and then have the furnace actually *work*) is beyond me. His name's Conrod—Grant and Jen recommended him to us years ago. We love him and would recommend him to anyone.

I feel like Conrod gave us a good deal, but furnaces aren't cheap. I was tempted to tell Crystal that the furnace could be her Christmas present to me this year, but of course she'd already bought everything I'd asked for. This included a new wetsuit—an upgrade over the wetsuit I've been using in triathlons for the past seven years. I'm excited to start using it for two reasons: 1) It's better than my old wetsuit and should make me a little faster in the water, and 2) Unlike my old wetsuit, it was purchased new, which means I'm the only person who will have ever peed in it.



*Christmas night with Tommy and Ilse Eskelsen*



*Christmas Eve Cousins Nativity*

*Christmas night: Crystal and me with Jon & Emily Eskelsen*



(On an unrelated note, if anyone's interested in a third-hand, medium-tall, black-with-red-trim Xterra Vector Pro X3 full-sleeve wetsuit—number of times peed in: unknown—I have one available!)

This month's other unanticipated expenses include the 8-dollar-per-pill ADHD meds I started taking a week ago.

I've always believed that if I'd been born 15 years later, I almost certainly would have been diagnosed with ADHD as a boy. Most of you who knew me then probably remember me as an "impulsive child." (*Impulsive child* is a tactful way of saying *incorrigible brat*, which is probably the term you used, and you wouldn't have been wrong.)

Growing up cured some (though by no means all) of my tendency toward impulsivity, but I still frequently struggle with patience, attentiveness, and sitting still. I feel like I have been struggling more with these things lately, and so I mentioned them to my primary care physician. She suggested I speak to a psychiatrist.

And so I made an appointment with a psychiatrist. (Technically, I made an appointment with a "psychiatric-mental health nurse practitioner" (PMHNP), but from my perspective, a PMHNP may as well be a psychiatrist.)

I brought Crystal to the appointment to help me remember things and, if necessary, to attest to my irritability and general fidgetiness. I introduced myself to the PMHNP and told him I thought I had ADHD. He then proceeded to ask me a series of questions and instructed Crystal not to help me with the answers. As I recall, the questions included what year is it, who is the president of the United States, and how do you spell the word *world* (and then he spotted me the first three letters—"W-O-R...?" so I only had to fill in the last two). Then he made me spell it backwards, which was harder, but Crystal told me I got that and all the other answers right.

He then asked whether I was feeling suicidal and if I'd had any recent suicidal ideations. I told him no—neglecting to mention the Sunday-night stake meeting at church earlier this month that I had no interest in attending but ultimately went to out of a nagging sense of obligation and duty. Ten minutes in, I was already wishing I were dead. And after an hour, when the person conducting the meeting stood up and announced *five additional speakers*,<sup>3</sup> I almost lost it entirely. But I didn't actually do anything other than grumble loudly



Grace after a school dance concert

<sup>3</sup> Fortunately, three of the final five speakers were teenagers, whom I always enjoy listening to and who don't speak for very long. And the two grown-ups were perceptive enough to realize that it was time for this ordeal to be over and kept their remarks brief.

enough to register my dissatisfaction with everyone in a five-pew radius, as is my wont.

Anyway, I didn't mention this to the PMHNP. Even though some of life's circumstances make me wish I were dead (pointless meetings, mostly, but also loud gatherings, traffic congestion, and any line with more than two people ahead of me in it), I'm generally able to convince myself that these circumstances are transitory, and I don't think I experience anything rising to the level of suicidal ideation.

I don't remember the PMHNP asking me anything specific about my symptoms. He just ran through the various drug options before settling on 16 milligrams of something whose name I can't remember. (Crystal knows what it's called.) We'll try that for a month and see what happens. One thing I've learned from seeing my children receive various types of mental health treatment is that it is largely a trial-and-error thing.

But I suppose most of life is a trial-and-error thing. I'm particularly grateful for loving family members who help me through all the error.

Happy New Year!

Love,  
Tim *et al*



*Our old furnace (and a free plug for Conrod).*