

JANICEK CHRISTMAS

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Maly's First
Communion
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Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Merry Christmas! We hope this finds you warm, happy, healthy and among those you love and whom, in return, love you just as much so as to stuff your stockings and take the leftovers with them whenever they finally leave your house.

'Tis the season when we're all glowingly overwhelmed with a sense of philanthropy, fellowship, good tidings, and love for all. As families, we cuddle together on the couch and huddle around the iPad to look at Facebook photos of all of the children sitting on the mall Santa's lap and quietly think to ourselves, "If that poor child keeps growing up to look like her father, she's in for a world of hurt." And we take pause and reflect on what's truly important this time of year, "Will black yoga pants make my butt look good, and I mean really good?"

Speaking of good-looking butts, yours truly got a haircut yesterday. While I was waiting in the reception area I picked up an issue of 'People' magazine. In it there was a page dedicated to photos of male celebrities who had hair in the 1980's and are now bald. I thought about following suit and having my hair buzzed off, but ultimately decided against it. During a pause in my decidedly usual haircut, I was solicited the opportunity to have my eyebrows

"shaped up a little bit." Fearful that either gas-powered lawn care equipment or hot wax might be introduced, I politely declined. So now I'm all conscious of my eyebrows. Maybe I should just let them go wild and they'll get to the point where I can comb them over my head.

Yet another year has passed and Elise and I aren't getting any younger. Elise will be turning 40 in February. Forty. There are 11 months and 2 weeks in the new year where my wife will be in her forties and I'll still be in my thirties. This will be an awkward year because I can already tell that I'll be compelled to keep my distance from her in public as the authorities could be keeping a close eye on us and ready, at any point, to peg her with a charge of indecency against an innocent and strapping young man such as myself.

If you know Elise, you'll know that there's not much that gets under her skin. She's always calm, cool and takes things in stride, and that's one of the many characteristics that I adore about her. She does, however, get really perturbed when I hide her dentures. I've had to dodge many a swift blow from her handbag that contains hard candies and the plastic sporks she "borrows" from the cafeteria where she and the

other old timers meet for Canasta on Thursday mornings.

She hasn't let on that turning 40 soon has bothered her. In fact, we've decided that to celebrate the collective coming of age and entering into a new and glorious decade we're going to load up the family and head west on a road trip. We haven't quite yet decided to where, but currently we're considering either Yellowstone or Yosemite this summer. That should be fun, right? A nine and a three year old on a 1,500 mile road trip. I think I'm going to invest in a salt lick that'll mount nicely in the back seat's center console in an effort to prevent frequent bathroom stops.

And since we're on the topic of livestock, the kids are doing great. They're all wormed and fed and whatever it is that you do for kids so they can go to school and get through the security line at the airport. Elise does a great job at ensuring that they're nurtured and being raised to be conscious and caring young ladies. I make sure they possess matured and refined palettes as it relates to all varieties of gummy bears, can snap a mean bath towel and are able to make funny noises with their armpits.

Maly started the third grade this year. I'm not sure if you recall, but the third grade is when things start counting. Gone are the days of coloring within the lines and singing songs about rainbows and puppies. Last week she came home with a spelling list that had the word "neuroendocrinology" on it. And the week before that she had to research and write about things like Sir Francis Drake and the human casualties of the Anglo-Spanish war of 1585. When I was in the third grade I was still trying to remember to not eat glue, and I don't think I could even spell the word "booger," let alone my own last name.

She's learning multiplication and division and she has to keep a weekly journal and a calendar where all of her assignments and homework are documented and scheduled. She has homework she does on the internet that, if I had to guess, makes her faster and smarter and establishes a refined appreciation of funny cat videos. And she's doing well in school. So far she's gotten all A's and one B.

So school alone takes up a lot of Maly's week. When the weekend comes around, she likes to relax. Thankfully, she has a set of good friends for a social outlet. And thankfully Elise and I have maintained an open and respectful bond so she still likes to hang out with us. At least that's what we like to tell ourselves.

