



'Tis a month before Christmas  
And all through the house  
Not a creature is stirring  
The kids must be out.



Hah! No such luck. It's just a matter of time before the kids are located and the sweet silence is broken by a mother's voice ringing out in the distance. "Have you lost your mind!?!?" "What were you thinking!?!?" and my all-time favorite, "Sometimes, I swear you haven't got the sense of a goat!" That last one's a little unfair, but only if you're a goat.

### All I want for Christmas...



Hannah has lost two front teeth. Jefferson hasn't lost any. Can you spell orthodontia?

Unfortunately, the kids aren't the only ones to provoke such exasperation. There was the great baseball incident when Jefferson kept asking me to pitch harder and harder until I was literally taking a full windup and firing tennis balls as hard as I could. And damn if he wasn't hitting them. So I motioned for Chris to step outside and watch our big guy in action. And with Chris watching proudly, I promptly fired a fastball right into Jefferson's groin. Chris was not pleased and let me know it—"Have you lost your mind!?! What were you thinking!?! Sometimes, I swear you haven't..." But before I could be compared to a goat I cut her off with a quick-thinking, "He made me do it!" Holy crap, they've turned me into a six year old.

Of course that's better than what I almost became at the Pilot truck stop near Toledo. We were returning from Michigan when Jefferson decided he needed to poop. Now I couldn't leave a four year old in a truck stop restroom all by himself, so I waited outside the stall, leaning against the bathroom wall. I'm standing there, seemingly alone, when a CAT hat wearing, wallet-on-a-chain truck driver walks in. All he sees is me hanging out by myself in the bathroom while he steps to the urinal. I'm thinking that this can't look good and that I've got to let this guy know that I've got a kid I'm waiting on. So I decide to ask Jefferson how he's doing. But I probably could have chosen my words a little better because I blurted out, "How's it going, big guy?" Jefferson, the little toad, remained silent while my truck drivin' friend turned to me with a very strange look in his eye. Now I shouted, "Jefferson, HOW ARE YOU DOING?!" This time he answered, "Good." Well good for you, now let's move it! I swear, I'm not going to live to see fifty.

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Do you see a pattern here? Somehow these little people, who used to be so entertaining, have learned how to turn the tables and make me the object of amusement. I've got to tell you, I'm not liking this new development.

Hannah, for example, thinks she's got me figured out. One night Chris and I were at a Steve Earle concert when our friend Judi, who was watching the kids, called to talk to Chris. Later, Hannah wanted to call, but Judi told her where we were and that it was too loud to hear anything. Hannah just rolled her eyes and said, "Daddy must have picked those seats." Who? Me? Music? Loud? Never.

Ahh, little girls. I was warned that they have a way of wrapping Daddy around their finger. And Hannah had me one day as we were riding in the car. From the back seat she started out spelling, "D-A-D - I - L-O-V-E - Y-O-U" How wonderfully sweet, I thought, until she continued on, "R - B-U-T-T." Sheesh. Hannah, we don't talk like that. Of course, she would argue, "I'm not talking, I'm spelling." Oh, please Lord, give me strength.

So, all in all, it's been a strange year. I've got a dad who attended more Springsteen concerts than I did and a son who can hit my best stuff. I'm perfectly capable of throwing my back out for a week just by playing hide-and-seek with the kids (I should probably stop trying to squeeze myself into cupboards—bad for me, bad for the cupboards). Yet I asked for an electric guitar for Christmas. I don't know if I should feel young, old or just plain silly.

Naturally, the strangest part of this year was adjusting to the loss of my mom just before Christmas last year. Anyone who has lost a parent knows how difficult it can be, but if you look hard enough, you can also find some strangely powerful, enriching moments. One such moment came as a result of a trip to Wal-Mart with Hannah to buy stickers for a scrapbook she wanted to make. Now my mom was a very craftsy person, always embroidering, sewing or making something for someone, often for her beloved grandchildren. Well, when Hannah and I got to the crafts department, she started jumping up and down and squealing in excitement at the sight of all the ribbons, stencils, paints and what-not. It was very cute. Still, all I could think was how much my mom would have loved taking Hannah to shop at JoAnn Fabrics so they could work on projects together—and how much Hannah would have cherished it. And how it would never happen. Later, as I related this story to some of our neighbors, one of them commented about how wonderful and amazing it is that my mom's love of craft work lives on in Hannah. Well, to paraphrase Jim Morrison, change the mood from sad to gladness. My mom lives on—and her grandchildren are living proof. Man, I love those kids.

May all of you be as blessed as we are with wonderful family, friends and neighbors. It is life's greatest gift.

**Merry Christmas, Everyone**