It might be too soon to tell, but I like to think the oldest child is going to be a runner. Elise and I have been quietly on standby, waiting for Maly to come to us and say, "Mom, Dad, I want play to soccer," or dance, gymnastics, softball, Quidditch, swimming or competitive cat herding. Anything. One day, on a whim, I asked her if she'd be interested in running in the Austin County Fair 5K. I explained to her that 5 kilometers is a little over 3 miles. With nary a pause she agreed to her first organized running race. That was a proud moment for yours truly. So the next morning our training began. We started our first day at 3:45 a.m. by drinking four raw eggs each and then jogging over to the greenbelt that's adjacent to our neighborhood. I hoisted her over the barbed wire fence and told her to find the nearest cow and start punching it. While she started on that first training assignment, I leaned against a cedar fence post and sang a little ditty I'd made up about the Anglo-Spanish war. Before I got to the second verse, the owner of the property came running out from the trees, waving his 30-30, bleary-eyed, yelling and asking what the hell we were doing chasing his cows and crowing about the hard times of the late-1500's at 4 a.m.

So we ran like hell. While running, I told her that running a 5K at my hometown's county fair would be a breeze compared to this.

And for the four or five Saturdays that followed, she dutifully woke up early and went for 2+ mile runs with me. She and Elise ran in the Austin County Fair 5K and did really well. Maly won in her age group. She was the only one in her age group, but, she won, and I think that gave her a little taste of victory.

Since then she has participated in a fun run at her school where she covered a little over 2.5 miles. She ran in a 1-mile cross country race where she brought home a trophy for coming in 8th place. And most recently she ran the 5K Turkey Trot that our neighborhood put together on Thanksgiving morning. She ran that one all by herself as her mom and grandma walked the 5K and I ran the 10K. So Maly ran all by herself among 300+ participants. Can you tell that I'm proud?



Elise and I are both very proud of Maly. She's a wonderful child. I don't know what we did right to deserve such a good first kid and older sister for Mara. And I know it has to be hard at times for Maly when Mara demands a lot of our attention. Maly takes it all in stride. We couldn't be more proud of her.

And then there's our sweet little Mara. She's 2.5 years old now and is the singular reason why most of my remaining hairs are gray. I say she's sweet, but between you and me, I secretly think her agenda is to browbeat the entire family into submission. The child speaks just enough English to where she can be really, really cute and affectionate, but also really scary and intimidating. I love nothing more than coming home from a long day at work to her running up to me at the garage door while smiling and saying, in her little toddler voice, "Daddy, I miss you so much today!" And then I drop to a knee and she gives me a huge hug and just hangs on. She gives the greatest hugs. She is an affectionate little bugger. But because she's little, she sure makes up for it with her big voice. When she gets mad, which is often, she lets everyone know. If she wants someone to stop doing something that pisses her off, which might be, for example, existing in her presence, she says, "'TOP IT!' Her S's haven't quite fully developed yet. And if everyone else is enjoying themselves and having a laugh when she is otherwise not amused, she furrows her brow, throws the evil stare and declares the situation, "Not! Funny!" These scenarios are invariably followed by a series of blood-curdling screams that have now gotten yours truly banned from the local PetSmart because of repeatedly asking if they sell a shock collar that is rated safe and effective for small humans.

She's growing up so fast. And she's so gorgeous. The red hair stuck, and I attribute her ginger temper to that. Strangers always compliment her hair when we're out.

Both girls are beautiful inside and out. There are those days when I seriously consider selling them both for a Nespresso machine. But the good days far outweigh the bad. We love being with our children and living vicariously through them as they experience their respective lives. I like to think Elise and I have done an alright job of raising our little family.

And Elise and I are doing just fine as well. Elise stays busy taking care of the girls by day. I do my thing to make sure the lights are on. Elise is a homeroom mom for Maly's 3rd grade class this year and continues to be active at church. We've both been doing our respective training for a half marathon that's coming up in late January. One of Elise's bucket list items is to finish a half marathon before she turns 40. I'm going to use the half marathon to determine if I'm crazy enough to run a full marathon.

As always, we hope this Christmas season and New Year are filled with love and laughter. And remember to show the ones you're near that they hold a very special place in your heart.

With our love,

Josh, Elise, Maly & Mara

